

CONTEMPORARY

ISSUES IN SOCIETY

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Contemporary Issues in Society

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Contemporary Issues in Society

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Contemporary societies are in a state of crisis. A statement such as this may have produced anxiety or uneasiness in the past, but it is so common an expression today that as we enter the 1990s it virtually has a taken-for-granted quality. Television and print media buffet us daily with accounts of the indicators of this crisis. Law enforcement officials in the United States do not appear to be making headway in the "war on drugs." The number of homeless individuals and families who eke out their existence on the streets of our cities has grown, while programs of governmental support for the needy have been cut back. The deterioration of the environment because of toxic waste dumping, acid rain, and the destruction of natural ecosystems may mean that we will leave planet earth to our children in an uninhabitable state. The educational system in the United States is subject to heated criticism because it graduates students who are ignorant of geography, world affairs, and even basic reading and writing skills—or worse, who are functionally illiterate. The political systems of eastern Europe are experiencing critical social and economic transformation. In short, contemporary societies are confronted on all sides with a perplexing array of social troubles that seem all but intractable.

How severe are these crises? What are their causes? What is already being done to alleviate these problems? These are some of the issues that we wish to address in this reader. This book is a collection of readings for introductory sociology and social problems courses, but it may also find a place in courses on American

society. The readings examine problems and issues in contemporary societies that are of interest to sociologists and students of sociology. The book was designed so that it may be used in conjunction with a text, or with several paperbacks, or it can stand alone. Great care has been taken in selecting the readings for this anthology so that they address a range of issues and problems that are considered in sociology courses from a number of levels of analysis used by sociologists. No attempt has been made to address all the relevant problems that bedevil societies and their members, but we have tried to sample the more important ones. Similarly, we make no claim to have included all the important theoretical perspectives on an issue, or even to have covered issues in a completely balanced way. While sociology is unified in a number of ways, the discipline is characterized by too much diversity, dissension, and controversy to strive for comprehensiveness in a single book with such a broad scope.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Our objective in constructing *Contemporary Issues in Society* was to choose lucid and highly readable selections from the writings of sociologists as well as other well-known authors whose work has clear sociological import. The 51 articles are divided into seventeen chapters organized around the individual, major dimensions of social inequality, institutional settings, social environments, and emerging social issues. They have been drawn from pro-

fessional sociological journals, research monographs, popular mass-market books, and articulate magazines. In the selection process, emphasis was given to the sociological relevance of the topics and to the quality and style of writing. Student and instructors will find excerpts from well-known authors who have wide popular appeal but are not often read in sociology courses, as well as less familiar pieces that bring a fresh and insightful perspective to societal analysis. The vast majority of the readings were originally published in recent years, although a few sociological "classics" that are still relevant to contemporary societal issues have been included. A special effort was made to include selections that are often cited in introductory and social problems texts but never find their way into readers. We also sought to create a blend of ethnographic and quantitative articles that are within the grasp of most undergraduate students. Our hope is that this will facilitate access to topics that are cited in textbooks, that intrigue students, and that will assist instructors in integrating course materials.

Each of the seventeen chapters presents three readings that address prominent areas of concern under that topic, and each of the three readings approaches the topic from a different level of analysis. The readings are arranged so that the three levels of analysis—cultural (C), individual (I), and cross-cultural (C-C)—are presented in the same order in each chapter. This permits the instructor to assign all or some of the articles on a given topic, or to assign only those readings on the same level of analysis across different topics. Naturally, some of the readings themselves address issues from multiple levels of analysis or defy easy categorization. The use of different levels of analysis is one distinctive aspect of this anthology, and the levels should not be considered definitive categories. Rather, they should be considered guides to reading the articles.

SPECIAL FEATURES

The features of this anthology are:

- High-quality, lucid readings that explore sociological perspectives on issues in societies
- Six-part organization which includes an introductory chapter on sociological perspectives on issues and a concluding epilogue on emerging issues as well as coverage of the individual, social inequalities, institutional settings, and social environments
- Readings that address problems from three levels of analysis—cultural, individual, and cross-cultural
- An explicit cross-cultural and international focus in each chapter which explores either the impact of the United States on one or more other nations or the effects of other nations on issues in America
- Inclusion of research and literature that is frequently cited in textbooks but not often included in anthologies
- Chapter introductions that profile major dimensions of inequality and societal institutions and offer a context for understanding social issues
- Discussion questions following each selection which encourage students to review the major points in the reading and to think further about the sociological import of the conclusions reached in the reading

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Hugh F. Lena
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