

# **GLOBAL SOCIAL PROBLEMS**



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**Allan Mazur**

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**For Julie and Rachel,  
and their world**

# PREFACE

The long-standing course in American social problems is one of the most useful in the college curriculum, giving to students a critical understanding of issues that appear in the daily news and may affect their own lives. That course focuses on a standard set of problems, including crime, racial discrimination, inequality of the sexes, drugs, broken families, and poverty—all as they affect citizens of the United States.

Such topics remain as relevant as ever, but events of the past two decades emphasize the importance of newer problems that extend beyond America's borders, affecting the whole world. First among these is the possibility of a nuclear war that could destroy civilization in the Northern Hemisphere. Even if peace reigns, the persistently increasing human population seems to negate material gains in world production. In parts of Africa and South Asia especially, life-styles are worsening rather than improving. If there is any way of relieving this suffering, it will certainly require increases in productivity that will further strain the physical environment of the earth, which is already suffering from pollution, resource depletion, and perhaps climate change.

These global problems are the subject matter of this book. My perspective is not only geographically broader than in conventional texts but considerably longer in historical terms, viewing the twentieth century as a moment of transition from past millennia of agrarian

civilization to a future society that, hopefully, will be more satisfying for all the earth's people.

The study of global problems should not replace American social problems on the student agenda but be an addition to it, either as a supplement to the normal course or as a second course. This book will serve either format. It is not of sufficient length to be the sole text in a semester-long class but works well as a core reading that binds together supplementary materials. I will describe my own course in global social problems in case others wish to move in the same direction.

The nine chapters in this book define the main topics of my syllabus, with one to three weeks devoted to each subject. Students read, in addition, three short books to enrich topics that are of special interest to me or them. I assign the first of these, *Things Fall Apart*, by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe (1959), after my Chapter 3 on industrialization. Achebe portrays Ibo agrarian life at the beginning of this century, telling of the clash with European imperialists from the viewpoint of the Africans. This becomes the basis for a discussion of the control of the Third World by the industrial nations.

After my Chapter 4 on the superpowers, I assign *Thirteen Days*, which is Robert Kennedy's (1971) narrative of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and also Nikita Khrushchev's account of the same event (in Talbott, 1970, pp. 488-505), so we can analyze the Rashomon-like nature of their conflicting views, which brought us as close as we have come to a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. Since many students are interested in ecological problems, after reading Chapter 8 on technology and the environment, I assign more detailed reading on the greenhouse effect, the depletion of stratospheric ozone, air and water pollution, destruction of the rain forest, and extinction of animal species. Yearly *State of the Earth* volumes, published by the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C., serve this purpose nicely.

Since social problems are current events, and undergraduates typically know little of such matters, I assign an hour or more of reading each week from the current *Time* or *Newsweek*, selecting articles that are germane to topics in this book, for example, Soviet-American affairs, the environment, or Third World problems. I use some class time each week to discuss the news and provide background.

Some audiovisual aids are helpful, and they provide a welcome break in class routine. I like to show about 20 minutes of the full-length film classic, *Rashomon*, to complement the text in Chapter 1, using the remainder of the period for discussion of the issues raised there. The movie, *Hiroshima/Nagasaki* (1970, running time is 17 minutes), based on Japanese film taken after the atomic bombings, is a dramatic introduction to Chapter 5 on war. Another movie, *Mexico City* (1983, 10 minutes), shows the urban problems of the world's largest city and nicely complements Chapter 7 on population. Several energy technolo-

gies discussed in Chapter 8 are shown in *Energy Sources* (1983, 19 minutes). The difficulty of resolving technical disputes between experts, discussed in the final chapter, is well illustrated by a film from the *Nova* television series, "Rise and Fall of DDT" (1978, 18 minutes).

For instructors who are willing to bring on-line computer displays into their classrooms, the data set in *50 Nations Showcase* (Szafran, 1987) contains variables similar to those used in Chapter 6, permitting professor and student to explore together how inequalities in material well-being and human rights vary around the world.

Since my student days, I have opposed courses graded solely on the basis of one midterm examination and a final. For many students, such tests are a better measure of how well they handle stress than of their mastery of assigned work. Also, the midterm-final system encourages easily distracted undergraduates to put off their reading until the days and nights just before each exam. A grading system based on short weekly quizzes or papers, all equally weighted, reduces the anguish of examinations and encourages students to stay current in their classwork, probably heightening their interest in the course as well. Certainly the students prefer this system, and it need not require much additional work for the professor.

I know of no one person who is an expert on all the topics covered in this book. Therefore I am grateful to the diverse specialists, and some nonspecialists, who commented on one or more of the chapters. Those who were most helpful, even if I did not always take their advice, are Cissie Fairchilds, Michael Freedman, Craig Humphrey, Jerry Jacobs, Robert Jensen, Louis Kriesberg, W. Henry Lambright, Robert Lerner, William Mangin, Polly Mazur, Denton Morrison, John Nagle, Thomas Neumann, Joseph Nye, Eugene Rosa, Seymour Sachs, Harvey Sapolsky, Stuart Thorson, and George Zito. I also wish to thank the Prentice-Hall reviewers: Paul L. Crook, Mesa College; Eric P. Godfrey, Ripon College; Jean H. Cardinali, Monroe Community College; William Feigelman, Nassau Community College; John W. Milstead, Winthrop College; and John B. Benson, Texarkana College. I thank Howard Schuman for suggesting to me the imagery of *Rashomon*.

Allan Mazur

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# 1

## OBJECTIVITY AND BIAS

In the classic Japanese movie *Rashomon*, a samurai and his wife are traveling through the forest when they are confronted by a bandit who kills the man and has sex with the woman. After a woodcutter finds the samurai's body, the bandit is arrested and brought to trial where each participant relates the incident from his or her own viewpoint (Kurosawa, 1950).

The bandit admits that he was so struck by the lady's beauty that he decided to take her. He captured the samurai and tied him to a tree, and then he overpowered the lady, whose fierce struggle changed to passion as she finally gave herself willingly to the bandit. Afterward the lady, now disgraced in the eyes of two men, tells the bandit that either he or her husband must die, and she will belong to whomever kills the other. The bandit unties the samurai and, after a heroic fight, kills him with a sword thrust, but by this time the lady has fled.

In the lady's version, the bandit has raped her, and she now lies weeping in front of her trussed-up husband. She looks up at him in her grief, but he stares coldly back with unmoving eyes, driving her to frenzy. "Kill me if you must," she cries, "but don't look at me like that." She staggers toward him with a dagger to cut his ropes, but as he continues his blameful gaze her desperation grows until she

faints. On awakening she sees her husband, still tied to the tree, the dagger in his chest.

Now the court hears the testimony of the dead husband, which is told through the voice of a spirit medium. The samurai-medium claims that the bandit, after raping his wife, tried to console her, asking her to come away with him. She agrees, perhaps because she is too ashamed to stay with her husband. But as she regains her resolve, she tells the bandit, "Kill him. As long as he is alive I cannot go with you." Both men are shocked, and the bandit asks the still bound-up husband if he should kill *her*, but she runs away. In sympathy, the bandit cuts the captive's bonds. The husband wanders off listlessly but then notices the dagger on the ground. He retrieves it, raises it over his head and plunges it into his own chest.

— Which version is correct? Each participant relates the incident in a way that justifies his or her own behavior while casting blame on the others. This occurs so often in real life that we will speak of the "Rashomon effect" when people give inconsistent accounts of the same situation, and each person's account suits a position that he or she wants to defend (Frankel, 1981).

At first glance, the major question in *Rashomon* seems to be, What really happened? But the plot thickens when we find that there was a witness. The poor woodcutter knows more than he has told for he came upon the scene right after the bandit had his way with the lady. There he sees the bandit begging for the lady's forgiveness and asking her to leave her husband and marry him. The sobbing lady cannot answer, but she finds the dagger and cuts her husband's ropes. Seeing this, the bandit says, "I understand. You mean that we men must decide," and he reaches for his sword. But the husband says, "Stop! I refuse to risk my life for such a woman." The woman looks at her husband in disbelief as he says to the bandit, "If you want her, I'll give her to you." By now the bandit appears to have second thoughts and is ready to leave, but the lady asks him to wait. Soon all three are arguing, as the lady calls both men cowards. The men fight awkwardly with swords, and finally the bandit kills the samurai. The lady flees.

None of the participants comes out very well in this version, but is this finally the true story? We are never certain because it turns out that the woodcutter too has selfish motives, for after everyone else left the scene, he took the valuable dagger and didn't want the police to know. Is his story any more trustworthy than those of the others?

For years cinema critics have debated whether the film's director, Akira Kurosawa, meant the woodcutter's version to be the correct story or not (Richie, 1972). (One might think that they would simply ask Kurosawa what he meant, but apparently they haven't.) In any case, the film raises a more profound question than simply inquiring what

actually happened, for it asks if there really is a single, uniquely correct account. If there is one true version, then any deviations from it must be lies or errors. But perhaps each person told the story as he or she *really* thinks it happened. In some sense, reality is in the mind of the beholder, and the reality for one person may differ from the reality for another (Jacobs, 1982).

Certainly there are limits to this relativistic view of reality. The samurai was killed with either a sword (as in the accounts of the bandit and the woodcutter) or a dagger (as told by the lady and the samurai himself). Somebody is right and somebody wrong here, and in principle one could settle this particular point by measuring the size of the wound to see which weapon fits. But the truth is not always easy to determine, even in principle. What did the samurai really communicate when he stared at the lady? She interpreted his gaze as a look of malice and contempt. Perhaps he was staring blankly because he was in shock. If the same look meant one thing to the husband and something else to the wife, then they did indeed experience different realities. Or consider the bandit, who believed that the lady succumbed to his masculinity, giving herself willingly to him after her initial rebuff. Did she in fact "turn on" to the bandit's forcefulness, or did he simply play out in his own mind the common male myth that some women enjoy being raped? Of course, one can conjecture anything one likes because the story is fiction, but the same questions would apply to a real-life situation.

The Rashomon effect recurs throughout this book because social problems are always controversial, and with any proposed solution, some people stand to gain and others to lose. Any time we find interest groups in conflict, whether the rich against the poor, or one group of nations against another, we will find inconsistent accounts of the situation, with each account serving the interests of those who subscribe to it. We must recognize when these claims represent separate realities, so that each side's position is as good as the other, and when there is a single reality, so that one side may be right and the other wrong. Unless we make some such attempt to find an objective truth, we will be lost in an irresolvable morass of claims and counterclaims.

Conflicting accounts always have some points of agreement. We will assume a claim to be correct if all parties agree to it (although occasionally it turns out that everyone was wrong—a situation sometimes called "pluralistic ignorance"). In *Rashomon*, all agree that the samurai and his wife were traveling through the forest when they encountered the bandit, that the bandit tied up the husband and had sex with the wife, that afterward the husband and wife were estranged, and that the samurai was stabbed to death. If this were real life rather than fiction, we would assume that these points of agreement had in fact occurred.

When there are disagreements about factual matters, it is sometimes possible to find objective evidence showing who is right. As we

have already discussed, it would have been possible to decide if the samurai had been killed by a sword or a dagger by measuring the size and shape of the wound. Although fingerprinting was not available in medieval Japan (and besides, too many people handled the weapons), one can imagine such kinds of evidence that would implicate one person rather than another.

Sometimes one person's opinion is as good as another. At other times it is possible to say who is correct and who is wrong. It is important to recognize both these situations and to be able to distinguish one from the other.

## THE LIBERAL BIAS

A sociology course ought not to be a class in political indoctrination. Nonetheless, it is impossible to teach social problems without suggesting that certain conclusions or solutions are preferable to others. No matter how much the professor attempts to be evenhanded, one hand is often more even than the other. American sociologists are among the most politically liberal of college professors—schools of business management are much more conservative (Ladd and Lipset, 1976), and this bias is reflected in our sociology.

Sociology wasn't always so liberal. A popular social problems textbook written about the time of World War I, in analyzing the American "negro problem," claimed that

the African environment of the ancestors of the present negroes in the United States deeply stamped itself upon the innate traits and tendencies of the race. For example, the tropical environment is generally unfavorable to severe bodily labor. Persons who work hard in the tropics are, in other words, apt to be eliminated by natural selection. On the other hand, nature furnishes a bountiful supply of food without much labor. Hence, the tropical environment of the negro failed to develop in him an energetic nature, but favored the survival of those naturally shiftless and lazy. Again, the extremely high death rate in Africa necessitated a correspondingly high birth rate in order that any race living there might survive; hence, nature fixed in the negro strong sexual propensities in order to secure such a high birth rate. (Ellwood, 1919, pp. 248-249)

The author, Charles Ellwood, was no extremist but rather a prominent sociologist who served as president of the American Sociological Association. The Ku Klux Klan once burned a cross on his lawn, apparently because his views were not strong enough for them.

This was a time when many Americans felt overwhelmed by the flood of strange peoples entering their cities. Always a land of immigrants, the nation was founded by British and northern Europeans.

Starting about 1880, employment opportunities in America, religious persecutions in Russia, and the introduction of convenient and inexpensive steamship transportation, all combined to spur immigration from southern and eastern Europe to the cities of America's Northeast. These "new immigrants," coming from areas that had heretofore sent few people to America, seemed especially foreign to those already here. Asian immigrants to California, although fewer in number, were even stranger. And the black population, which had lived in the rural South for two centuries, began moving to the Northern cities when jobs became available during World War I. All these new arrivals, having little money or education, and many not speaking English, formed the pattern of ethnic slums that has since been characteristic of American cities. The miserable lot of these people, reinforced by exploitive employers and a lack of public welfare services, made them a powerful symbol of "urban decay" to their middle-class neighbors.

Sociologists sought to understand this problem so that they could find solutions. Ellwood, like many of his colleagues, concluded that a major reason for urban decay was the poor quality of the new people, whom he thought were "degenerate strains," deficient in their basic biological makeup as well as their cultural heritage:

Slavic and Mediterranean races have not shown the capacity for self-government and free institutions which the peoples of Northern and Western Europe have shown.... It is scarcely probable that a people of so different racial heredity from ourselves as the Southern Italians, for example, will maintain our institutions and social life exactly as those of our blood would do. (pp. 234-235)

The Chinese work for wages below the minimum necessary to maintain life for the white man....[They] become addicted to the opium habit and other vices, and...so few women come among the Chinese immigrants that Chinese men menace the virtue of white women.... (p. 242)

Ellwood was a progressive reformer who advocated many solutions that would find sympathy among modern liberals, including child labor laws and public responsibility for better housing, education, and health and unemployment insurance. However, like other sociologists of his time, he also favored strict immigration laws to stop the entry of southern and eastern Europeans, for he feared that these "degenerates" would mix their blood with that of older Americans.

Professor Ellwood was a mainstream sociologist, but the discipline has changed so much that many of his teachings are anathema to modern sociologists. For instance, whereas modern sociology claims that most sex differences are learned, the result of boys and girls being taught their respective sex roles, here is Ellwood's view:

That these differences are original, or inborn, and not acquired, may be readily seen by observing children of different sex. Even from their earliest



years boys are more active, restless, energetic, destructive, untidy, and disobedient, while little girls are quieter, less restless, less destructive, neater, more orderly, and more obedient. These different innate qualities fit the sexes naturally for different functions in human society, and there is, therefore, a natural division of labor between them....(p. 95)

Ellwood believed that sexual promiscuity (as we see it today) would be the downfall of society; that the nuclear family—with the father as breadwinner and the mother at home—was sacrosanct, and it was threatened by the “women’s movement”; and that “from the sociological point of view” the ideal family should have three to six children (p. 196).

Many people today would agree with Ellwood, but not many sociologists would. Modern social problems textbooks defend the emancipation of women and their new opportunities outside the home. They show that the boundary between “normal” and “deviant” sexual behavior is arbitrary, varying from society to society, and from time to time within a given society, so there can be no absolute standard of proper sexual conduct. And as far as having six children per family, well....

Why has sociology changed so much in viewpoint? First, our whole society has liberalized since World War I, with a loosening of sexual mores in the 1920s, the creation within the federal government of social welfare programs during the Depression, and women entering the work force (if only temporarily) during World War II. The horrors of Nazi racism, reinforced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, have greatly reduced prejudicial attitudes in the United States (if not other aspects of the race problem), and the massive (presumably permanent) reentry of women into the labor force since the 1970s has given a firm base to the modern women’s movement. During the 1980s the country moved in a more conservative direction, but in the long view only slightly so, for even the conservative Reagan administration accepted the federal government’s role in social welfare policy and sexual and racial equality of opportunity, which were radical positions in Ellwood’s time.

Sociology moved left faster than the rest of the country, largely because different kinds of people were entering its ranks. Ellwood’s colleagues, many of them conservative clergymen, represented WASPish upper-class America, those with access to college, drawn to the field for its kinship to social work. With the Depression, education became a good route for upward occupational mobility, accessible to the children of immigrants who lived near inexpensive public universities. Sociology was one of the academic fields especially attractive to Jews (Ladd and Lipset, 1976), who brought with them the liberal