

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of bold, expressive brushstrokes in a variety of colors including deep blue, vibrant orange, and rich red. The strokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of movement and depth. In the bottom left corner, there is a small, solid green circle.

FOURTH EDITION

CONTEMPORARY

Social Problems

VINCENT N. PARRILLO

JOHN STIMSON

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Contemporary Social Problems



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PREFACE

In the three years since publication of the last edition of this book, unfolding events and social changes have redirected public thinking about some of our social problems. As a result of initiatives in California, Texas, and Washington, D.C., affirmative action has lost much of its potency. Welfare has become primarily a state program rather than a national one. Federal assistance to noncitizens has fallen drastically. Many observers who once viewed HMOs as the solution to soaring medical costs now see them as profit-motivated businesses that often deny important tests and treatments to patients in order to reduce costs.

Other trends contribute to public misgivings. Megamergers and advances in technology and telecommunications encourage corporate downsizing, displacing skilled workers while generating new jobs that typically involve low pay and limited upward mobility. Governments at every level struggle to balance budgets without overburdening taxpayers. Meanwhile, crime, drugs, shortcomings in the educational system, environmental disasters, homelessness, population growth, poverty, racism, sexism, single-parent families, declining urban infrastructure, and violence all contribute to create major differences between the American ideal and American reality.

Such pervasive problems stimulate extensive sociological inquiry; and indeed, many books examine this subject. While other texts are informative, however, my former co-authors and I originally wrote this book because none of these excited and intrigued students about the sociological perspective in studying social problems. Our goal was to create a lively, readable text providing students with more than a dry, depressing recitation of statistics and complex social policy analyses. Although gratified

by the strong response to previous editions, I have attempted in this fourth edition—my first solo effort with this text—to create an even more clearly written and comprehensive book that adopts a more consistent and succinct format throughout all chapters to hold student interest. Realizing that many students taking this course are not sociology majors, I also want to provide a grounding in basic sociological knowledge for analyzing social problems. Students already experience many of the problems examined here in their everyday lives and so have formed or accepted mythical or traditional explanations for them. My goal is to overcome these quasi-explanations and replace them with scientific concepts.

To establish this practical explanatory framework, in each chapter I apply sociological theoretical analysis to the factual content. Some other texts use only a Conflict perspective, but my approach is eclectic, offering Functionalist, Conflict, and Interactionist analyses, because I believe nonmajors should be acquainted with all viewpoints. In addition, two newer theoretical orientations: Feminist and Postmodern, appear in several appropriate chapters; and Chapter 14 includes discussion of the new Environmental orientation, which abandons the twin notions at its foundation (the status of humans as recent invaders and the goal of leaving nature alone) in favor of active human intervention in the natural world.

Instructors partial to one particular theoretical orientation can easily emphasize it in their classroom teaching while using this book as a source of supporting and contrasting ideas. Indeed, many past reviewers and adopters often have labeled the book's orientation as Functionalist, Conflict, or Interactionist, depending on their own predilections. No one should find the book antithetical to a particular theoretical view, yet the book does not indulge in amorphous sociological analyses. Readers will find more theoretical commentary and consistent application here than in most other texts.

The book is organized more cohesively than typical social problems books. Chapters are arranged to flow sequentially from microsocial to macrosocial topics; thematically, they are grouped into five parts, each of which begins with a two-page introduction to acquaint students with the interrelated chapter components, the main issues addressed, and important questions to think about while reading.

Each chapter begins with a “facts” page of provocative data to pique reader interest. A brief sociohistorical context section places each social problem in perspective, and an international context section describes how other societies confront particular social problems. The primary focus, however, is on present-day U.S. problems, their interrelationships, and the reasons they persist. The text also stresses how social definitions of problems affect perceived causes and attempted cures. Integrating sociological theory and current knowledge draws the student into fuller understanding; for this purpose, boxed inserts illustrate or augment the topics under consideration.

I have a strong interest in stimulating each student's sociological imagination. This term, coined by C. Wright Mills more than forty years ago, refers to people's ability to see how their personal experiences and the changes within society are interrelated. Two unique features of this book—Chapter 2 and the alternative futures scenarios in each chapter—employ what Mills called “the interplay of individuals and society, of biography and history, of self and world.”

Chapter 2 looks at the individual in society and examines the problems of anomie and alienation caused by the modern world. Because individuals tend to define the troubles they endure in terms of blame and individual weakness, rather than in terms of historical and

societal change, they need to be shown the impact of society on individuals' expectations about the quality of their lives. This chapter helps students gain sociological insights into the social arrangements and structural conditions that form people's self-images and self-evaluations and create life chances. Included is a discussion of the Postmodern orientation, which is a natural extension of the notion of the individual's "lostness" in modern society.

Alternative future scenarios, set in 2030, conclude each chapter. These encourage students to develop an awareness that several different directions and results are possible, depending on the policies we adopt now. I hope that these sections will generate student enthusiasm for investigating the sociological perspective and recognizing possibilities for change.

To maintain a flowing, readable style, I opted to run footnote citations at the back of the book instead of interrupting the text with parenthetical citations. Besides the boxed inserts mentioned previously, pedagogical aids include chapter summaries, annotated bibliographies, key terms, and an end-of-book glossary. An instructor's manual is available, with chapter overviews, chapter outlines, key terms, suggestions for class projects and activities, Internet exercises, and an annotated bibliography of relevant media materials. The manual also provides an objective test file and a set of essay/discussion questions for each chapter. Other available classroom instruction resources are a computerized test bank, an interactive Social Problems video, and Powerpoint® Presentation Software for Social problems.

The challenge of revising a book in so broad and rapidly changing a field as social problems was made less formidable by the dedicated efforts of many individuals. First, and most important, I wish to acknowledge the roles played by John Stimson of William Paterson University and Ardyth Stimson of Kean University, who co-authored earlier editions of this text. Although I have significantly revised those efforts at many levels, their ideas and approach to the subject remain evident here. Similarly, Mary Lou Mayo's past writings of the chapter on the family still shine through in this new edition. My thanks as well to Michelle DeAngelo for her research assistance on this edition.

I also thank the past users of the book for their many helpful suggestions and comments. Special thanks goes to reviewers A. Levine, El Camino College; Keith Durkin, McNeese State University; Earl Schaeffer, Columbus State Community College; Mark Rubinfeld, Loyola University New Orleans; and Angelika Hoehner, SUNY Agricultural and Technical College at Cobleskill. I should acknowledge reviewers of past editions of this book too: Lee D. Millar Bidwell, Longwood College; Anne R. Peterson, Columbus State Community College; Mary Jo Huth, University of Dayton; Lawrence S. Soloman, North Carolina State University; Robert H. Weller, Florida State University; and Stuart A. Wright, Lamar University.

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Vincent N. Parrillo



Contents

Preface	xv
PART I	SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS
Chapter I	Definitions and Perspectives
	3
The Four Elements of a Social Problem	6
Individual or Social Damage	6
Offense to a Powerful Group's Standards	6
Persistence	7
Overabundance of Proposed Solutions	9
The Role of the Social Scientist	12
Research Thinking	13
Research Observation	14
The Importance of Theories	16
Sociological Perspectives	16
The Functionalist Orientation	16
The Conflict Orientation	20
The Interactionist Orientation	21
The Feminist Orientation	22
The Postmodernist Orientation	24

	Guiding Principles for Studying the Future	24
	We Can't Always Predict the Future, But We Do Invent It	25
	What You Don't Know Can Hurt You: Latent Effects	25
	"Plan or Be Planned For"	25
	Examine the Taken-For-Granted	26
	Use Scenarios to Examine Alternative Futures	26
	Summary	27
	Key Terms	28
	Suggested Readings	28
Chapter 2	The Individual in Modern Society: Alienation, Anomie, and Postmodernism	29
	Functionalists: Social Situations Create Individuals' Problems	30
	Shyness and Culture	31
	The Loss of Community	31
	Anomic Situations	34
	Conflict Theorists: Alienation and Powerlessness	35
	Powerlessness	35
	Political Alienation	38
	The Human Commodity	39
	Interactionists: Searching for Meaningful Identities	40
	Individual Negotiation and Social Change	40
	Loss of Individualism: Society Packages Your New Identity	41
	Secularization and the Search for Meaning	43
	Postmodernism: A Break with the Past	45
	Adolescent and Young Adult Suicide	46
	Motivations for Suicide	46
	Media Influences	48
	Alternative Futures	49
	Pessimistic Scenario	49
	Optimistic Scenario	50
	Summary	51
	Key Terms	52
	Suggested Readings	52
PART II	CHALLENGES TO INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING	53
Chapter 3	Alcohol and Drug Abuse	55
	The Sociohistorical Context	56
	Alcohol and Drug Use in an International Context	57

Alcohol	58
Dangers	59
Youth and Alcohol Consumption	60
Gender and Alcohol Consumption	61
Cocaine and Crack	63
Use	63
Cocaine and Public Policy	63
Marijuana	65
Dangers	66
Use	66
Narcotics	66
Dangers	67
Use	67
Tobacco	68
Why Smoke?	69
Anti-Smoking Campaign	70
Social Consequences of Drug Use	72
Crime	72
Automobile Accidents	73
Ill Health	74
Economic Losses	75
Drug Abuse in Sports	76
Social Control and Solution Attempts	76
Preventive Programs	77
Treatment Programs	78
Sociological Perspectives	82
The Functionalist Orientation	82
The Conflict Orientation	83
The Interactionist Orientation	85
Alternative Futures	86
Pessimistic Scenario	87
Optimistic Scenario	87
Summary	89
Key Terms	89
Suggested Readings	90

Chapter 4 Sexual Behavior	91
The Cross-Cultural Context	92
Past and Preiterate Societies	93
Social Control of Sexual Intercourse	93

Changing U.S. Patterns of Sexual Behavior	93
The Rise and Decline of Casual Sex	94
Casual Sex Not Personally Fulfilling	94
Premarital Sex	95
Extramarital Sex	96
Safe Sex	97
International Comparisons	97
Homosexuality	99
Homosexuality in Sociohistorical Context	100
Homosexuality in the United States	101
The Extent of Homosexuality	102
Public Attitudes About Homosexuality	104
Pornography	105
The Victims of Pornography	106
Pornography and Violence	107
Pornography and The Internet	108
International Comparisons	109
Prostitution	109
The Sexual Career of a Prostitute	110
Is Prostitution a Social Problem?	112
International Comparisons	113
Child Molestation	114
The Extent of Child Molestation	114
Responding to the Problem	114
Sociological Perspectives	115
The Functionalist Orientation	115
The Conflict Orientation	116
The Feminist Orientation	116
The Interactionist Orientation	117
Alternative Futures	118
Pessimistic Scenario	118
Optimistic Scenario	119
Summary	120
Key Terms	121
Suggested Readings	122
 Chapter 5	 123
Crime and Violence	
Crime, Laws, and Prosecution	124
Laws and Norms of the Society	124
Differential Enforcement of Laws	124
Measuring the Extent of Crime	125
Index Crimes and the Uniform Crime Report	125
Victims and the National Crime Victimization Survey	126

Violence in the United States	129
Violence in Sociohistorical Context	130
Violent Crime	132
Homicide	132
Rape	134
Organized Crime	137
White-Collar Crime	138
Property Crime	138
Juvenile Delinquency	138
What is Juvenile Delinquency?	139
Gangs	139
Rethinking Juvenile Crime	141
The Criminal Justice System	141
The Police	142
The Prisons	142
Terrorism	145
Terrorism in Sociohistorical Context	145
Dealing with Terrorists	147
Political Terrorism	148
How Effective is Terrorism?	149
Sociological Perspectives	150
The Functionalist Orientation	150
The Conflict Orientation	151
The Interactionist Orientation	152
Alternative Futures	153
Pessimistic Scenario	153
Optimistic Scenario	154
Summary	155
Key Terms	156
Suggested Readings	157
PART III CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL EQUALITY	159
Chapter 6 Race and Ethnic Relations	161
The Sociohistorical Context	162
International Comparisons	162
Dimensions of the Problem	164
Institutional Discrimination	164
Education	165
Employment	169
Housing	173
Justice	175

Specific Problem Areas	177
Native Americans	177
African Americans	178
Hispanic Americans	178
Asian Americans	179
Illegal Aliens	180
Anti-Immigrant Sentiment	180
Sociological Perspectives	182
The Functionalist Orientation	182
The Conflict Orientation	183
The Interactionist Orientation	184
Alternative Futures	185
Pessimistic Scenario	185
Optimistic Scenario	186
Summary	187
Key Terms	188
Suggested Readings	189
Chapter 7 Poverty	190
Poverty in Sociohistorical Context	191
International Comparisons	193
Blaming the Poor	193
Intelligence as an Explanation	194
The Culture of Poverty	195
The Nature of Poverty	196
Absolute Deprivation	196
Relative Deprivation	198
Who are the Poor?	198
Minority Status	198
Family Structure	201
Age	202
Locale	203
The Impact of Poverty	203
Health	203
Housing	204
Family Life	205
Attitudinal Responses	205
Education	205
Work	206
Work and Welfare	206
The Welfare Poor	206
Public Welfare Programs	207

Welfare as a Way of Life	208
Income Distributions	209
Eliminating Poverty	210
The “Trickle Down” Approach	210
The “Robin Hood” Approach	211
The Interventionist Approach	211
Sociological Perspectives	214
The Functionalist Orientation	214
The Conflict Orientation	216
The Interactionist Orientation	218
Alternative Futures	219
Pessimistic Scenario	219
Optimistic Scenario	220
Summary	221
Key Terms	222
Suggested Readings	223

Chapter 8 Gender Inequality 224

The Biological Argument	225
“Support” for the Biological Argument	225
Weakness of the Biological Argument	226
Socialization and Sexism	227
Family Influence	227
Media Influence	228
Sexism in Sociohistorical Context	230
Gender Inequalities in an International Context	230
Newer Identified Forms of Sexism	232
Genital Mutilation and Female Sexuality	232
Women as Disposable Property	234
Sexual Harassment	235
Arenas of Change	238
Education	238
The Workplace	240
Political Representation	242
The Social Construction of Maleness	243
Sociological Perspectives	245
The Functionalist Orientation	245
The Conflict Orientation	245
The Interactionist Orientation	246
The Feminist Orientation	248
Alternative Futures	249
Pessimistic Scenario	250
Optimistic Scenario	251

Summary	251
Key Terms	252
Suggested Readings	253
PART IV CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS	255
Chapter 9 The Family	257
Family in Sociohistorical Context	258
Recent Changes	258
The Scope of Family Problems	260
Divorce	262
Factors Contributing to the High Rate of Divorce`	263
The Impact of Divorce on Adults	264
The Impact of Divorce on Children	264
Changes in Family Structure	267
Remarriages and Reconstituted Families	267
Single-Parent Families	268
Teenage Pregnancy	271
Violence and Abuse	272
Incidence of Family Violence	272
Social Factors Linked to Violence	275
Sexual Violence and Victimization in the Family	277
Marital Rape	277
Incest	278
The Need for Societal Intervention	279
Services for Battered Wives	279
Intervention in Child Abuse	279
The Police	279
Prevention of Family Violence	280
Family in an International Context	280
Why Are Families in Trouble?	282
Individual Faults	282
The Growing Emphasis on Individual Rights	282
Deviant Families and Sick Individuals	283
Sociological Perspectives	283
The Functionalist Orientation	283
The Conflict Orientation	285
The Interactionist Orientation	287
Alternative Futures	288
Pessimistic Scenario	288
Optimistic Scenario	289
Summary	290

Key Terms	292
Suggested Readings	292
Chapter 10 Problems in Education	293
Education in Sociohistorical Context	294
Social Promotions	294
Grade Inflation	295
Curriculum Change	295
Education in an International Context	295
The School is a Bureaucracy	296
Conformity and Obedience	297
Hierarchy of Authority	297
Education and Social Class	298
Dominance of Middle-Class Values	298
Ability Grouping or Tracking	299
Education Problem Areas	303
School Dropouts	303
Adult Illiteracy	303
School Funding	306
A Question of Quality	308
Subject Matter	309
Academic Standards	309
Teacher Competency	310
How Else Can We Improve Education?	311
Equitable School Districts	312
Voucher Plans	313
Learning Environment	314
Sociological Perspectives	316
The Functionalist Orientation	316
The Conflict Orientation	317
The Interactionist Orientation	318
Alternative Futures	320
Pessimistic Scenario	320
Optimistic Scenario	320
Summary	321
Key Terms	322
Suggested Readings	322
Chapter 11 The Corporate United States and Work	324
Work in Sociohistorical Context	325
The Corporate United States	326
Who Owns the Corporations?	326
Engulf and Devour	327
Corporate Technostructure	328

Market Manipulation	329
Consumer Manipulation	329
Government-Corporate Alliances	330
The Military-Industrial Complex	330
Multinational Corporations	334
International Impact	335
Work in the Corporate United States	337
Occupational Trends	337
Unemployment and Underemployment	339
Job Satisfaction	343
Occupational Health and Safety	345
Government Regulation	345
Health Hazard Occupations	346
Sociological Perspectives	349
The Functionalist Orientation	349
The Conflict Orientation	350
The Interactionist Orientation	351
Alternative Futures	353
Pessimistic Scenario	353
Optimistic Scenario	354
Summary	355
Key Terms	357
Suggested Readings	357
Chapter 12 Health Care	358
Health Care in an International Context	359
Health Care in Sociohistorical Context	360
Dominance of Modern Medicine	361
The Social Organization of Health Care	362
Uneven Health-Care Delivery Systems	363
Health Care for Profit	364
Malpractice	366
The Hospital Industry and Its Expenses	367
Medical Insurance	368
Rise of Managed-Care Programs	369
Bioethics: Life and Death Discussions	371
Abortion	371
Keeping the Dying Alive	374
The Aids Epidemic	374
Scope of the Problem	376
Impact on Health Care	377

Mental Health	377
The Nature of Mental Disorders	377
Socioeconomic Factors	378
Sociological Perspectives	380
The Functionalist Orientation	380
The Conflict Orientation	381
The Interactionist Orientation	382
Alternative Futures	383
Pessimistic Scenario	383
Optimistic Scenario	384
Summary	385
Key Terms	386
Suggested Readings	386
 PART V CHALLENGES TO THE QUALITY OF LIFE	 389
 Chapter 13 Urban Decline and Growth	 391
U.S. Cities in Sociohistorical Context	392
Urban Change in the United States	393
Urban Sprawl	393
Traffic Congestion	396
Housing Problems and Solutions	397
Redlining and Abandonment	397
Urban Renewal	398
Public Housing	398
Housing Subsidies	399
Gentrification	400
Homelessness	402
Political Fragmentation	405
Can Snowbelt Cities Compete with Sunbelt Cities?	405
The BosWash Megalopolis	406
Urban-Suburban Interdependence	408
The Central Cities	408
The Outer-Ring Suburbs	408
The Inner-Ring Suburbs	409
Thinking Regionally	410
Cities in an International Context	410
Sociological Perspectives	411
The Functionalist Orientation	411
The Conflict Orientation	412
The Interactionist Orientation	413