Social Problems

D. Stanley Eitzen with Maxine Baca Zinn • Fourth Edition

FOURTH EDITION

SOCIAL PROBLEMS

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PREFACE

The topics covered in this book—such as racism, sexism, militarism, political crime, drug use, and mental disorders—are inherently interesting. The typical book on social problems describes these phenomena separately, using a variety of explanations. Students exposed to such a melange of approaches may retain their interest in these problems but probably would complete the book with little grasp of how social problems are interrelated and the role of society in their creation and perpetuation. This book strives to be different. The approach is sociological. There is a coherent framework from which to analyze and understand society and the problems found therein.

My overarching goal is to capture the imagination of the readers. I want them not only to be interested in the topics but also to become enthusiastic about exploring the intricacies and mysteries of social life. I want them, moreover, to incorporate the sociological perspective into their explanatory repertoire. The sociological perspective requires, at a minimum, accepting two fundamental assumptions. The first is that individuals are products of their social environments. Who they are, what they believe, what they strive for, and how they feel about themselves are all dependent on others and the society in which we live. The incorporation of the sociological perspective requires that we examine the structure of society to understand social problems such as racism, poverty, crime and alcoholism. This method, however, runs counter to the typical explanations people employ for social ills. The choice is seen in an example supplied by Thomas Szasz:

> Suppose that a person wishes to study slavery. How would he go about doing so? First, he might study slaves. He would then find that such persons are generally brutish, poor, and uneducated, and he might conclude that slavery is their "natural" or appropriate social status. . . . Another student "biased" by contempt for the institution of slavery, might proceed differently. He would maintain that there can be no slave without a master holding him in bondage; and he would accordingly consider slavery a type of human *relationship* and more generally, a *social institution,* supported by custom, law, religion, and force. From this point of view, the study of masters is at least as relevant to the study of slavery as is the study of slaves. (Szasz, 1970: 123–124)

Most of us, intuitively, would make the first type of study and reach a conclusion. This book, however, emphasizes the second kind of study: looking at masters as well as slaves. An observer cannot gain an adequate understanding of racism, crime, mental illness, or other problems by studying only bigots, criminals, and the mentally disturbed. I will focus on the social structure to determine the underlying features of the social world in an effort to understand social problems.

Since my emphasis is on social structure, the reader is required to accept another fundamental assumption of the sociological perspective (see Eitzen, 1988, Chapter 1). I am referring to adopting a critical stance toward all social forms. Sociologists must ask: How does the social system really work? Who really has the power? Who benefits under the existing social arrangements and who does not? We should also ask questions such as: Is the law neutral? Why are some drugs illegal and others, which are known to be harmful, considered legal? Why are so few organizations in the United States—which is characterized as a democracy—democratic? Is our society a meritocratic one where talent and effort combine to stratify people fairly? Questions such as these call into question existing myths, stereotypes, and official dogma. The critical examination of society will demystify and demythologize. It sensitizes the individual to the inconsistencies present in society. But most important, a critical stance toward social arrangements allows us to see their role in perpetuating social problems.

In conclusion, the reader should be aware that I am not a dispassionate observer of social problems. Unlike the chemist who can objectively observe the reaction of chemical compounds in a test tube, I am a participant in the social life I seek to study and understand. As I study busing riots in South Boston, child abuse, poverty, urban blight, or the behavior of the CIA, I cannot escape my feelings and values. The choice of topics, the order in which they are presented, and even the tone of the discourse in the book reveal my values. I cannot, however, let my values and my feelings render the analyses invalid. All pertinent findings must be reported, not just those that support my point of view. In other words, I must be as scientific as possible, which requires a recognition of my biases so that the findings will not be invalidated.

Let me, then, briefly make my values more explicit. I oppose social arrangements that prevent people from developing their full potential. That is, I reject political and social repression, educational elitism, institutional barriers to racial and

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sexual equality, economic exploitation, and official indifference to human suffering. Stating my feelings positively, I favor equality of opportunity, the right to dissent, justice, an economic system that minimizes inequality, and a political system that maximizes citizen input in decisions and provides for an adequate care system and acceptable living conditions for all persons. Obviously, I believe that American society as it is presently arranged falls short of what I consider to be the "good society." The problem areas of our society are the subjects of this book.

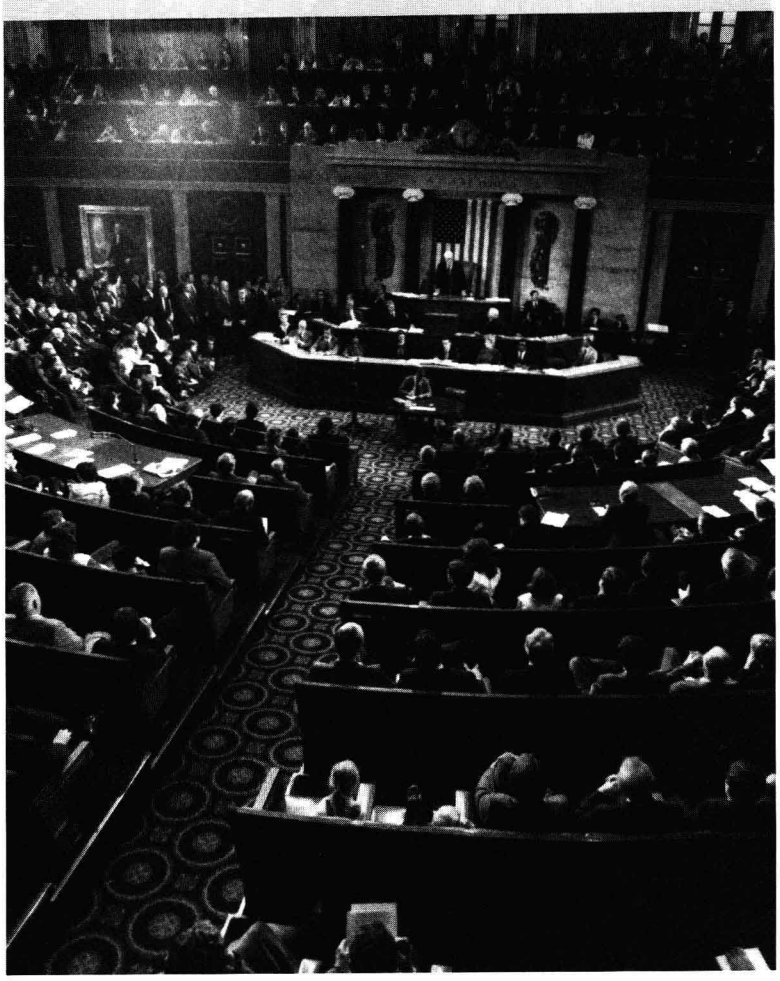
The Fourth Edition This edition improves on the earlier ones in several ways. Of course, the materials have been updated. New Observation inserts have been added on such subjects as the global pesticide threat; the double jeopardy of nuclear power and nuclear weapons; the comparison of the United States with other nations on various military and social indicators; the poor who work full-time; the homeless; the occupations with the highest concentrations by race, ethnicity, and gender; the new immigration laws; anti-Asian violence; pay equity; determining "old-age"; AIDS; child care; the legacy of patriarchy; full employment; working for McDonalds; corporate crime; Americans as guinea pigs for radiation testing; alcohol use and abuse; and the political economy of the tobacco industry. Two new chapters have been included—one on sexual orientation and the other on family-related social problems. The structure of the previous edition has been retained, except for the addition of a new section on institutional problems, where chapters on the family, education, and work are located.

Acknowledgments I want to thank the sociology editor at Allyn and Bacon, Karen Hanson, for her support and guidance during the revision process. Maxine Baca Zinn rewrote the race/ethnicity and gender chapters for this edition, providing the most thorough and current analyses of these complex subjects. Her constructive criticisms, perceptive insights, and consistent theoretical approach have improved this edition immeasurably.

Dedication Typically, books are dedicated to those persons the author loves and who are responsible for his or her development, motivation, creativity, and world view. For these reasons, I have dedicated other books to my wife, children, and parents. For these same reasons, this book is again dedicated, with great affection and gratitude, to Arthur Waltner and the memory of Edna Waltner.

PART

ONE



THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

1

THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Human beings are plagued by problems that result from the social arrangements within society. American newspapers, magazines, and television continually remind us of these problems. Consider some representative newspaper headlines:

- "14% of Americans Live in Poverty"
- "Women in the Work Force Make 70 Cents for Every Dollar Paid to Men"
- "As Many as 3 Million Americans Are Homeless"
- "1 in 4 High School Students, Mostly Minorities, Never Graduate"
- "The Price of Antibiotics Used by AIDS Victims Quadruples in 3 Years"
- "GM Closes Local Plant and Moves Operation to Mexico"
- "Iran-Contra Affair Shows Administration's Disregard for Democracy"

The headlines highlight social problems such as poverty, sexism, racism, corporate crime, economic dislocations, and political crime. These problems and others, which are examined in detail in this book, are inherently interesting. So the description and analysis provided here are intended to add to the reader's understanding and appreciation of the complexity of social life.

Sociologists have always been intrigued with the causes, consequences, solutions, and changing definitions of social problems. The following historical sketch of how sociologists have approached social problems provides a useful background to the focus of this book.

History of Social Problems Theory

Typically, social problems have been thought of as social situations that a large number of observers felt were inappropriate and needed remedying. Early American sociologists applied a medical model to the analysis of society in order to assess whether some "pathology" was present. Using what were presumed to be universal criteria of normality, sociologists commonly assumed that social problems resulted from "bad" people—maladjusted people who were abnormal because of mental deficiency, mental disorder, lack of education, or incomplete socialization. These social pathologists, because they assumed that the basic norms of society are universally held, viewed social problems as behaviors or social arrangements that disturb the moral order. For them the moral order of American society obviously defined such behaviors as homosexuality, alcoholism, suicide, theft, and murder as social problems. But this approach did not take into account the complexity inherent in a diverse society.

In a variation of the absolutist approach sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s focused on the conditions of society that fostered problems. Societies undergoing rapid change from the processes of migration, urbanization, and industrialization were thought to have pockets of social disorganization. Certain areas of the cities undergoing the most rapid change, for example, were found to have disproportionately high rates of vice, crime, family breakdowns, and mental disorders.

In the past few decades many sociologists have returned to a study of problem individuals—deviants who violate the expectations of society. The modern study of deviance has developed in two directions. The first sought the sources of deviation within the social structure. Sociologists saw deviance as the result of conflict between the culturally prescribed goals of society (such as material success) and the obstacles to obtaining them that some groups of people face. The other, of relatively recent origin, has focused on the role of society in creating and sustaining deviance through labeling those viewed as abnormal. Societal reactions are viewed as the key in determining what a social problem is and who is deviant.

Most recently, some sociologists have tried to alert others to the problematic nature of social problems themselves (see Spector and Kitsuse, 1987). These theorists emphasize the subjective nature of social problems. They say that what is defined as a social problem differs by audience and by time; pollution for example, has not always been considered a social problem. This perspective also examines how particular phenomena come to be defined as social problems, focusing on how groups of people actively influence those definitions.

This brief description reveals several issues that must be addressed in looking at social problems. First, sociologists have difficulty agreeing on an adequate definition of social problems. Second, there is continuing debate over the unit of analysis: Is the focus of inquiry individuals or social systems? Related to the latter is the issue of numbers: How many people have to be affected before something is a social problem?*

Toward a Definition of Social Problems

There is an objective reality to social problems: There *are* conditions in society (such as poverty, racism, and ageism) that induce material or psychic suffering for certain segments of the population; there *are* sociocultural phenomena that prevent a significant number of societal participants from developing and utilizing their full potential; there *are* discrepancies between what the United States is supposed to stand for (equality of opportunity, justice, democracy) and the actual conditions in which many of its people live; people *are* fouling their own nest through pollution and the indiscriminate use of natural resources (Eitzen, 1984). This normative approach assumes that some kinds of actions are likely to be judged deleterious in any context. Anthropologist Ralph Linton has noted, for example, that practically all societies disapprove, in varying degrees, of incest, adultery, promiscuity, cruelty to children, laziness, disrespect for parents, murder, rape, theft, lying, and cheating (Linton, 1952). Therefore, one of the goals of this book is to identify, describe, and explain situations that are objective social problems.

There are several dangers, however, in defining social problems objectively. The most obvious is that subjectivity is always present. To identify a phenomenon as a problem implies that it falls short of some standard. But what standards are to be used? Will the standards of society suffice? In a pluralistic society like ours there is no uniform set of guidelines. People from different social strata and other social locations (such as region, occupation, race, and age) differ in their perceptions of what a social problem is and, once defined, how it should be solved. Is marijuana use a social problem? Is pornography? Is the continued growth of military spending a social problem? There is little consensus in American society on these and other issues. All social observers, then, must be aware of differing viewpoints and respect the perspectives of the social actors involved.

Even sociologists and other social scientists do not agree among themselves on the definition of social problems and on what types of phenomena should be included under that rubric. Nor can they escape making value judgments as they pursue their work. It is impossible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal

* C. Wright Mills made an appropriate distinction. If a situation like unemployment is a problem for an individual or for scattered individuals, it is a "private trouble." But if unemployment is widespread, affecting large numbers of people in a region or the society, it is a "public issue" (social problem) (Mills, 1962).

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