

SOCIAL PROBLEMS & THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

A Paradigm for
Analysis

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DAVID R. SIMON

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

A PARADIGM FOR ANALYSIS

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who died as this book was being written.
I miss you, Dad.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID R. SIMON is Professor of Criminal Justice Administration and Sociology at San Diego State University and Research Associate in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Simon has authored dozens of articles in a wide variety of academic journals and is also author of *Ideology and Sociology*, *Crimes of the Criminal Justice System* (with Joel Henderson), and *Elite Deviance*, 5th edition, 1995, in press. Dr. Simon received his doctorate in sociology in 1975 from Rutgers University and was National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Postdoctoral Fellow in 1983–84 at the University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health's Alcohol Research Group.

PREFACE

Almost every student who takes an introductory course in sociology learns about C. Wright Mills and *The Sociological Imagination*. Sadly, this initial experience with Mills seldom goes any further. It has always puzzled me that Mills's paradigm is celebrated as the essence of the sociological worldview when so few sociologists have ever used it. Mills's work is only slightly dated in this post-Cold War world. He remains in many ways a voice in the wilderness.

One of Mills's great contributions to sociology is his synthesis of what he termed the classic tradition. Mills emphasized that all the classical sociologists investigated social structure, history's "main drift," and the varieties of men and women society was producing. The classic tradition provided a beginning to sociological inquiry. What Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and others provided were models from which theories and hypotheses could be derived. The models did not need to be "correct." They could and should, Mills thought, be subjected to continual reinterpretation.

The classic tradition was, for Mills, the beginning of an inquiry into the relationship between private troubles and public issues. What Mills provided American sociologists was important answers to questions about structure, history, and biography. His concepts of the power elite and mass society, the postmodern era, and the cheerful robot were ahead of their time. Today Mills is remembered largely for pointing out that the military-industrial complex made the "big" decisions in American life. Postmodern culture is being thoroughly examined by a host of disciplines, but only rarely is Mills mentioned as its pioneer investigator.

What is most unappreciated, perhaps, is that Mills's paradigm represents a viable model for the analysis of social problems. To paraphrase one of the early reviewers of this manuscript, it's surprising that no one has thought of using it in this way before. This use of the sociological imagination requires

students to be well grounded in Mills's sociology. I have attempted to provide such a grounding in this book. Each chapter centers on one of the basic concepts of the paradigm (structure, biography and alienation, historical main drift, ideology, social change).

I have also provided two exercises at the end of each chapter. The first exercise is brief, designed for classes in which multiple exercises can be used. The second exercise is appropriate for classes in which term projects are assigned. Most of the latter exercises involve content analysis and study of the mass media. I believe that content analysis is an ideal method for undergraduates. A representative sample of materials can be gathered and analyzed without the need for a research grant, time-consuming interviews or observations, or costly research assistants. I have designed exercises that my students have told me were fun and interesting, a welcome relief from the traditional research paper.

I have spent considerable space in this book analyzing social character (biography) and alienation. These two concepts rarely figure in analyses of social problems, yet Mills considered them essential to an understanding of the relationship between private troubles and social problems. The idea of social character is like an iceberg: it comes up above the intellectual surface every few years, only to sink into obscurity until the next Christopher Lasch or Robert Bellah redeems it. Social character and the alienation that characterizes it are much too important to the study of social problems to be left to fads of social criticism. As Chapters 3, 4, and 6 make clear, an understanding of social character is an important element in both self-help and societal analysis.

The sociological imagination, at its heart, is about the interrelationships of the individual, the immediate milieu, and the macro environments that compose social life. Too many students, including sociology majors, have difficulty grasping the sociological. This is another reason why the idea of social character is so crucial. Once the sociological nature of individualism and the social problems caused by it are understood, an appreciation of the sociological is possible. Until this appreciation is achieved, sociology often remains mysterious in this, the most ideologically individualistic of societies. Thus much of what I have to say in the chapters ahead is about American individualism as myth and as a cause of social ills.

Employing Mills's categories in the way I have done here has made me painfully aware that Mills explored some subjects much more deeply than others. Mills spends less than a paragraph in *The Sociological Imagination* on what causes social problems. Thus in some places I have had to fill in gaps with contemporary analysis that complements Mills's central ideas. I have found that the idea of social problems as social harms is useful. Certainly harms are what Mills had in mind when he spoke of genuine crises, as opposed to phony manipulations.

This book is informed by my earlier work in the tradition of C. Wright Mills, especially *Elite Deviance*, which I cite and borrow freely from throughout. This was essential in explaining the macro-micro links in social problem analysis.

Finally, I believe, as Judith Richman pointed out in her analysis of this manuscript, that students understand social problems best when they can relate those problems to their personal experiences. I have attempted to merge self-help and social change into one interrelated discussion. In Chapter 6, which constitutes my effort at a sociology of self-help, I analyze two topics central to the lives of most students: love and career. Here I have had the pleasure of using the ideas of Inge Bell, whose *This Book Is Not Required* I cite throughout.

This book is written in a spirit of optimism and exploration. It approaches the study of social problems as an adventure in exploration of both self and society. It is also written in the confidence that the great crises of our age are resolvable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Aside from C. Wright Mills, to whom I owe a great intellectual debt, many people have offered encouragement and stimulating ideas that have aided me immensely in writing this book. Joel Henderson, my co-author of *Crimes of the Criminal Justice System*, helped write Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this book and played devil's advocate throughout.

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David R. Simon

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

AMERICA'S PROBLEMS: TROUBLES OR CRISES?

There are times in the life of every civilization when it must either honestly confront the realities or face its decline (Phillips, 1990, 1993; Ehrenreich, 1990:196–207). During such moments:

- Myths created by the mass media must be separated from realities.
- Political rhetoric must be divorced from forthright evaluation of the political process.
- Myths about family, education, religion, and community must be distinguished from the actual events occurring in those institutions.

These times also require that the origins of the crises of personal life be properly related to the social problems from which they stem. We live in an era of crises and confusion.

America's "main drift" (master trend) today is toward economic, political, social, and ethical crisis, and the nation is "declining at an alarming rate" (Schaefer, 1988:3). This decline is the subject of daily headlines. Consider what now occurs on an average day among American youth.¹

- 2738 unmarried teenagers bear children.
- 2000 teens attempt suicide.

¹The following lists are based on information in *Scandal Annual* (1989).

- 4.4 million youths consume illegal drugs or alcohol.
- 5200 children aged 10 to 17 are arrested.
- 5500 adolescents run away from home, and 14,000 drop out of school.
- Children 13 and under collectively watch 192 million hours of TV, yet the average mother spends eleven minutes per day with her offspring, the average father eight minutes per day with his.
- 800,000 high school seniors are unable to read.

Consider the dimensions of an average day's crime and drug problem:

- Employees steal \$34 million from employers.
- Organized crime reaps nearly \$250 million.
- Arsonists torch 225 buildings.
- Street criminals steal nearly \$11 million from victims while engaging in about 82,000 criminal acts against property.
- Criminals assault 12,000 people and rape 2430 women.
- Americans smoke 87,000 bales of marijuana, snort 380 pounds of cocaine, and pay drug dealers \$123 million.
- More than 1,000 Americans die from the effects of cigarette smoking, *the single most preventable cause of death in America.*

Meanwhile, at the highest strata of society:

- Corporations illegally take in \$550 million.
- Individual white-collar criminals steal \$110 million.
- Prosecutors indict five public officials on corruption charges.
- Industry produces 15 billion pounds of hazardous waste.
- Over 2500 people lose their jobs.

Finally, episodes of wrongdoing spread cynicism and pessimism throughout the land (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Goldfarb, 1991; Garment, 1991):

- Hate crimes make headlines almost daily. Among the latest incidents are the murders of foreign tourists in Florida. Arsonists set off firestorms in southern California, forcing the rich and famous to evacuate or risk death. Teens in San Francisco set a sleeping homeless man afire for fun.
- U.S. officials indict the Panamanian dictator for taking drug smugglers' payoffs while in the employ of the CIA.
- The State Department dismisses an employee for searching the passport file of the mother of a presidential candidate.
- The savings and loan scandal is the largest financial crisis in the nation's history, with costs estimated to run as high as \$1 trillion. About 40 percent of the savings and loan failures were due to fraud and corruption.
- The nation is experiencing its longest economic slump since the Great Depression while American corporations export jobs to Third World nations.

Meanwhile, American executives are paid almost 300 times more than the average worker.

- In 1992, Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* sparks renewed interest in the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy. A poll taken at the time of the movie's release indicates that nearly 70 percent of the public believes that either the Central Intelligence Agency or the American military, or both, murdered their own commander in chief (*Time*, January 13, 1992, p. 56). The willingness of the public to doubt the government's version of events underscores the increasing loss of the government's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Many Americans doubt that even the release of all classified files in the case will reveal the truth behind the crime.

One could easily expand this list of crises into a catalog of social problems. Yet merely extending a laundry list of crises both societal and personal would

President John Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy arriving in Dallas on November 22, 1963. President Kennedy may have been the last president most living Americans truly admired. Issues concerning who fired the shots that killed him that day have been debated for over 30 years. About 90 percent of Americans feel that his assassination involved a conspiracy, and nearly 75 percent think government agencies were part of that conspiracy. The manner in which the government-appointed Warren Commission handled the investigation into President Kennedy's murder was so controversial that it contributed to doubts about the official findings.
(UPI/Bettmann)



not help us understand the origins and possible solutions of social issues. What are the public attitudes regarding the causes and solutions of such conditions? What, in this nation that considers itself the greatest experiment in democracy in world history, are the people's reactions to these multiple crises? What impact have these conditions had on the public mind?

PUBLIC RESPONSES TO THE CRISES OF OUR AGE

In late 1990, two advertising researchers asked a representative sample of 2000 American adults 1800 questions regarding what they really believed about their lives. James Patterson and Peter Kim (1991) asked people about a wide range of individual beliefs and behaviors, as well as about leading economic, political, and social problems. The results were so startling that they made headlines in newspapers across the nation. The findings reveal that the majority of Americans suffer a crisis of belief.



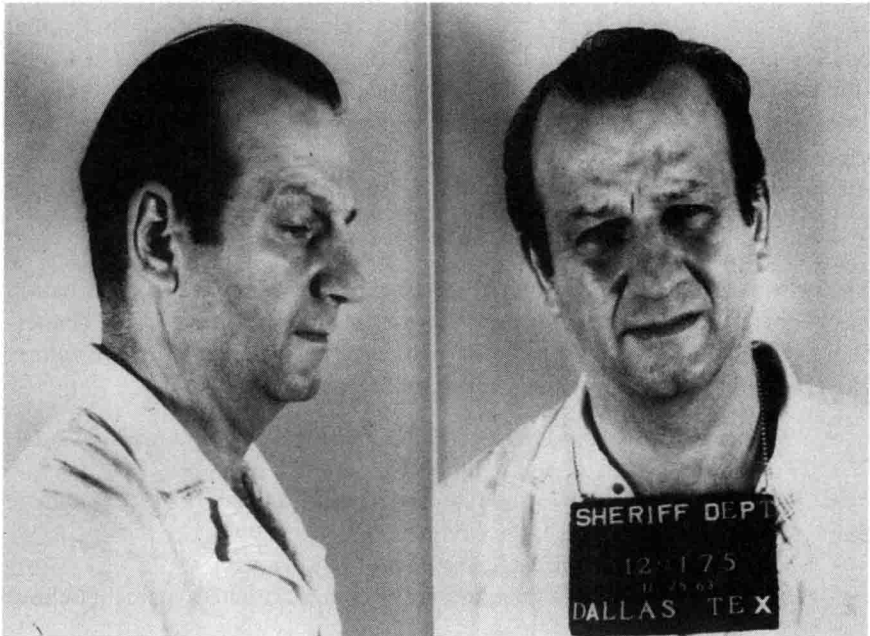
Lee Harvey Oswald was accused by the Warren Commission of being the lone assassin who killed President Kennedy. However, Oswald was no loner. He had extensive ties to New Orleans organized crime figures, who included his own uncle. Oswald also had ties to American intelligence agencies and to anti-Castro Cubans who were being funded and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency. His real motives remain hotly debated. (UPI/Bettmann)

A Crisis of Morality Few, if any, stable values exist on which to base decisions about daily life or social issues. Only 13 percent of Americans believe in all of the Ten Commandments. People now choose which rules they will obey.

There is no longer a moral consensus in the United States, as there was in the 1950s, and “there is very little respect for any rule of law” (Patterson & Kim, 1991:6). Many of the results of their survey support this notion:

- The official crime statistics are off by at least 200 percent. Sixty percent of Americans report being crime victims; over half of those 60 percent report being victimized twice.
- One-fourth of Americans say they would abandon their families for \$10 million.
- Two-thirds believe there is nothing wrong with lying, and lie regularly.
- 30 percent of employees have personally witnessed violations of crimi-

Jack Ruby walked into the Dallas police headquarters building 36 hours after Oswald's arrest and shot Oswald (who was surrounded by about 200 armed guards) on national television. Ruby had been a member of organized crime for decades, but his Mafia ties were virtually ignored by the Warren Commission's investigation. (UPI/Bettmann)



nal or ethical codes by their bosses, and 43 percent say they cannot trust their co-workers.

- 80 percent of Americans want morals and ethics taught in public schools, and a majority believe that the leading cause of America's economic decline is "unethical behavior by [business] executives" (Patterson & Kim, 1991:237).

A Crisis of Confidence in Authority Public confidence in America's institutions is at an all-time low, and 80 percent of Americans say there are no living heroes. Among the lowest-rated occupations for honesty and integrity are congressional representative and local politician; lawyer; TV evangelist; stockbroker; executives in oil, network television, and labor unions; and car and insurance salespeople.

Item: Studies in 1987 and 1991 detailed what Americans feel about their political system. Americans are deeply alienated from the political life of their nation. When the pollster Lou Harris asked a national sample in 1987 if their interests were represented by politicians, 60 percent said they were not—the highest percentage since Harris first asked the question in 1966 (Harris, 1987:35–37). A 1991 Kettering Foundation study found that most Americans believe there is no point to voting and that money has overwhelming influence in political campaigns, with millions being spent to secure jobs paying \$100,000 a year. This sample of respondents believed that media coverage of campaigns alienates voters, partly because of reliance on "sound bites"—politicians' practice of reducing complex public problems to empty slogans (*Seattle Post Intelligencer*, June 11, 1991, p. A-3). Polls taken in 1992 and 1993 reveal that the average American believes that the federal government wastes 48 cents of every dollar, and only 20 percent of the public trust Washington to do the right thing most of the time (down from 76 percent in 1963) (Gore, 1993:1).

Pessimism about the Future of the Nation Americans feel their nation has become "colder, greedier, meaner, more selfish, and less caring" (Patterson & Kim, 1991:213) and they are markedly pessimistic about the future. How do Americans picture their world in the year 2000?

- 52 percent believe that Japan will be the world's economic world leader.
- 77 percent believe the rich will be richer and the poor, poorer.
- 72 percent believe that crime rates will have risen and 71 percent believe there will be more violence in the streets.
- 62 percent believe the homeless rate will have risen.
- 60 percent feel AIDS will have become epidemic, and 60 percent believe that no cure will have been found.