

SECOND EDITION

# SOCIAL PROBLEMS



A CRITICAL POWER-  
CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE

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JOE R. FEAGIN

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# ***SOCIAL PROBLEMS***

## ***A CRITICAL POWER-CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE***

second edition



**Joe R. Feagin**

*University of Texas at Austin*



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# PREFACE

This nation began with these dramatic words, written by the young revolutionary Thomas Jefferson:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the People to alter or abolish it. . . .

With these lines Jefferson put into words the desires of second-class citizens for equality, liberty, and social justice. Although Jefferson himself did not have the propertyless, women, or black Americans in mind when he penned these lines of the Declaration of Independence, his ideas have been expanded to include the democratic demands of all exploited peoples for greater control over their political and economic lives. Fewer than one hundred years later, President Abraham Lincoln would echo Jefferson's words in his 1863 Gettysburg Address:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Coming in the same year as his Emancipation Proclamation freeing Southern slaves, these words of Lincoln extend Jefferson's ideas of liberty and social justice to black Americans.

One can see in the history of the United States a long series of people's movements seeking to take back control not only over the political system but also over the economic system under which they live—from the early farmers' rebellions, to socialist movements, to union movements, to community action groups, to black ghetto revolts. Just 128 years after the Declaration of Independence, another famous American, union leader and presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, extended Jefferson's ideas to include the economic system and all the working people of America, especially the propertyless. In an important 1904 statement he proclaimed:

Full opportunity for full development is the unalienable right of all. . . . The earth for all the people! That is the demand. The machinery of production and distribution for all the people! That is the demand. The collective ownership and control of industry and its democratic management in the interest of all the people! That is the demand. The elimination of rent, interest and profit and the production of wealth to satisfy the wants of all the people! That is the demand. Co-operative industry in which all work together in harmony as the basis of a new social order, a higher civilization, a real republic! That is the demand.

Debs spoke of economic liberty and justice. Six decades later the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke vigorously of liberty and justice from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Reverend King was killed just five years later, as he was trying to help black workers fight for better working conditions in Memphis.

Among the deepest hopes in human beings are desires for freedom from the oppressive political and economic conditions in which they live, for fully human development, for equality and democracy, and for happiness. As we will see in the chapters that follow, many Americans have not yet secured the full range of these basic human rights. They continue to face class domination, race discrimination, and sex discrimination.

Yet in the past and in the present some Americans have become aware of these roots of their problems and have adopted a critical power-conflict perspective in interpreting this troubled society. This social-problems textbook develops a thoroughgoing, critical power-conflict perspective as a necessary step in making sense of the confusion of problems in this society. We examine the roots of major societal troubles in the patterns of class, race, and sex stratification and subordination. This examination leads us to emphasize, among other things, the *connections* among numerous problems. What are often dis-



cussed in this country as separate problems are, in fact, closely interrelated. For example, the drive for ever-renewed profit in capitalistic enterprises—profit whose use and reinvestment are ultimately in the hands of small capitalist elites—links together such apparently diverse problems as environmental pollution, persisting unemployment, and corporate price-fixing. The profit-oriented drive creates unemployment when it becomes more profitable to move manufacturing operations from the North to the Sunbelt, or from the Sunbelt to Taiwan. This drive generates corporate crimes such as illegal price-fixing, and it is a major factor in the expanding problem of environmental pollution. Many problems appear at first to be isolated, but on closer examination they are linked together because of their roots in the structure and processes of our advanced capitalistic system. These arguments will be fully developed in the chapters that follow.

A major advantage of a critical power-conflict perspective, compared to the perspectives found in more conventional social-science textbooks, is that it usually forces us to think critically about the operation and fundamental roots of the social system in the United States. Many of us have been told by our parents or teachers: “Never mind what you think; *we* are trying to teach you what to think.” Buckminster Fuller put it this way in his book *Critical Path*:

My mother said it. My school teachers said it. . . . “Thinking” was considered to be a process that is only teachable by the elders of the system. “That is why we have schools, dear.” Thinking was considered to be an utterly unreliable process when spontaneously attempted by youth.

The first step toward an adequate understanding of the problems in our great society is to look systematically into major social problems and to examine their roots in our underlying class, racial, and gender systems. We must be willing to look at facts that have been hidden from our view. We must be willing to study ideas and data that our “elders” have told us are forbidden or foreign. We must keep an open mind and be willing to consider views that challenge our existing ideas about the social world around us.

It is in looking deeply into the roots of our society and in probing the seamy side of our basic institutions that we can become fully human, for full humanity includes control over our own ideas and thought patterns. If we let someone else do most of our thinking for us—whether it be parents, spouses, teachers, employers, or television—we are not using our human capabilities to the fullest. A major purpose of this book is to provoke readers into analyzing more carefully the social relations in which we live out our lives. Whether students can absorb all the arguments and data presented here is relatively unimportant; what is important is that students learn the habit of thinking for themselves about this society.

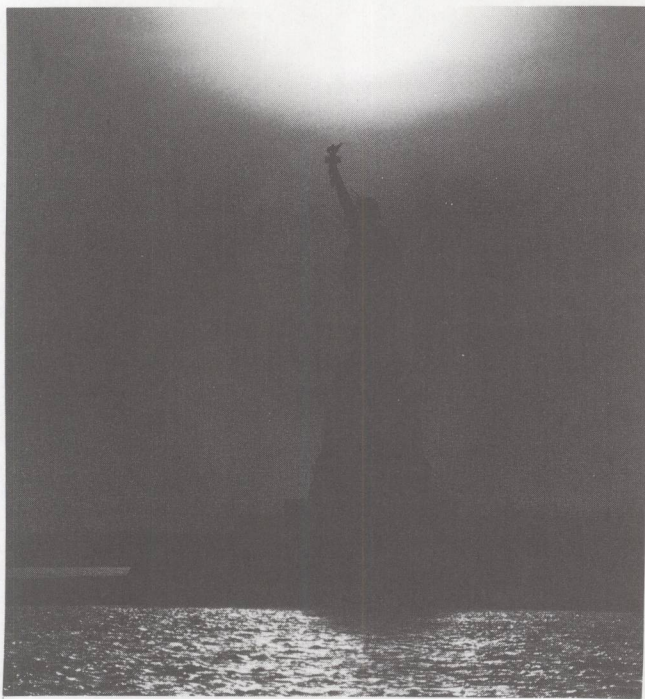
Recent decades have brought an endless series of crises—energy crises, race riots, unemployment crises, inflation, air and water pollution, wars—to our fragile globe. And the next few decades will doubtless bring more crises. If we Americans are to be able to handle them, more of us will have to think deeply about the social and economic roots of the problems of this society—and about new solutions to those social problems.

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