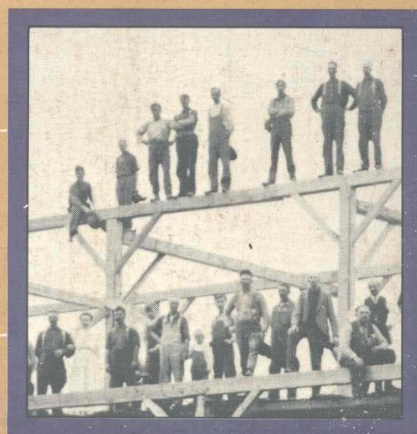
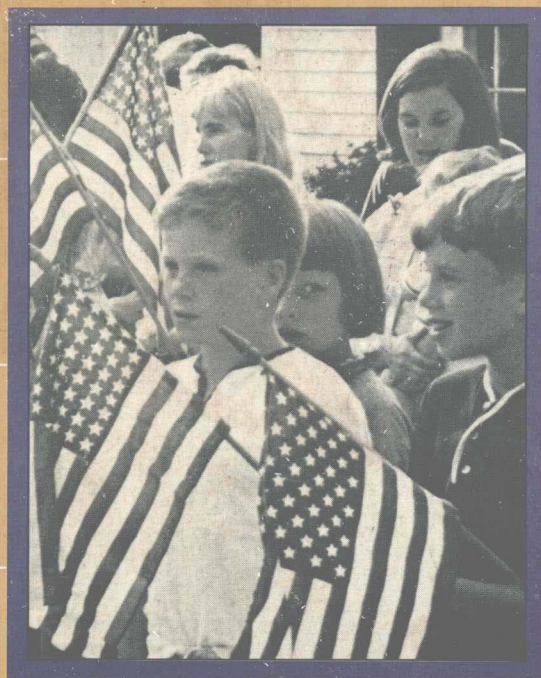


Social Issues and the Social Order

The Contradictions of Capitalism

JOAN SMITH



Social Issues and the Social Order
The Contradictions of Capitalism

J O A N S M I T H

State University of New York at Binghamton

Winthrop Publishers, Inc.
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Smith, Joan

Social issues and the social order.

Bibliographies

Includes index.

1. Social institutions—United States. 2. Social problems. 3. Capitalism—United States. I. Title.

HN65.S566 973 80-18770

ISBN 0-87626-813-0

Cover and interior design by Jennie Bush/Designworks

Cover photos courtesy Vermont Historical Society; © 1973 Peter Miller/Photo Researchers; Gilles Peress/Magnum; Peter Vandermark/Stock, Boston; and William Fried.

Acknowledgments appear on page xiii

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P R E F A C E

This is not an easy book. The reasons it is not are central to one of its major themes—that people's relationships to each other and therefore to their problems are necessarily obscured, mystified, and distorted in capitalism. Thus, the very tools of understanding that people are handed in order to grasp their world and deal with it effectively are warped and inadequate.

In part one, I try to uncover the kinds of conceptual tools people might use to better understand their lives and to do something substantial about their problems. Nevertheless, because the real world of our lives is shrouded in ideology, the concepts and categories I use will appear at first glance to be abstract and overly theoretical. I think, however, and hope I have shown, that just the opposite is the case. The concepts and categories I employ are rooted in the real history and workings of our society. For that reason I begin with a historical account.

This abbreviated historical account will probably cause most historians to wince at the superficiality with which the subject is treated. However, there are two principle reasons for beginning where I do. First, though I am not trying to uncover a definite history of capitalism, I do want to show in broad outlines how it works and what were its determining relations. Second, the historical reasons for the existence of a social problem dictate the kind of experience it will be for those subjected to it.

I am not a historian by training. I undertook this task with a particular lack of humility, since I believe that we can only fully appreciate our problems if we see them in a totality. Besides, it seemed eminently worth doing, but what is worth doing and what is actually done in our society are decidedly two different things. What is actually accomplished is generally a product of what appears possible. One goal of this book is to show the social and political origins of that appearance and how it might be revised.

Part two describes the principle contradictions and tensions that are built into the social structure of capitalism. It goes on to show how vast in-

stitutional arenas are shaped by these tensions. The reason this material is included in a book about social problems is that problems simply do not arise in a vacuum. They are constituent features of our society, and we can only hope to understand them when they are seen in the proper context. By proper context, I mean a theoretical context flowing from and adequately describing the historical development of the social world.

Second, most theoreticians of social problems, no matter what their intellectual persuasion, treat their topic from within a theory that is seldom spelled out. I believe that this procedure exactly replicates the central problem of the mystification of the world in general. If this were not true, it certainly would not have been necessary to begin this text as I have. However, if that mystification were absent, then the problems with which I am most concerned here would be entirely different.

This leads me to the second half of the book. Society under capitalism is structured around a central process and a central relationship. That process is the profitable expansion of capital and its accumulation by those who have ownership claims on productive property. The relationship is between those who will get the capital and those who produce it for them. From the point of view of owners, the smooth working of that process and the untroubled character of that relationship is the most pressing of concerns. From the point of view of everyone else (and in today's world this includes almost everyone), such untroubled waters should be the central social issue. When capital works right it is, for the vast majority of people, a problem!

Part three is devoted to describing the problems inherent in the expansion process. Part four describes the problems inherent in the social relations which are required for that process.

The reader will no doubt note that not a great deal of space is devoted to the usual problems receiving the major attention in more conventional texts. There are two reasons for this. First, most people simply do not come into direct contact with murder and riot, drug addiction and so-called overpopulation, and wars and revolution. But they do come into direct and daily contact with those social structures that produce these problems and their socially organized character. Second, if we understand these structures and the processes and relationships they organize and reproduce, we can not only deduce the proper way of understanding and dealing with these more dramatic issues, but we can also analyze the issues that confront us daily—our jobs or the lack of a job, bosses and landlords, cars that break down, and paychecks that fail to cover our bills.

My coworkers on this text include countless people I will never even meet. Among them are secretaries and printers as well as editors and mailmen. The few I can name and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude are Suzanne Feehan; Nancy Hall; JoAnn Houghton; Dorothy Odierna; Nettie Rathje; and Robert Jaccaud of the Baker Library, Dartmouth College. I owe

PREFACE

a special debt to Elinor Horne. Also, both Margery Williams and Pat Torelli were marvelous coworkers.

Professors Peter Evans, Brown University, and Robert Bach, State University of New York at Binghamton, criticized the manuscript and offered suggestions in a way that reflects their deep commitment to a kind of scholarship that will liberate people rather than contribute to their further exploitation. I am very grateful.

In a better world, there will be no need for texts on social problems. This is not because people's problems will have disappeared, but because everyone will know full well what they are, how they happen, and what must be done to solve them.

*State University of New York at Binghamton
and Hartland Four Corners, Vermont*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Slim Aarons/Photo Researchers, p. 22
Charles Harbutt/Magnum, p. 23
Louvre, p. 39
Giraudon, p. 43
The Bettman Archive, Inc., p. 56
Pepperidge Farm, p. 57
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Peter Vandermark/Stock, Boston, p. 67
Tamimint Library, New York University, pp. 74, 148
Courtesy of Public Affairs Press, pp. 81, 344
International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, p. 86
William Fried, pp. 104, 113, 158, 173, 182, 195, 208, 220, 221, 276, 281, 304, 360, 362
Bruce Roberts/Photo Researchers, p. 131
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[[INTRODUCTION]]

Social Problems and Social Theory

ON SUNDAY, JULY 17, 1977, the *New York Times* ran a total of eight front-page stories—presumably those which the editors had judged the most important of the day:

- The return to United States authorities of the bodies of three American helicopter crewmen who had been shot down over North Korea.
- An interview with Lloyd M. Bucher, former commander of the Navy spy ship U.S.S. *Pueblo* when it was captured by the North Koreans nine years before, in which Mr. Bucher warned against any reduction of United States armed forces in South Korea.
- The demands of political leaders for the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the alleged bribing of members of Congress by South Korean agents.
- A study by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics which stated that while the threat to the atmosphere's protective ozone layer from aircraft was not as great as previously believed, the threat from fluorocarbons found in aerosols was much greater than was suspected.
- The measures the Consolidated Edison Company of New York was taking to avoid a blackout like the one that, a few days before, had crippled New York City and surrounding areas.
- The Carter administration's plan to deal with unemployment in small towns.
- Complaints by New York City businessmen that the National Guard had not been called in to protect property during the blackout's widespread looting.
- A study conducted by economists at the University of Michigan which suggested that one out of every three American families could expect to suffer some poverty or economic hardship in a ten-year period.

It was not the best of days, certainly; but neither was it the worst, to which anyone who keeps up with current affairs can well attest.

In what follows we will take up some of the more usual ways social scientists go about studying social problems. From there we will contrast these approaches with those to be used in the text. Last, we will describe the set of assumptions that underlie the view of social problems to be presented, and show how those assumptions organize the materials in the following chapters.

The Definitional Approach

What do the stories on the front page of the *Times* have in common? Are they about completely different aspects of modern industrial life, or are they linked in some very important, specific ways? Are they intrinsically problematic or are they problems because we (or the *New York Times*) think they are?

Some sociologists believe that it is not the state of the problems themselves that should be of interest to us, but rather the political process by which some situations may exist for many years without being considered cause for alarm until, sometimes suddenly, they are deemed serious problems.¹ For example, it is pointed out that the zero population growth movement of the late sixties and early seventies got underway at a time when the United States population had shown a steady decline over the previous ten years, and not earlier, when the population was booming.

Ironically, say these sociologists, what was once defined as a solution to a social problem was in a later period redefined as a problem itself!² For several decades, social scientists concentrated on the problems of the poor and called for welfare programs to ameliorate their condition. Not long after, however, another generation of social scientists was claiming that the welfare system was the locus of severe social problems.

This process is so often repeated (with schools, prisons, social welfare programs, mental hospitals; in fact, the entire spectrum of social institutions) that some theorists argue that social problems should be seen as fads taken up by the public and social scientists alike when their attention is not directed elsewhere. The explanation for the stories on that *Times* front page, therefore, lies not in the objective conditions that the stories report, but in the society's definitions of what counts as a social problem.³

According to the definitional view, the reason for the articles about poverty, the environment, and military conflicts is simply that enough politically powerful people agreed that these situations were problematic. The

1. John I. Kitsuse and Malcolm Spector, "Toward a Sociology of Social Problems: Conditions, Value Judgments and Social Problems," *Social Problems* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1973): 407-19.

2. Armand L. Mauss and Julie Camille Wolfe, *This Land of Promises* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1977).

3. Howard S. Becker, *Social Problems: A Modern Approach* (New York: Wiley, 1966).

key phrase is *politically powerful*. The fundamental units of society are seen by the definitionists as interest groups comprised of people who have "come together" on the basis of shared interests and who then influence decision making in favor of those interests. Social policy is the result of the interaction between these many and varied groups.⁴

And what of social problems? They are "used" by the groups in their competition for power. Each group constructs versions of what constitutes social problems—interpretations believed to best attract the attention of those whose allegiance it wishes to claim. The pluralist view is central to the definitional approach. But how much of it is based on assumptions about the nature of the political process and social structure, assumptions that the definitionists share with those they seek to study? In other words, does the society project a subjective view of itself—of competing interest groups—which these sociologists have embraced as truth?

Social Problems and Social Stability

Many social scientists are not at all satisfied with the idea that social problems are matters of public opinion as expressed and altered in a pluralistic society. Instead, social problems are viewed as real in their own right. They take on their problematic characteristics because, as Robert Merton wrote, they "represent interruptions in the expected or desired scheme of things; violations of the right or proper, as a society defines these qualities; dislocations in the social patterns and relationships that a society cherishes."⁵

A social problem, then, is anything that disturbs the character of a society, no matter what that character is. In a totalitarian society a democratic movement would be a violation of what is defined as right and proper, and thus a social problem, just as in a democratic society a totalitarian movement would be seen as problematic. The purpose of the society's institutions is taken for granted; and within the context of these institutions, social problems are isolated, defined, and analyzed. The sole concern is to pinpoint areas of tension within the society (or social institution) itself, leaving intact the society's basic parameters and assumptions. Unfortunately, one's perspective then becomes something like that of a horse who is wearing blinders. For these theorists an obstacle in the road is a problem, but where the road is going is out of view and beyond question.

Other sociologists treat social problems as specific phenomena in their

4. Clayton A. Hartjen, *Possible Trouble: An Analysis of Social Problems* (New York: Praeger, 1977), ch. 2.

5. Robert K. Merton and Robert M. Nisbet, *Contemporary Social Problems* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1961), p. 702. (It should be noted that though there have been many subsequent editions to this book, its basic theoretical position remains the same as when it was first published in 1961.)

own right. Drug addiction, divorce, child abuse, crime, and alcoholism are all distinguished from each other and studied separately, in great detail. One must collect enough data on a specific problem until a specific theory explaining the problem can be postulated.

Unlike the definitional sociologists, these empiricists do not concern themselves with the social nature of social problems. How and why the problems came to their attention in the first place is not examined. That the very act of choosing particular topics of study over others might mean a bias, a sharing of the basic assumptions of the society, is not considered. But could it be that what creeps into their work—their careful accumulation of observations and facts—is exactly the kind of subjectivity empiricism is designed to avoid?

The Social Context

How, then, are we to look at social problems and make sense of them? How are we to look at society itself?

Most of us go on quite contentedly without ever consciously examining our own perspective on the world around us, but that doesn't mean we don't have one. In fact, neither the *New York Times* account of the events of that Sunday in July nor this textbook's description of social problems is possible without some view of what constitutes society and social organization. But the *Times* doesn't issue along with its morning edition a guidebook on how to read its stories. It's assumed that the average person will be able to read, understand, and evaluate each article. Why? Simply because the *Times* also assumes, just as most of us do, that the facts will speak for themselves.

Each set of facts seems to occupy its own separate (if contiguous) universe. A careful reading of a newspaper will not yield the possible relationship between military action in Southeast Asia, unemployment in small towns, and the destruction of the ozone layer. So not only do the facts seem to speak for themselves, but they seem to have an "objective" independent life of their own—loosely connected, perhaps, to the facts in the next column over, but surely not welded to them. The social problem of unemployment is one thing, the thinning of the ozone layer is another, and never the twain shall meet—at least not in the same chapter of a social problems text or a front-page article of the *Times*. But in the world in which we live, they meet as surely as time passes. They are set together, generated, and perceived in a social context.

It is our job to bring forward that social context—as well as the set of assumptions about society and its problems which we all share—and see if we can link together those assumptions and sets of facts to make intelligible how and why the headlines of today were really made yesterday and the headlines of tomorrow are being created now. In other words, we are going to look for the *logic* of social problems.

Social Structure and Social Problems

In the social sciences, social problems are generally seen as having two distinct features. On one hand there are facts. For example, one could add up the number of people with a substandard education in a given society. On the other hand, these facts are then "colored" by social structure. The "meaning" of poverty or education varies from place to place depending upon a society's own structure. While the lack of education in a contemporary industrialized nation is a serious handicap, it is much less so in a rural agriculturally based country.⁶

Yet the structure of the society—its political relationships, its economic and class lines—already exists in the genesis, description, and explanation of social problems. It already exists in the "facts." The social structure determines what will be seen as true and factual and what will be seen as false and irrelevant. Our society shapes our vision.

The two features of social problems—the facts on one side and social structure on the other—do not and cannot exist independently of each other. Each implies a different aspect of the other. To talk about social problems without at the same time attending to the social structure within which they arise is to render any analysis meaningless.

The usual separation of facts from social structure is paralleled by the separation of facts from theory. Many social scientists conceive of their work as primarily the accumulation of factual data at some minimal level of abstraction that will later crystallize in theoretical formulation. What is actually going on, however, is the collection of facts that already have as part of their character features of social structure and theoretical formulations. Facts do *not* speak for themselves; they don't even exist by themselves.

The *Times*, and social scientists, and everyone else conduct their affairs within a framework of contemporary society, and are restricted by the limits of that framework. To all there are apparent social problems with apparent solutions, but to all there are also social issues that do not appear as problems. Moreover, there are solutions which are unthinkable. For instance, it is estimated that the redistribution of declared corporate profits to all those under the poverty line would bring every adult American up to the minimum standard of living, and yet this possible solution to poverty, and the perspective it reflects, will not be found underlying a front-page *Times* story on unemployment in small towns.⁷ To "see" certain problems and their solutions would require moving outside the framework of contemporary soci-

6. It is in this way that empirical research joins with the definitional approach. Without giving up the "objective" character of social problems, one can also regard them as all relative and thus the outcome of the "definitional" process.

7. David Gordon, "Capitalism and the Roots of Urban Crisis," in *The Fiscal Crises of American Cities*, ed. Roger E. Alcaly and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 82-112.