SOCIAL PROBLEMS

FIFTH EDITION

James M. Henslin

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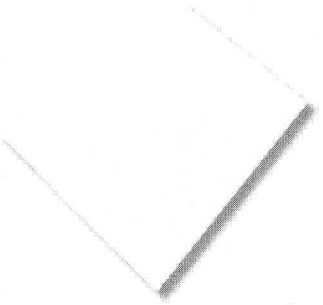
Social Problems

Fifth Edition



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For those yet to come onto this scene not of their own making—
may they live in a better world.

Preface

Scope and Coverage of This Book

Social Problems is an enjoyable course to teach, and most students find it to be the most exciting course in sociology. Certainly the topics are fascinating, ranging from such controversial matters as prostitution and pornography to such deeply embedded problems as poverty and racism. Some of the issues are intensely personal, such as abortion; others, such as war, center on global stratification. All are significant, vital for our present and for our future.

The benefits of this course for students are similarly wide-ranging. Not only do students gain a sociological understanding of social problems, but also they are able to explore—and evaluate—their own opinions about the problems and controversies that affect their lives. As the course progresses, students become aware of the social forces that shape their views, gaining insight into how their particular situation in life penetrates their thinking and shapes their view of the world.

The Sociological Task: The Goal of Objectivity

I have always found this process of insight and self-discovery—so essential to good sociology—to be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching Social Problems. But teaching this class is also a challenge, for it requires objectivity in the midst of deep controversy, something very difficult to achieve. Students are a captive audience, and in my opinion using the classroom to promulgate particular points of view on social problems is unfair. It seems to me that the sociological task is to present competing views on what makes something a problem and what can be done about it. The instructor's view of the best solution—or of why a particular aspect of life is a social problem in the first place—is a matter of opinion. It is difficult to push one's own opinions aside, and yet this is precisely what objectivity requires.

In this text, I have tried to do precisely this—to present both sides of issues fairly and objectively. I have no hidden agenda, no axes to grind. I know, of course, that total objectivity, no matter how ardently it is desired or pursued, is impossible, but I think that objectivity should be the hallmark of Social Problems, and I have tried to attain it. The most obvious example is found in Chapter 1, where I use abortion as the substantive issue by which to illustrate basic sociological principles. Beginning with this topic jump-starts the course, placing us squarely in the midst of one of the most debated and heated issues in U.S. society. It also brings deep-seated attitudes to the surface. Used creatively, this approach allows us to illustrate the social origin of ideas, which is so essential to understanding social problems. To be fair

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to students, however, instructors need to take a neutral stance—no matter how strongly held their attitudes may be. (This is extremely difficult in such emotional and volatile matters as abortion, and from time to time, we need to remind ourselves that our attitudes, too, are rooted in social structure.)

If I have been successful, both students and instructors who are on the extreme opposite ends of this issue—those who favor abortion on demand and those who oppose abortion under any circumstances—should feel that their position is adequately represented. They also will likely feel that I have somehow represented the other side too favorably. To check whether I had succeeded in attaining objectivity in this critical matter, I asked national officers of both pro-choice and right to life organizations to comment on this chapter. *Both sides* responded that I had been "trapped" into being too fair to the other side. I also asked my classes, after they had read the chapter, where they thought I stood on abortion. I was astonished—and pleased—when half replied that I was pro-choice and half that I was right to life.

The goal of this book, then, is to objectively present the major research findings on social problems, to explain their theoretical interpretation, and to describe clearly the underlying assumptions and implications of competing points of view. In endeavoring to reach this goal, I have strived to present the best of the sociology of social problems and to introduce competing views fairly. To again use Chapter 1 as an illustration: I use the terms *proabortion* and *antiabortion,* which, though far from perfect, are more neutrally descriptive than those preferred by proponents of either position—*prochoice* or *freedom of choice,* on one hand, and *prolife* and *right to life* on the other. While not everyone will be happy with my choice of terms—and they certainly cannot do justice to the many nuances and positions inherent in both sides of this critical issue—I feel that they are the more neutral and objective labels.

If I have been successful, readers should find themselves content when they encounter views with which they are in agreement and uncomfortable as they confront those with which they personally disagree. This should hold true for readers of all persuasions, whether "radical," "liberal," "conservative"—or any other label currently in fashion. It should also make for a more exciting class.

Method of Presentation: Incorporating Theory into the Discussions

Readers will find this book more theoretical than many. As one reviewer said, most texts in social problems simply mention theory in an initial chapter and then dispense with it thereafter, whereas this text follows through with the "theoretical promise" of its introductory chapters. Theory, however, can be vague, abstract, and difficult to understand. This is not necessary, and to overcome this problem I embed the theory in clarifying contexts. For example, when I introduce the three basic theories in Chapter 2—symbolic interaction theory, functional theory, and conflict theory—I make them concrete by applying each one to the social problem of discrimination against the aged in U.S. society. In the following chapters, I consistently apply these

theories to *each* social problem. This approach helps provide students with a cohesive understanding of what otherwise might appear to be a disparate collection of problematic events and issues. The effect is cumulative, allowing students to broaden their understanding of these perspectives with each new chapter. (The single exception to applying each theory to each social problem is Chapter 3. Here I treat three social problems, and, because at this point students are becoming familiar with these theories, it seems more effective to apply a single theory in greater detail to each of the social problems.)

Chapter Organization and Features

A major impediment to learning is the seemingly whimsical way in which authors of textbooks present social problems. In the typical case, the analysis is jumbled—the order differs markedly from one chapter to the next, with no regularity of structure. To overcome this, I utilize a consistent structure within the chapters. This provides a "road map" that guides students through each social problem and lets them know what to expect in any given chapter. After the first three chapters, I use the following framework to analyze each social problem:

Opening Vignette Intended to arouse student interest in the social problem and to stimulate the desire to read more, this brief opening story presents essential elements of the social problem.

The Problem in Sociological Perspective Here I present a broad sociological background that sets the stage for understanding the social problem.

The Scope of the Problem This section presents basic data on the extent or severity of the problem. It allows students to grasp the problem's wider ramifications.

Looking at the Problem Theoretically Here I present a theoretical analysis of the problem or some major aspect of it. I consistently begin on the more personal level, with symbolic interaction theory, move from there to functional theory, and conclude with the perspective of conflict theory.

Research Findings Both current and classic sociological studies—and, where relevant, studies from other academic disciplines as well—are discussed here. To allow students to become more familiar with primary research, I present many sociological studies in detail.

Social Policy This section focuses on actions that have been taken or could be taken to try to solve the social problem. I often spell out the assumptions on which these policies are based and the dilemmas they create.

The Future of the Problem Because students are intensely interested in knowing what their future will bring, I conclude with an overview of the direction that

the problem is likely to take, given what is now known about the problem's dimensions and trends.

Summary To reinforce what the students have just learned, I provide a succinct point-by-point summary of the main ideas in the chapter. Students will find this summary helpful for review purposes, especially in preparing for tests. They can also use it as a *preview* of the chapter; many of my students find it useful to read the summary *before* they read the chapter.

Key Terms As each term first appears in the text, it is set in bold type and is defined in context. Key terms are also listed and defined at the end of each chapter.

Suggested Readings An annotated list of key readings helpful for further understanding the social problem is provided at the end of each chapter. In addition to their value for term papers, many students find them useful for in-class reports, discussions, and debates.

Suggestions for Using This Text

Authors of social problem texts, as well as instructors of this course, must always decide whether they want to begin with the more "micro" or the more "macro" problems. Each approach is popular and has much to commend it. In my own teaching, I prefer to begin at the micro level. I begin by focusing on problems of personal concern to students—issues about which they are already curious and have questions they want answered. After students are familiar with the sociological perspective and sociological theory, I move to an examination of broader social problems. This is only my preference, of course, and it is equally logical to begin with problems involving large-scale social change and then to wrap up the course with a focus on more individualistic problems. Instructors who wish to begin with problems affecting the largest numbers of people can simply move Part II of this text to the end of their course. Nothing else will be affected.

Because this book is written for students, I have resisted the urge to insert qualifying footnotes, the kind that read: "A fuller amplification of this position would include reference to the works of so-and-so," or "This theoretical position is really much more complex than I can describe here but because of lack of space. . . ." Such qualifiers are directed to a professional audience, and though they might serve to fend off some potential attack on the work, such "disclaimers" do not benefit students.

Request for Feedback / Invitation to Respond

This text flows from years of teaching this basic course in sociology, especially from reactions of my students, who questioned and reconsidered their view of social problems. It also incorporates feedback that was graciously provided by instructors. The

text is intended to help make your course more successful, to bring greater rewards from teaching the sociological perspective. Results count, however, not intentions, and how the book actually works in the classroom is the real test. I greatly appreciate your feedback. Whether positive or negative, because it is based on your own classroom experience, I will find it useful. My email address is listed below.

Acknowledgments

Finally, as is the custom in prefatory rituals, I wish to acknowledge the contributions of those without whose help this book would never have been written. First and foremost among them is my wife, Linda Henslin, who was of inestimable help in the first two editions. Each successive edition is still informed by her penetrating insight into social problems. I must also acknowledge that this edition exists largely because of her willingness to support my compulsion to continue what I began years ago—even though traveling would certainly have been a less taxing diversion.

I also wish to acknowledge the efforts of Dusty Friedman. As usual, she coordinated the project beautifully, resolving the inevitable problems that arise during the publishing process. What a pleasure to work with! Jane Townsend did an outstanding job of editing, imaginatively going beyond what was required. I owe much to these two fine people.

Prentice Hall is loaded with talent. I wish to acknowledge the contribution of John Chillingworth; this edition would not have been published without him. I also wish to thank Nancy Roberts for overseeing the project and working to resolve issues. Thanks also go to Sharon Chambliss and Allison Westlake for coordinating matters, and to Melinda Alexander for photo research. As always, it is good to be able to depend on competent people.

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Finally, my heartfelt best wishes to both instructors and students. May this text prove useful, and may it provide understanding and insight into the major problems facing our country, many of which have global ramifications.

May our children live in a better world!

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To the Instructor

A wide variety of supplements to aid you in using this text is available from the publisher. These supplements include:

1. An instructor's resource manual (with outlines, objectives, discussion questions, and classroom activities);
2. A test item file with over 1,500 items, in both print and on disc;
3. A free customized test preparation service;
4. A video library on topics reviewed in this text;
5. Color transparencies;
6. A Web site with study questions, chapter objectives, and links to related materials on the Net;
7. A guide to help students learn how to find sociological resources on the Net;
8. A study guide for students;
9. A newspaper supplement.

Prentice Hall will provide details on these supplements.

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