

# AMERICA'S PROBLEMS

Social

Issues

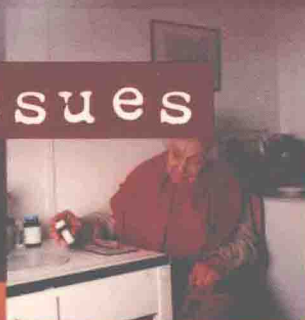
and

Public

Policy

Third Edition

ELLIOTT CURRIE \* JEROME H. SKOLNICK



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# AMERICA'S PROBLEMS

## Social Issues and Public Policy

THIRD EDITION

Elliott Currie and Jerome H. Skolnick

*University of California, Berkeley*



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# Preface

We've been gratified by the response to the first two editions of *America's Problems*, and for this new edition we've made some changes that we think have improved the book considerably while keeping its overall character intact. In addition to a thorough updating of evidence and argument throughout all chapters, we've continued to streamline the book, cutting down on some overly lengthy discussions and shortening or eliminating some tables and charts. Our aim has been to make the book more accessible to students without sacrificing content or our original commitment to comprehensive and high-level discussion of contemporary social issues. We hope we've succeeded, and we deeply appreciate the comments of all those readers who gave us helpful feedback on earlier editions.

Much has changed in America—and the world—since our last edition, and we have tried to keep up with those often momentous shifts in social reality and social policy. The Cold War is over, and though this change has hardly led to a stable and peaceful world, we've decided to drop our chapter on national defense—not because the issues are unimportant but because others cried out for inclusion. In its place is a wholly new chapter on the state of America's schools (we did the same in our reader, *Crisis in American Institutions*). We consider some of the domestic implications of continued high levels of defense spending in our concluding chapter, "Strategies for Social Policy." At home, many of the problems discussed in earlier editions have, tragically, stagnated or worsened in the 1990s, including economic inequality and the pervasive insecurity of the job market in an era of "downsizing." In these and other areas, we've tried to keep abreast of the swelling volume of important new research.

But though we have added substantial new material, expanded some sections, and pared others, we have left the basic design of *America's Problems* intact. We wrote this book because we felt that the United States

faces both unprecedented challenges and unprecedented opportunities as the twenty-first century dawns, and that meeting those challenges will require the best and most careful analysis of social issues we can muster. We believe that students should be introduced to the complex—and often difficult—research bearing on the most important debates about social problems today, and that without that kind of exposure they would be poorly prepared to participate in shaping American society in the future. We still share these beliefs. More than ever, we see the need for a book that can interpret the forces underlying contemporary changes in American society, and do so in a way that is accessible and interesting to students. We have tried to write a textbook for people who don't like textbooks—one that achieves depth without being stuffy and formal, that teaches without being pedantic, that is up-to-date and timely but also rooted in the best traditions of social science.

*America's Problems* is grounded in the assumption that particular problems must be understood in the context of broader social and economic structures and forces that shape them. Too often the literature still treats social problems in isolation from each other and from larger social processes. As a consequence, most texts on social problems, even if they have moved beyond the traditionally narrow focus on personal deviance and disorganization, seem awkwardly fragmented—a hodgepodge of disconnected concerns. They rarely make an effort to provide students with an overall sense of the master forces of their society and of how these forces affect social and personal life.

Our book's organization addresses these shortcomings. It covers the traditional categories within the field—from family problems to crime and poverty—but consistently focuses on them through the lens of fundamental structures and processes of American society.

Specifically, *America's Problems* is divided into two closely related parts. The first, "Systems and Structures," deals with what we regard as some of the most important of the broad structural features of American society—the contours of the private-profit economy in America and its changing role in the *world* economic order, and the historically pervasive inequalities of class, race, and sex. The second part, "Impacts and Institutions," considers several areas of social concern—the family, the workplace, health and illness, environment and energy, crime, and the schools—in light of the discussion in Part One. Finally, we conclude with "Strategies for Social Policy," a chapter that casts a look at some prospects for the future based on what has gone before. We believe that a book on social problems should be dynamic, not static; though it cannot predict the future, it should offer some guide to developments on the leading edge of social action and social policy.

The book's organization, then, stresses the linkages in American society between public and private, social and personal, structure and symptom.

In addition, two emphases further distinguish *America's Problems* from other texts in the field.

First, though we do not grind axes or indulge in narrow polemics, *America's Problems* (like *Crisis in American Institutions*) does not pretend to be value-neutral. It rests on certain fundamental values, including democracy, inclusion, and social justice. These values have recently come under systematic attack, but they are a vital part of our commitment as social scientists, educators, and citizens.

Second, though we stress the social nature of America's problems—the idea that personal problems are deeply influenced by larger social processes—we view people not as passive objects of social forces but as active participants who shape those processes as well as being shaped by them.

In emphasizing these themes, we are affirming what we feel is the most powerful and valuable tradition in social problems writing. It is the tradition of C. Wright Mills's insistence on the value of the "sociological imagination," and the tradition of E. A. Ross's conception of a "civic sociology" that not only analyzes and describes social issues but helps prepare students for a more aware and more principled participation in public life.

A book of this size and scope is necessarily a collective enterprise, whose quality depends enormously on the effort and dedication of the many people who help create it. Rod Watanabe, chief of staff at the Center for the Study of Law and Society, has helped facilitate each issue with his customary skill and patience. Susan Senger's skills, insight, and good spirits were indispensable in helping us turn out a finished manuscript of the first edition under very demanding time constraints. Much of the original work on the manuscript of that edition was ably done by Christina Miller, Ingrid Barclay, and Margo Rodriguez. We have also been blessed with an unusually capable group of researchers: Special thanks to Jennifer Hammett, Michael Peltz, and Laurie Rubinow for their initiative and creativity on earlier editions and to Anthony Costello for much-appreciated assistance on this one.

Margaret Loftus and Alan McClare of Longman provided skillful guidance, support, and patience. We would like to thank successive reviewers for their comments on the manuscripts: Robert Ross, Clark University; Edward Ponczek, Harper College; John Mahoney, University of Richmond; Bernadette Tarallo, University of California, Davis; David Linewebber; Robert Kleidman, Cleveland State University; Judith McIlwee, Mira Costa College; Michael Miller, University of Texas, San Antonio; Charles O'Connor, Bemidji State University; and Judy Vaughan, Arkansas Tech University. We greatly appreciate, as well, the careful and skillful production work on successive editions by Ron Newcomer, Scott Huler, and their coworkers and, most recently, by Diane Fredrick and her associates at Thompson Steele Production Services.

An instructor's manual/test bank has been prepared by Anthony Costello of the University of California, Berkeley. The instructor's manual features chapter summaries and outlines, lecture notes, and additional resources. The test bank portion, also available in TestMaster computerized format, includes multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay questions. A student study guide is available, providing learning objectives, chapter overviews, and practice tests.

Finally, a project of this kind makes heavy demands on family and friends who have to endure the book's intrusion into their lives. Once again, we are especially grateful to Rachael Peltz and Arlene Skolnick for the good advice, indispensable support, and consistent encouragement that ultimately made this book possible.

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# Introduction: Thinking About Social Problems

More than 35 years ago, a well-known American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, wrote that “ours is a time of uneasiness and indifference.” Despite unparalleled prosperity, Americans were suffering from the vague feeling that all was “somehow not right” (1959, p. 11). Today many of us might be inclined to say the same thing—if not worse. Just as in the 1950s, when Mills wrote those troubled words, American society presents a complicated picture. It is—on the whole—a powerful society and in many ways a prosperous one. But it is also full of disturbing contradictions.

It is a society of enormous wealth—and growing poverty. It is a society that creates astonishing technological wonders—and frightening toxic wastes. It is a society that produces millions of jobs—and condemns millions to unemployment. It is a society of booming cities and swelling ranks of the homeless, of world-class universities and bursting prisons.

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## CHANGING PROBLEMS, UNCERTAIN SOLUTIONS

Most of these contradictions are not new: They have been with us for a long time. But many of them are growing sharper and more urgent as we move toward the twenty-first century. American society is changing rapidly and often dramatically, and there is a growing sense that our traditional ways of coping with society’s ills are no longer adequate for the task. Americans, according to a survey by the *Washington Post*, began the 1990s full of “ambivalence and apprehension”—worried that the country was in a steady decline, concerned that their children would be worse off than they were, and skeptical that government could come up with effective solutions to America’s social problems (Balz, Broder, and Taylor, 1990). Opinion polls in the 1990s routinely found the great majority of



Americans “dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time” (Gallup, 1992).

Those feelings reflect some undeniable—and fundamental—changes in the world around us. Three such changes in particular have forced us to rethink many of our traditional assumptions about social problems: the transformation of the global economy, the crisis of the welfare state, and the failure of technological solutions.

### **The Transformation of the Global Economy**

The first change involves the relationship of the United States to the larger world economy. To a degree unprecedented in American history, we are faced with tough global economic constraints that have made the achievement of prosperity for all Americans much less certain than it seemed in the past: not just a period of slower-than-normal growth, or a temporary downturn in the economy, but the closing-off of economic options we had come to take for granted—and on which we had based a whole way of life.

America began as a frontier society, with what seemed like limitless lands and natural resources. Even after the settling of our own lands, the same sense of limitless potential continued as American businesses expanded overseas in search of new resources and new markets. Especially after World War II, when the economies of many other industrial countries lay in ruins, the United States easily dominated the world economic order. Only recently have we begun to understand how much of our peculiarly American brand of prosperity has depended on this capacity for expansion, first throughout the country and then throughout the world. That expansion was not, of course, entirely a blessing—either for Americans or for the rest of the world. But it did allow us to postpone reckoning with some fundamental issues: the limits of natural resources, the distribution of income and wealth, and the need for guiding and coordinating the economy. Up through the 1960s, as one observer writes, “people worried about many things—social upheaval, nuclear war, the environment—but they took it for granted that the economy would continue to deliver an ever-higher material standard of living” (Krugman, 1994, p. 3). But it’s clear that this approach to the “management” of America’s problems is running out of time. For a variety of reasons, we are no longer able to roam the rest of the planet at will, mining its human and natural resources to fuel the engines of economic growth.

One reason is that the terms of economic competition around the world have changed starkly. You need only look at the vast numbers of foreign-made cars—or stereos or television sets or motorcycles—in America to know that the United States no longer dominates the world market for most of the goods we use every day. And today it’s not only the big industrial powers—Japan and the advanced countries of Europe—that have successfully challenged American economic dominance. It’s also some of the