

## RADICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

READINGS IN CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY
THIRD EDITION

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#### Preface

My main purpose in compiling this anthology is to make available a set of texts that reflect a critical, engaged viewpoint in sociology. The readings are designed for generalists, not specialists, in the hope that they will be useful to students and citizens in their attempts to understand, cope with, and change the world around them.

Much of the work of sociologists has tended to be "ideological" in the sense that *its underlying assumptions* have reflected support of existing social institutions. This anthology is intended to be a utopian antidote, an interpretation of the social world dedicated to the possibility and the desirability of radical change. My aim is to help cultivate the utopian sensibility: the ability to look at social patterns and to see them not only as they are and as they have been but as they might be, if. . . .

Human self-consciousness makes possible the deliberate transformation of social institutions. It is not necessary that we put up with the social world as we find it. If history is not predetermined and inevitable, then one of our tasks should be to help change it in the direction that we want.

The utopian outlook leads to the general question of what varieties of social arrangements would maximize the possibilities for human fulfillment and the ability of men and women to control the conditions that affect their lives.

Regarding work and the economy: How can we maximize people's control over, and pride in their work? How can we provide enough jobs for all? Can we reap the advantages of industrialization and automation without becoming victims of their disadvantages? What are the alternatives to bureaucratic organization? Can a democratically controlled cooperative economy eventually replace the existing capitalist system?

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What kinds of educational arrangements best promote the conditions under which individuals can attain freedom and fulfillment? How can we eliminate racism and sexism? How should we deal with crime? Under what conditions could we have a society without prisons?

Regarding politics: Under what conditions might warfare be eliminated? How necessary is a strong, central government? What are the best strategies for promoting political changes? Is nonviolent revolution possible? Can we, and should we, build a third, "people's party"?

I do not pretend to have the answers, nor is there necessarily any one best answer to such questions. Some of the questions raised will be touched on by the selections in this book. Others remain to be dealt with. But this anthology should at least help sensitize readers to the possibilities of social invention and to some of the obstacles in the way.

I did not intend this to be a "balanced" book. Because the book was designed largely to help American students deal with their environment, most of the articles refer to the United States. The social prescriptions represented in the selections run along the spectrum from piecemeal reform to wholesale radical changes and revolution. In making choices I purposely selected writings that I felt constituted radical critiques of the established social order.

In this edition I have included articles from the first and second editions that have withstood the test of time and have added materials relevant to the 1980s, as well as new sections on strategies for change and economic alternatives. The student movement, the civil rights movement, protests against the Vietnam war, and the New Left of the late 1960s and early 1970s are now history. The outward mood of the country has become more conservative, but the structural problems remain. I hope that this volume will contribute to a resurgence of radical thought and action that may yet lead us away from the brink of nuclear war and toward a participatory socialist society based on freedom and equality.

Thanks to all my friends who contributed suggestions, and to Kathryn M. Lindenfeld for her patient editorial help. Because of limited space, I have had to omit a number of excellent articles I would have liked to include and to abridge others. Omissions are indicated by three centered asterisks when one or more paragraphs were omitted or by ellipsis points when the omission was minor. In a few cases I have left out or abridged lengthy footnotes.

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# Social Science and Human Values

Psychologism and the myth of value neutrality are two major obstacles to understanding social problems. Psychologism is the explanation of social phenomena in terms of the attitudes and behavior of individuals rather than the structure of society. It is the attribution of structural characteristics to a mere sum of individual attitudes or milieux. The myth of value neutrality is simply that social scientists can be objective, when in fact they cannot. Although these are two separate obstacles, believers in value neutrality tend to prefer psychologistic to structural theories of social problems.

Sociology is necessarily value directed. Our very choice of problems and our phrasing of them are determined by what we take for granted. If we take for granted the existing social structure, we will focus on reforms of the system or on the failure of individuals to adjust to it, but we will not search for structural alternatives. Take poverty, for example. Supporters of the prevailing system might ask such questions as "What social reforms might reduce the extent of poverty?" or "How can we reeducate the poor so that they can better participate in the economy?" Critics, however, might begin by asking whether the cause of poverty is not to be found in the capitalist system itself.

Sociological theories are necessarily based on certain assumptions. According to John Horton, all theories about social problems are normative. They are based either on the assumption that the existing social order ought to be maintained or that it ought to be changed. The former he calls order theories, the latter conflict theories. Order theories define social problems in terms of individual failure to adjust to prevailing mores. Conflict theories define problems as struggles between competing groups. They are based on dissatisfaction with the prevailing system.

Horton shows how order and conflict theorists conceptualize the relationship of blacks to whites. Order theorists assume consensus among blacks and whites on the American creed; they see the problem as one of incomplete assimilation and unequal opportunity of sharing in the rewards of the great society. Conflict theorists define the problem as a struggle for black liberation.

One variety of order theory is "blaming the victim." According to this position, poverty is caused by characteristics of the poor, unemployment by the lazy nature of the unemployed, rape by the provocative actions of women, and so on. As William Ryan points out, victim blaming is an ideological process. Pinpointing the blame for social problems on their victims serves the interests of those who hold power and benefit most from society as it is. The alternative is conflict theory, which looks for structural causes of such problems. The selection from C. Wright Mills shows why conflict theory is more relevant and useful than order theory in empowering the dispossessed to deal with the problems that afflict them.

Mills distinguishes between personal troubles and public issues. Troubles affect individuals and their immediate social milieux; their statement and resolution lie within the scope of the individual and his or her relations with family and friends. Issues transcend the local troubles felt by individuals; they are experienced by many persons at the same time and often reflect a "crisis in institutional arrangements." Often, problems such as unemployment, racism, and sexism may be *thought* by those who suffer from them to be merely personal misfortunes, but they also can be seen as social issues that affect many others "in the same boat."

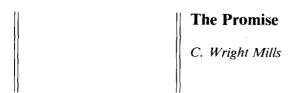
The distinction between troubles and issues shows why psychologism is inadequate to explain social problems. Psychologism views contradictions within political or economic institutions as though they were merely a sum of individual problems, and directs us to solve them by helping individuals. A social problem can be coped with on a personal basis by a few who are smart, aggressive, or rich, but it cannot be solved for everybody except by changing the social structure.

Applying Mills's conception, we see racism as a system of institutionalized segregation and discrimination, instead of merely the prejudiced attitudes of individuals. The cure for racism is not the education of whites to see blacks as equal but the provision of jobs or income for unemployed blacks and greater power for them as a social group. Similarly, we see the causes of unemployment in capitalism and the use of automation rather than in individual laziness or lack of skills. No matter how qualified a per-

son may be, he or she will not find a job in a capitalist system when the work can be done more cheaply by machines. For the causes of war, we look to the existence of sovereign states with their arms races and military conscription, rather than to the aggressiveness of individual soldiers or statesmen. Belligerent political leaders may precipitate wars, but they cannot do so without armies and organized military production.

To say that psychologism does not adequately explain social phenomena is not to criticize psychology or psychiatry per se. These disciplines can be a source of personal growth and liberation. But they become potential instruments of repression when they hold that poverty or alienation, which are the faults of an exploitative system, can be ameliorated through personal effort or psychotherapy. Often such remedies only help individuals to adjust to a sick social order when, instead, they should join with other people to change it.

Answers to social inquiry are largely determined by the nature of our questions. Social phenomena can best be understood by asking questions about the social structure rather than about individuals within it. Furthermore, because objectivity is impossible in the study of human affairs, the only practical alternative is to recognize and explicate our assumptions and values.



Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectors. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.

Surely it is no wonder. In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change? That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming "merely history." The history that now affects every man is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed: new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies rise, and are smashed to bits—or succeed fabulously. After two centuries of ascendancy, capitalism is shown up as only one way to make society into an industrial apparatus. After two centuries of hope, even formal democracy is restricted to a quite small portion of mankind. Everywhere in the underdeveloped world, ancient ways of life are broken up and vague expectations become urgent demands. Everywhere in the overdeveloped world, the means of authority and of violence become total in scope and

bureaucratic in form. Humanity itself now lies before us, the super-nation at either pole concentrating its most coordinated and massive efforts upon the preparation of World War III.

The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral statis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they cannot understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives? That—in defense of selfhood—they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private men? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?

It is not only information that they need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

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The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of