JOHN C. ALESSIO

Social Problems and Inequality

Social Responsibility through Progressive Sociology

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ASHGATE

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND INEQUALITY

Shattering the old disciplinary limits with an unabashedly progressive approach John Alessio bares the underlying interconnections shaping the issues that confront us all, from everyday troubles to global disasters. His crisp, provocative analysis points the reader to examine their own role in social issues and most importantly how we can move from being part of the problem to becoming part of the solution.

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A masterful introduction to the sociological perspective that turns the illuminating power of the discipline onto important contemporary issues – including the oppression of animals. This powerful political-economic analysis is a compelling argument for rejecting an unsustainable system and working for justice for all the residents of the planet.

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Solving Social Problems

Series Editor:
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Solving Social Problems provides a forum for the description and measurement of social problems, with a keen focus on the concrete remedies proposed for their solution. The series takes an international perspective, exploring social problems in various parts of the world, with the central concern being always their possible remedy. As such, work is welcomed on subjects as diverse as environmental damage, terrorism, economic disparities and economic devastation, poverty, inequalities, domestic assaults and sexual abuse, health care, natural disasters, labour inequality, animal abuse, crime, and mental illness and its treatment. In addition to recommending solutions to social problems, the books in this series are theoretically sophisticated, exploring previous discussions of the issues in question, examining other attempts to resolve them, and adopting and discussing methodologies that are commonly used to measure social problems. Proposed solutions may be framed as changes in policy, practice, or more broadly, social change and social movement. Solutions may be reflective of ideology, but are always pragmatic and detailed, explaining the means by which the suggested solutions might be achieved.

Foreword

When I was a beginning instructor in large-lecture courses on the sociology of social problems, I often lamented, with like-minded colleagues, about the paucity of good textbooks available for use in the course. Our main complaint was that most current books placed heavy emphasis on individual pathologies like alcoholism, crime, or mental illness, and while many of these chapters were excellent treatments of the subject, they gave much less attention to the institutional structures that contributed to or created these problems. So I solved the problem by joining with a colleague to develop our own social problems book. We focused on three interdependent and reinforcing changes in American society that we considered to be revolutionary: technological militarism, labor-displacing cybernetics, and the human rights revolution that was an oppositional voice that would no longer accept war, corporate domination, and poverty as normal features of a healthy society.

I suspect that John Alessio also found many existing social problems textbooks to be wanting, and instead of lamenting, he acted and wrote his own book. *Social Problems and Inequality* confronts established taken-for-granted institutions and presents a critical sociology perspective that breaks the mold of social problems books in several important ways. First, and foremost, he has focused on the interconnections among social problems rather than treating them as separate entities. Many of the conditions discussed in the book are interrelated and the result of a common set of institutional factors. Second, he uses contemporary theoretical perspectives to analyze the institutional basis of social problems, and to consider different solutions to remedy systemic problems. Using this approach provides students with a working understanding of a number of theoretical perspectives including conflict theory, structural functionalism, social exchange theory, and feminist theory. Third, the discussion of social problems keeps the spotlight on dominant institutions and corporations that are the source of social and economic inequality and responsible for their continued maintenance. Fourth, the book presents for analysis real public organizations (CIA, Enron) and high-profile historical events (Iraq War, 2008 financial crisis), thereby encouraging readers to apply the sociological way of looking at the world to their own lives and to public events.

John Alessio is passionate about his subject and he consistently challenges the reader to consider important applications of the sociological perspective to the task of positive social change. There are many memorable sections and passages in this book, but here is one that stayed with me:

What this chapter tells us is that the people of the United States and the world in general need to democratically create and control their own economy and their own media and airwaves or they will continue to let the media, and hence, the economy, control them.

Robert Perrucci
Purdue University

Preface

Solving social problems has been the goal of Sociology since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. Much has been investigated, analyzed, and written about Sociology and its various subfields since that time. Sociologists and other social scientists have contributed a great deal toward an improved understanding of how the social world works. Many social organizations have been assisted in their efforts to achieve their goals. While sociologists have done a good job of writing about social problems as isolated individual entities, we have not done a good job of analyzing and writing about their interrelationships and common sources. Consequently, we have not been able to effectively offer credible and practical guidelines for resolving the world's most serious social problems.

This book is designed to offer a relatively new direction for social problems—one that moves toward a greater understanding of the interrelationships between the various issues commonly referred to within the social problems literature. Moving toward that goal, there are a number of primary objectives pursued.

Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

One objective of this book is to provide the reader with an understanding of how theory can guide one's thinking about social issues and possible solutions to social problems. Theoretical perspectives are integrated around certain issues to show their interrelationships. This process allows one to see the common sources of some of the ideas within different perspectives. For example, conflict theory and structural functionalism, while quite different in important ways, both represent responses to the systemic problems of the industrial revolution. The approach of integrating perspectives begins to be revealed within the substantive chapters where it becomes clear that no one theoretical perspective has the one true way of seeing social reality. Perspectives are discussed primarily in terms of their strengths and, therefore, what they have to offer citizen students of social problems.

The references to some of the weaknesses of theoretical perspectives are intended to caution the reader to not become overly committed to, or dogmatic about, any one perspective. Like churches, theoretical perspectives are created by humans and none of them can lay claim to the ultimate truth. Together, however, the theoretical perspectives of Sociology provide a powerful tool for helping people more fully understand the root causes of social problems. Once the somewhat artificial boundaries of the various perspectives in Sociology are overcome, it is easier to appreciate what the theoretical perspectives have in common and what they offer one another. It is unfortunate that this way of

viewing sociological perspectives is often lost in the territoriality that sometimes characterizes Sociology as a discipline.

Integration of Micro and Macro Levels of Analysis

A second objective is to challenge the reader to see the interrelationship of social problems from both a micro and macro perspective, and understand how the two levels interact with one another. The difficult task of bridging the traditional boundaries between micro Sociology and macro Sociology is addressed. I did not set out with that explicit purpose in mind when I first started thinking about writing this book. However, the first semester I spent collecting notes to begin my writing I was teaching both a Social Psychology course and a social problems course where I found myself drifting back and forth between macro and micro applications of Social Psychology. This interconnection within Social Psychology began to impact how I saw social problems content and Sociology in general. A fuller understanding emerged of what is lost by keeping macro and micro bodies of sociological literature separate. Dispersed throughout this work, the reader will find a considerable amount of interplay between what is happening at the interpersonal level, and what is happening within the larger social entities of the social world. The more I allow the micro/macro boundaries to drop in my own thinking, the more confident I am that greater integration of the micro and macro levels of analysis is needed if we hope to use sociological theory and practice effectively.

Integration of Social Problems Issues

The third objective is to show that many of the individual social problems, currently treated as separate silos, actually stem from the same sources: root causes that work together in a complex interrelated fashion. Numerous mechanisms are in play to create and maintain various types and forms of social and economic inequality. The social construction of inequality is critical to the operation and maintenance of Western economic policies—commonly known as laissez-faire economics or free market capitalism. Inequality manifests itself in a variety of ways. One of the more common ways in which inequality is created is through the social construction of group identities. These group identities lead to in-group and out-group behavior, which is then rationalized and maintained through stereotyping, scapegoating, blaming the victim, and frequently demonizing the excluded groups.

The excluded socially constructed groups then become available for low cost labor, marketing-induced overconsumption, high interest loans, and eventual acts of desperation as people struggle to support their families and maintain some semblance of self respect and cultural/sub-cultural integrity. The globalization of the "free market" economy has moved this process to all

parts of the world, forcing group identities onto entire nation-states. Dissent and deviation from the heavily prescribed economic-based norms are punished locally with imprisonment and are punished around the globe with military force and acts of genocide. People responsible for the decisions leading to the creation and maintenance of these complex social problems processes hide behind the powerful shield of corporate personhood and the corporate resources that control political systems and courts of law.

Understanding and eventually unraveling these complex processes requires first understanding human vulnerabilities, social psychological responses to vulnerabilities, and how the human condition is vitally connected with the rest of existence, including the existence of other forms of life. Those who play key roles in the perpetuation of social problems may or may not be aware of the full extent of their participation and/or the history and long term consequences of their behaviors. Notwithstanding, this book is not about demonizing those who demonize others, but is more so about understanding the processes behind the resultant social problems that occur when humans systematically create inequality for economic benefit. It is only through that understanding of the complexities and interrelatedness of social problems that long term solutions can be effectively proposed.

Practice

Fourth, this book is as much about sociological practice as it is about sociological theory. The last two chapters address important applications of Sociology, beginning with a chapter that examines the efficacy of free market economic responses to systemic world problems. The contradictions embedded in the free market approach are analyzed and their inadequacies discussed. The final chapter outlines approaches that can be taken by citizens to be actively involved in applying Sociology in their everyday lives. There are explicit recommendations about what course(s) of action could to be taken in order to bring about positive social change. In addition to the final chapters, however, there are dispersed throughout the text, suggestions about how certain identified problem situations might have been handled differently if a progressive sociological approach had been taken.

In the study of social change, one often finds historical records of violence and, sometimes, the sociological prediction of such activities. The reader should not confuse discussions about violent revolutions and predictions of violence with condoning violence. The preferred option from the standpoint of this book is always a non-violent option and one that does the least harm relative to living beings. There are, however, revolutions that need to occur that are not necessarily violent. I say "not necessarily violent" because one can never be sure what others are going to do when they are not achieving their goals. Additionally, it is not the sociologist's place to judge the actions of severely oppressed and desperate people, or anyone for that matter.

My father was a union organizer for the coal mines in Western Pennsylvania. When the coal miners struck in an effort to organize themselves into unions, the violence was most often started by the companies who called upon local police and private security thugs to harass and even attack the striking workers. In more modern times, the National Guard, the FBI, and provocateurs have been used for the same purpose. Gandhi, influenced by the work of Leo Tolstoy (1899b), espoused complete non-violence, but that did not prevent him and the people who followed him from being attacked. How people respond to violence perpetrated against them should be first determined by their own principles about how they want to live their lives, and secondly by strategies for achieving their social goals.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I dedicate this book to my Italian immigrant parents, Maria Femia and Paolo Alessio, who had no formal education, but whose peasant wisdom and intelligence were extraordinary.

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Chapter 1
The Systematic Study of Social Problems

Personal Troubles vs. Public Issues

Perhaps the most often cited work when defining the concept "social problems" is that of C. Wright Mills' "The Sociological Imagination," originally published in 1959. In "The Sociological Imagination," among other goals, Mills endeavored to draw a distinction between personal troubles and public issues. Some social problems authors have used Mills' arguments and examples to make the point that social problems are not to be confused with personal troubles. Others have used Mills' writings to emphasize the idea that personal troubles and social problems are inextricably connected. Indeed, when we look at "The Sociological Imagination," we find evidence to support both positions. Support for the former position can be seen in the following quote:

> *Troubles* occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware …

> *Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieu [sic] into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieu [sic] overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. (Mills 1993: 51)

As an example of a personal trouble, Mills identifies one person in a city of 100,000 being unemployed. Under these circumstances we are permitted to examine the person's character and skills for possible explanations of their unemployment. As an example of a public issue, he identifies 15 million people being unemployed out of a population of 50 million. Here we are permitted to examine the political and economic institutions of society for the sources of unemployment.

Support for the latter interpretation of Mills, i.e., that the personal and public are inextricably connected, can be seen in the next quote.

> What we experience in various and specific milieu [sic], I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieu [sic] we are required to look beyond them. (Mills 1993: 52)

The above quote is preceded by examples of large numbers of individuals experiencing hardships because of broader social structural problems. Regardless of which interpretation one chooses to give Mills' work, it seems clear that a purported fundamental distinction between personal troubles and public issues is the number of people involved. The importance of having a lot of people involved to constitute a public issue continues to be reflected in many of the text book definitions of social problems. Some examples are as follows:

> *A social problem exists when an influential group asserts that a certain social condition affecting a large number of people is a problem* ... (Zastrow 1996: 3)

> Social Problems can be defined as situations, policies, or trends that are (1) distressing or threatening to large numbers of people ... (Glynn et al. 1996: 3)

> A *social problem* is a condition affecting a significant number of people in ways considered undesirable ... (Horton et al. 1997: 2)

> Sociologically, a *social problem is a phenomenon regarded as bad or undesirable by a significant number of people or a number of significant people who mobilize to remedy it.* (Heiner 2010: 5)

And most recently:

> *... an alleged situation that is incompatible with the values of a significant number of people who agree that action is needed to alter the situation.* (Rubington and Weinberg 2011: 3)

A version of Heiner's approach is the definition offered by Joel Best: "That is, the study of social problems should focus on how and why particular conditions come to be constructed as social problems" (2008: 14). A constructionist approach presumes a public awareness of a problem, which implies someone with a claim goes through a process of making others see reality in the same manner as the claim-maker. According to these definitions there are no true external benchmarks for social problems analysts to study—only the process by which events come to be seen as social problems. Under this approach there are no social problems until there is a certain level of social consciousness of a problem, which can only emerge through an effective social construction of that problem.

One could, however, work backward from Best's model to discuss what the common events are that provoke individuals to engage in the process of making a claim, or what conditions prevent a claim from being effectively made when serious harm is being done to someone or some group of people. Indeed, from a social constructionist point of view, the more relevant question might be how social reality is effectively controlled to publicly deny the "existence" of social

problems. Therein lie the serious social problems, and that is the focus of the definition of a social problem in this book.

A Definition of Social Problem

If there are conditions and circumstances under which individuals cannot be held responsible for their negative predicament, however undesirable or seemingly isolated that predicament, it would seem to be important to recognize such predicaments as part of what constitute a social problem. We look to causal sequences of events to understand how the individual's behavior or negative situation is part of a broader social fabric and not simply the outcome of a personal decision. A definition of "Social Problem" should reflect the important issues discussed in the middle chapters of this book. The definition I use may have been influenced by a combination of definitions I have encountered over the years. If it is influenced by an existing particular definition, I am unaware of the source:

> *A social problem is a condition that involves harm to one or more individuals and/or one or more social entities, has at least one social cause and/or at least one social effect, and consequently has one or more social remedies.*

The actual reason for the importance placed on large numbers by some authors is not clear. While on the surface, as sociologists, it makes intuitive sense that we would be dealing with large numbers of people, Mills' seems to fall short of a logical explanation. Others tend not to address the matter. Since I raised this issue in a paper I presented at a conference a few years before writing this book, I have noticed some changes in the definitions of a social problem. It seems there is a movement toward greater inclusion, but texts still fall short of a clear explanation of why a single individual cannot experience a social problem. Leon-Guerrero (2009) is somewhat of an exception and comes close to seeing social problems in the same manner as presented in this text.

Framework of the Definition

On the one hand Mills indicated that personal troubles are a function of characteristics in the individual or local milieu. On the other hand he allowed public issues to consist of aggregated personal troubles. The argument seems to be that when a lot of people have a particular negative experience, it is a function of something happening in society. When few people have the same experience, it is a function of something wrong with the individual or the individual's immediate circumstances.