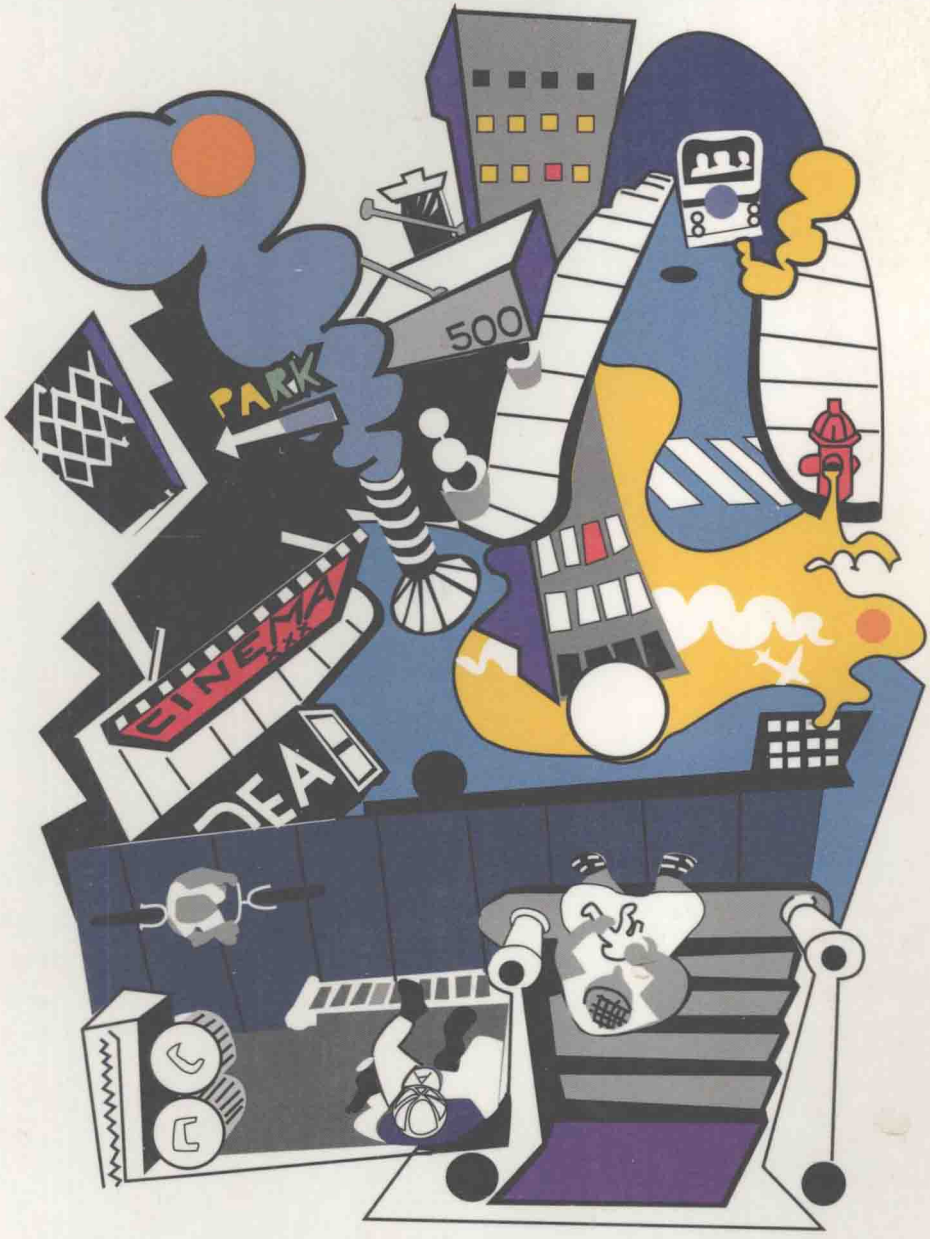
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS



DANIEL J. CURRAN • CLAIRE M. RENZETTI

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Edited by

Daniel J. Curran

Claire M. Renzetti

St. Joseph's University

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PREFACE

As this book goes to press, we are struck by the air of both optimism and despair that seems to characterize the national mood. The United States has elected a new president, and most citizens, while hopeful that he will act quickly to solve the pressing social problems that currently plague us in this country, are also skeptical of his ability to effect meaningful change. The excerpts and essays that make up this volume serve as powerful testimony to the suffering of millions of people in this and other countries, and to the serious dilemmas that confront the new president.

In editing this book, one of our primary concerns was to assist students in developing a structural analysis of the serious social problems they repeatedly hear about on television, in political campaigns, and in newspapers, and more importantly, that some may experience in their everyday lives. We wanted to help them see the personal as political, so that they could critically evaluate the structural causes of these problems and, in turn, begin to conceive of structural or collective actions to solve them. Consequently, readers will find in the chapter introductions in this book and in the readings themselves a strong critical or conflict orientation, with an emphasis on the roles of particular social institutions and normative policies and procedures in the generation and perpetuation of social problems. In addition, a major theme of the text is the global reach of social problems, with readings in each chapter highlighting the intersections between

problems in the United States and those in other countries of the world. Although the electorate has been clamoring for politicians to take care of problems "at home," the readings in this book vividly illustrate the links between social problems in the United States and those abroad.

Another editorial goal was to ensure that students come to recognize and appreciate that in a diverse society such as ours, social problems stemming from social inequality have differential effects on differing groups of people. Thus, a second major theme of this book is the impact of the intersection of multiple oppressions: racism, sexism, social class inequality, heterosexism, and ageism. Although specific chapters of the book are devoted to these problems individually, issues stemming from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, and age are integrated throughout the book.

The majority of essays appearing here have only recently been published or were written specifically for this volume. Many are excerpts from books that have appeared on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list; others are reprinted from popular magazines, such as *World Watch* and *Greenpeace Magazine*. What they share in common is a critical analysis of a pressing social problem, but that analysis is accessible to students who have little or no background in the social sciences. These, we have found, constitute the majority of students who enroll in social problems and other introductory level sociology courses.

To assist faculty, this text is supplemented with a Test Bank of multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions.

No book is ever written or edited solely by the people whose names appear on the cover. The publication of a book requires the efforts of many whose work receives acknowledgment only in a preface such as this one. Of course, this is hardly a reflection of the significance of their efforts. Like all other authors and editors, we have incurred a substantial number of debts in compiling this volume. In particular, we would like to say thank you to Nancy Roberts, our editor at Prentice Hall, who has become during the last few years not only a valued professional colleague, but also a special friend. Thanks also to Nancy's assistant, Pat Naturale, and to Mary Anne Shahidi and Linda Pawelchak, production editors, who worked with us on the many "crises" that routinely arise during the course of producing a book.

And, as always, we wish to thank our sons, Sean and Aidan. Watching our two little boys grow and thrive and become increasingly more curious about the world around them—and what's right or wrong with it—has provided us with a powerful impetus for continuing to research and write about social problems.

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chapter one

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

We are often asked what we do for a living. When we answer that we're sociologists, the typical response is, "So, what do you do?" Sociologists do many things; most of us, though, teach, do research, and write about societies, social organizations, social interaction, and social problems. In fact, the study and explanation of social problems and their causes is a primary task of the majority of sociologists today. Sociologists play a central role in identifying particular situations or conditions as social problems and in formulating public policies and programs to remedy them. As one prominent sociologist, Joseph Gusfield, recently stated (1989:439), "As interpreters of social problems, [sociologists] earn our livings by other people's troubles."

This focus on social problems has characterized sociology since its emergence as a discipline in nineteenth-century Europe and at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States (Ross, 1990; Turner and Turner, 1990). However, not all sociologists agree on what should be labeled a social problem, nor do all sociologists study and explain social problems in the same ways. Sociologists use various theoretical and methodological frameworks, called *paradigms*, for carrying out their work. As Patricia Hill Collins notes in the second reading in this chapter, a paradigm consists of the beliefs, values, assumptions, and techniques shared by the members of a community or profession. A paradigm, then, is a guide or a map that the members of a discipline follow in choosing topics to study, in deciding what methods to use to study them, in developing theories to explain their findings, and in deciding to what uses their findings will be put. Since sociology is a *multiple paradigm science* (Ritzer, 1980), it consists, as Collins points out, of a system

of knowledge shared by sociologists, but also of a number of competing paradigms (for example, functionalist, Marxist, feminist, and so on).

The multi-paradigmatic nature of sociology helps to explain why sociologists do not always agree on what is a social problem, what causes a particular problem, and how a problem should be studied or solved. This is not to say that the sociological enterprise is characterized by total relativism. Rather, what we must recognize is that sociology—as well as other disciplines, for that matter—is not completely value-free. Sociology is a *social product*; the body of knowledge that composes it has been shaped by the specific social, political, and economic circumstances in which sociologists live.

At the same time, however, one can make a distinction between *facts* and *values*. Facts are empirically verifiable, that is, we can measure or observe them even though not all facts will be apparent to us at a given time. Values, in contrast, are evaluations or subjective judgments. They clearly have their place in sociology in that we are almost always influenced by our personal values in making decisions about what is most interesting, important, or worthy of study, and how it should be studied. Yet, we cannot impose our values on the data we obtain. If our research results turn out to disconfirm our cherished values, we must report them nonetheless. We cannot change the facts (that is, our empirical data) to conform to our values. In short, sociologists—and sociology—are both subjective and objective. While our values—.and our paradigms—guide our work, there is an objective nature to social problems: people are clearly harmed by or suffer under particular conditions.

How does the sociological approach to social problems differ from that of others? One of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, C. Wright Mills, argued that a full understanding of social problems and their effective remedies requires that everyone—not just sociologists—develop a *sociological imagination*. The sociological imagination, he wrote, enables its possessors to understand their individual experiences and difficulties in a historical and structural context. People tend to think—and are encouraged by politicians, the media, and other opinion-makers to think—that the difficulties they are experiencing are individual, private problems. Some of these may be personal or individual, but the sociological imagination allows us to connect "private troubles" with "public issues." Mills used the examples of unemployment, war, divorce, and urban life. Other examples fill this text. The point Mills made is that, although we often experience problems within our individual milieu, they frequently have social structural causes which render them unremediable through individual solutions. The sociological imagination, in helping us to draw the links between the personal and the political, empowers us to seek both the causes and solutions of social problems in the social structure.

Mills wrote *The Sociological Imagination* in 1959. During the 1960s and into the 1970s, it appeared that many people in the United States were developing a sociological imagination, as members of oppressed groups—African Americans and other racial minorities, women, lesbians and gay men, poor people, the elderly, the disabled—organized into social movements to obtain access to rights,

resources, and responsibilities that historically had been denied them and to raise awareness of and break down *institutional* as well as individual prejudices and discrimination. Their collective actions did bring about monumental changes, but the conservative backlash of the 1980s led to widespread cuts in the funding of significant social programs and a narrowing by the courts of the applicability of anti-discrimination laws. As Allan G. Johnson points out in the first reading in this chapter, there has been an explosion in the popularity of *individualism*. Problems such as poverty, racism, sexism, violence, and environmental pollution are typically seen as being caused by "bad" people. Consequently, the solutions advocated are to resocialize or punish these individuals. Johnson makes a powerful argument against *psychological reductionism* in understanding social problems and emphasizes that as long as we take an individualistic approach to social life, we should not be surprised if "nothing works" when we try to remedy social problems. He exhorts us to put the "social" back into social problems.

If one of the hallmarks of the sociological study of social problems is a focus on social structural rather than individual causes and solutions, it bears repeating that underlying sociologists' selections of which problems to study is the paradigm that informs their work as well as their value biases. Historically, sociology, like most professions, has been dominated by white, middle- and upper-class men. Consequently, what was studied and how it was studied was determined to a large extent by the rather narrow perspective of this limited circle of professional insiders. In the second reading in this chapter, Patricia Hill Collins shows how African-American women have brought to sociology new and distinctive viewpoints by drawing on their special "outsider within" status. Collins presents the essential features of black feminist thought. She discusses how this paradigm and black women's outsider-within status calls into question the taken-for-granted assumptions of white male insiderism, directs the attention of sociologists to new areas of inquiry, and demonstrates the importance of examining the interlocking relationships between various forms of oppression. She shows, for instance, how the oppression of white middle-class women and African-American men is at once similar to and different from the oppression of African-American women. Collins calls for institutionalizing outsider-within viewpoints in sociology, so as to offer to outsiders within "a powerful balance between the strengths of their sociological training and the offerings of their personal and cultural experiences." At the same time, this would strengthen the discipline as a whole by infusing it with diversity and challenging the "thinking as usual" of insider sociologists.

In this text, we have attempted to respond to Collins's call by providing the perspectives and experiences of many different groups of people. Readers will find here an emphasis on diversity, economic issues, inequality and the intersection of oppressions, and conflict between the powerful and the powerless, both within the United States and globally. These themes reflect our professional judgment that the economic and social arrangements of our society are problematic in and of themselves, but also underlie most of the other social problems that plague us. In addition, it reflects our position that the appropriate roles of the sociologist should be those of *social critic* and *social activist*. While one of our

primary tasks is to critically evaluate, with empirically verifiable evidence, particular economic and social arrangements as well as who is advantaged or disadvantaged by them, an equally important goal is to suggest ways to eliminate oppression and exploitation and to actively work to bring these solutions to bear. As the two authors who have contributed to this chapter argue, this is the humanist vision of the sociological imagination.

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The Forest for the Trees

Allan G. Johnson

PUTTING THE "SOCIAL" BACK INTO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Reading the daily newspaper and seeing the many problems that face modern societies such as the United States, it is difficult to avoid the impression that nothing seems to work. Governments and their programs come and go, as do debates between opposing political parties, but the problems remain and, if anything, grow worse along with people's feelings of collective frustration and despair.

It is fair to say that the problems are not solved partly because they are so broad in scope and complexity. But sociologists are drawn to a deeper explanation too often overlooked and rarely examined in a critical way: solving social problems requires that first they be understood as *social* problems with causes or consequences that are characteristics of social systems. Consider, for example, the case of poverty, perhaps the most far-reaching, long-standing, and devastating social problem of them all. Given the enormous wealth produced in the United States, the level of poverty and near-poverty is quite high, especially among non-whites, in spite of the sizable dent made by the 1960s federal "War on Poverty." Roughly 15 percent of the population lives below the poverty level, and if we include the near-poor, the percentage rises easily to 20 percent or more. Among children, the poor and near-poor include one out of every four.[1] Even the middle class is increasingly insecure, as the cost of buying a house or paying for college education esca-

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lates beyond the means of most families, even when both parents work.

How do we explain such levels of poverty and financial insecurity in the midst of an abundant wealth unprecedented in human history? From a sociological perspective, the distribution of wealth and income is a structural characteristic of social systems, and as such, can be understood as a consequence of those systems.[2] As a capitalist society, for example, the United States allows a minority to control most capital, forcing the working majority to live on wages. This facilitates the accumulation of wealth, with a small elite controlling the vast majority of wealth and income, and leaving a relatively small portion for the rest of the population. With a majority of the population competing for a disproportionately small share of the resources, a portion of that population will inevitably come up short and live in poverty. Part of the cause of poverty, then, lies in the nature of an economic system that facilitates and encourages the accumulation and concentration of wealth.

The level of poverty is also linked to basic ways in which industrial capitalism operates as a social system. The primary importance that capitalism places on competition, efficiency, and profit, for example, encourages control over costs by keeping wages low, the use of machines to replace workers, the introduction of high technology that renders obsolete the less sophisticated skills of many workers, moving jobs to locations where labor is cheaper and more easily managed (especially to Third World countries), and closing operations whose level of profit is insufficient to retain the interest of investors looking for a maximum return on their funds. These imperatives arise from the normal operation of capitalism as an economic system, and they result in dislocation, anxiety, and hardship for millions of workers. Even those employed full time often find that capitalist competition between firms forces wages so low that their families fall near or below the poverty line.

To these social factors we can add others, such as government policies that increase interest rates—resulting in higher unemployment—to fight inflation; the high divorce rate and the corresponding increase in single-parent families; the inevitable business cycle of boom and recession that throws people out of work without picking them all up again when the economy swings upward; the centuries-old legacies of racism in the form of poor education, despair, prejudice, and discrimination; and the simple fact that the vast majority of people own no productive property and, as such, have little direct control over any means of making a living other than to make themselves attractive in a changing job market.

Although these are by no means offered as a last word on the causes of poverty, this discussion illustrates how poverty in a society can be understood as a consequence produced by that society. At the level of collective action and understanding, however, relatively little use is made of this kind of analysis in the U.S. Instead, most approaches to poverty take one of two basic forms, perhaps best described as liberal and conservative. A perfect example of the conservative approach is found in Charles Murray's book *Losing Ground*, which spoke for many conservatives during the Reagan administration.[3] Murray argued that the world is like a merry-go-round on which the goal is to make sure that "everyone has a reasonably equal chance at the brass ring—or at least a reasonably equal chance to get on the merry-go-round." After reviewing thirty years of federal programs intended to eliminate poverty, Murray concluded the failure of these policies indicates that individual initiative and effort lie at the core of both the causes of poverty and any successful attempt to eliminate it. He

would do away with affirmative action programs as well as all federal welfare and income-support systems, including "AFDC, Medicaid, food stamps, unemployment insurance, and the rest. It would leave the working-aged person with no recourse whatsoever except the job market, family members, friends, and public or private locally funded services."[5] The result, he argued, would "make it possible to get as far as one can go on one's merit."[6]

Although the U.S. has not adopted the kind of draconian measures Murray prescribes, his argument touches a deep nerve in the nation's cultural consciousness. There is widespread acceptance of his view of society and the causes of inequality, yet at the same time there is little support for the kinds of policies they would lead to. The belief that individuals are basically responsible for their own outcomes, for example, has not led to a widespread demand to eradicate programs that benefit the needy. One explanation for this inconsistency between belief and action is that although Murray's views resonate with the ideology of individualism that is so powerful in the United States, there is the nagging but largely unarticulated recognition that it does not tell the whole story. This conflict rests on a basic confusion between two very different aspects of social inequality in general and poverty in particular.

On the one hand is the question of how individuals are sorted into different social class categories—the kind of question that is the focus of most sociological research on social mobility and status attainment: What individual characteristics best predict occupation and income? Who gets ahead? These are questions people are most familiar with because they reflect their own attempts to make the most of their lives. Although it may seem counterintuitive, however, these kinds of questions have relatively little to do with the larger questions of why inequality in general and poverty in particular exist and persist.

Imagine that income is distributed according to the outcome of a footrace. All of the income for a year is put in a pool from which people draw according to their place: the first fifth of the field splits 45 percent of the pool, the second fifth wins 25 percent, the third fifth gets 16 percent, the fourth fifth splits 10 percent, and the last fifth collects just 4 percent. The result of such a system would be an unequal distribution of income with roughly the apportionment by population fifths found in the United States.

If we then ask, "Why is there inequality; why is there so much poverty?" one obvious answer—and, to many, the only answer—is that some people get more because they run faster. If we want to explain why two people have different or similar outcomes, this explanation would suffice, although we would probably ask why some people can run faster than others. But if we want to understand why one-fifth must survive on only 4 percent of the income, the answer that they are the slowest runners is inadequate, for this ignores the terms of the race itself that require *some* fifth of the population to live in poverty. If the prize money were distributed more evenly by fifths, there would be less poverty regardless of how fast people could run.[7]

There are two very different phenomena involved here. On the one hand are the choices and abilities that affect how well people can live: going to college, for example, tends to have a positive effect on income. On the other hand are the limitations social systems impose which produce patterns of inequality among individuals regardless of what they do: the cost of college places it beyond the reach of most, and given a limited number of well-paid jobs for college graduates, even those who earn degrees may find themselves unemployed or working in jobs far below their training and abilities. To