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SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

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Sociologists have erred in locating social problems in objective conditions. Instead, social problems have their being in a process of collective definition. This process determines whether social problems will arise, whether they become legitimated, how they are shaped in discussion, how they come to be addressed in official policy, and how they are reconstituted in putting planned action into effect. Sociological theory and study must respect this process.

My thesis is that social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements with an intrinsic makeup. This thesis challenges the premise underlying the typical sociological study of social problems. The thesis, if true, would call for a drastic reorientation of sociological theory and research in the case of social problems.

Let me begin with a brief account of the typical way in which sociologists approach the study and analysis of social problems. The approach presumes that a social problem exists as an objective condition or arrangement in the texture of a society. The objective condition or arrangement is seen as having an intrinsically harmful or malignant nature standing in contrast to a normal or socially healthful society. In sociological jargon it is a state of dysfunction, pathology, disorganization, or deviance. The task of the sociologist is to identify the harmful condition or arrangement and to resolve it into its essential elements or parts. This analysis of the objective makeup of the social problem is usually accompanied by an identification of the conditions which cause the problem and by proposals as to how the problem might be handled. In having analyzed the objective nature of the social problem, identified its causes, and pointed out how the problem could be handled or solved the sociologist believes that he has accomplished his scientific mission. The knowledge and information which he has gathered can, on the one hand,

be added to the store of scholarly knowledge and, on the other hand, be placed at the disposal of policy makers and the general citizenry.

This typical sociological approach seems on its face to be logical, reasonable, and justifiable. Yet, in my judgment, it reflects a gross misunderstanding of the nature of social problems and, accordingly, is very ineffectual in providing for their control. To give an initial indication of the deficiency of the approach, let me indicate briefly the falsity or unproven character of several of its key assumptions or claims.

First, current sociological theory and knowledge, in themselves, just do not enable the detection or identification of social problems. Instead, sociologists discern social problems only after they are recognized as social problems by and in a society. Sociological recognition follows in the wake of societal recognition, veering with the winds of the public identification of social problems. Illustrations are legion—I cite only a few of recent memory. Poverty was a conspicuous social problem for sociologists a half-century ago, only to practically disappear from the sociological scene in the 1940's and early 1950's, and then to reappear in our current time. Racial injustice and exploitation in our society were far greater in the 1920's and 1930's than they are today; yet the sociological concern they evoked was little until the chain of happenings following the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation and the riot in Watts. Environmental pollution and ecological destruction are social problems of very late vintage for sociologists although their presence and manifestation date back over many decades. The problem of the inequality of women's status, emerging so vigorously on our current scene, was of peripheral sociological concern a few years back. Without drawing on other illustrations, I merely assert that in identifying social problems sociologists have consistently taken their cue from what happens to be in the focus of public concern. This conclusion is supported further by the indifference of sociologists and the public, alike, to many questionable and harmful dimensions of modern life. Such injurious dimensions may be casually noted but despite their gravity are given the status of social problems by sociologists. A few instances that come to mind are: the vast overorganization that is developing in modern society, the unearned increment in land values which Henry George campaigned against three-quarters of a century ago, the injurious social effects of our national highway system, the pernicious social consequences of an ideology of "growth," the unsavory side of established business codes; and may I add for my State of California, a state water plan with hidden social consequences of a repelling character. I think that the empirical record is clear that the designation of social problems by sociologists is derived from the public designation of social problems.

Let me add that, contrary to the pretensions of sociologists, sociological theory, *by itself,* has been conspicuously impotent to detect or identify social problems. This can be seen in the case of the three most prestigeful sociological concepts currently used to explain the emergence of social problems, namely, the concepts of "deviance," "dysfunction," and "structural strain." These concepts are useless as means of identifying social problems. For one thing, none of them has a set of benchmarks that enable the scholar

to identify in the empirical world the so-called instances of deviance, dysfunction, or structural strain. Lacking such clear identifying characteristics, the scholar cannot take up each and every social condition or arrangement in society and establish that it is or is not an instance of deviance, dysfunction, or structural strain. But this deficiency, however serious, is of lesser importance in the matter I am considering. Of far greater significance is the inability of the scholar to explain why some of the instances of deviance, dysfunction, or structural strain noted by him fail to achieve the status of social problems whereas other instances do reach this status. There are all kinds of deviance that do not gain recognition as social problems; we are never told how or when deviance becomes a social problem. Similarly, there are many alleged dysfunctions or structural strains that never come to be seen as social problems; we are not told how and when so-called dysfunctions or structural strains become social problems. Obviously, deviance, dysfunction, and structural strain on one side and social problems on the other side are not equivalent.

If conventional sociological theory is so decisively incapable of detecting social problems and if sociologists make this detection by following and using the public recognition of social problems, it would seem logical that students of social problems ought to study the process by which a society comes to recognize its social problems. Sociologists have conspicuously failed to do this.

A *second* deficiency of the conventional sociological approach is the assumption that a social problem exists basically in the form of an identifiable objective condition in a society. Sociologists treat a social problem as if its being consisted of a series of objective items, such as rates of incidence, the kind of people involved in the problem, their number, their types, their social characteristics, and the relation of their condition to various selected societal factors. Is it assumed that the reduction of a social problem into such objective elements catches the problem in its central character and constitutes its scientific analysis. In my judgment this assumption is erroneous. As I will show much clearer later, a social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in a society instead of being an objective condition with a definitive objective makeup. The societal definition, and not the objective makeup of a given social condition, determines whether the condition exists as a social problem. The societal definition gives the social problem its nature, lays out how it is to be approached, and shapes what is done about it. Alongside these decisive influences, the so-called objective existence or makeup of the social problem is very secondary indeed. A sociologist may note what he believes to be a malignant condition in a society, but the society may ignore completely its presence, in which event the condition will not exist as a social problem for that society regardless of its asserted objective being. Or, the objective breakdown made by a sociologist of a societally recognized social problem may differ widely from how the problem is seen and approached in the society. The objective analysis made by him may have no influence on what is done with the problem and consequently have no realistic relation to the problem. These few observations suggest a clear need to study the process by which a society comes to

see, to define, and to handle their social problems. Students of social problems notoriously ignore this process; and it scarcely enters into sociological theory.

There is a third highly questionable assumption underlying the typical orientation of sociologists in the study of social problems. It is that the findings resulting from their study of the objective makeup of a social problem provide society with the solid and effective means for remedial treatment of that problem. All that society has to do, or should do, is to take heed of the findings and to respect the lines of treatment to which the findings point. This assumption is largely nonsense. It ignores or misrepresents how a society acts in the case of its social problems. A social problem is always a focal point for the operation of divergent and conflicting interests, intentions, and objectives. It is the interplay of these interests and objectives that constitutes the way in which a society deals with any one of its social problems. The sociological account of the objective makeup of the problem stands far outside of such interplay—indeed, may be inconsequential to it. This distant removal of the sociological study from the real process through which a society acts towards its social problem is a major explanation of the ineffectiveness of sociological studies of social problems.

The three central deficiencies that I have mentioned are only a sketch of a needed full fledged criticism of the typical sociological treatment of social problems. But they serve as a clue and hence as an introduction to the development of my thesis that social problems lie in and are products of a process of collective definition. The process of collective definition is responsible for the emergence of social problems, for the way in which they are seen, for the way in which they are approached and considered, for the kind of official remedial plan that is laid out, and for the transformation of the remedial plan in its application. In short, the process of collective definition determines the career and fate of social problems, from the initial point of their appearance to whatever may be the terminal point in their course. They have their being fundamentally in this process of collective definition, instead of in some alleged objective area of social malignancy. The failure to recognize and respect this fact constitutes, in my opinion, the fundamental weakness in the sociological study of social problems and in sociological knowledge of social problems. Let me proceed to develop my thesis.

To lodge the emergence, the career, and the fate of social problems in a process of collective definition calls for an analysis of the course of this process. I find that the process passes through five stages. I shall label these: (1) the emergence of a social problem, (2) the legitimation of the problem, (3) the mobilization of action with regard to the problem, (4) the formation of an official plan of action, and (5) the transformation of the official plan in its empirical implementation. I propose to discuss briefly each of these five stages.

The Emergence of Social Problems

Social problems are not the result of an intrinsic malfunctioning of a society but are the result of a process of definition in which a given condition is picked out and identified as a social problem. A social problem does not exist for a society unless it is recog-

nized by that society to exist. In not being aware of a social problem, a society does not perceive it, address it, discuss it, or do anything about it. The problem is just not there. It is necessary, consequently, to consider the question of how social problems arise. Despite its crucial importance this question has been essentially ignored by sociologists.

It is a gross mistake to assume that any kind of malignant or harmful social condition or arrangement in a society becomes automatically a social problem for that society. The pages of history are replete with instances of dire social conditions unnoticed and unattended in the societies in which they occurred. Intelligent observers, using the standards of one society, may perceive abiding harmful conditions in another society that just do not appear as problems to the membership of the latter society. Further, individuals with keen perceptions of their own society, or who as a result of distressing experience may perceive given social conditions in their society as harmful, may be impotent in awakening any concern with the conditions. Also, given social conditions may be ignored at one time yet, without change in their makeup, become matters of grave concern at another time. All of these kinds of instances are so drearily repetitive as not to require documentation. The most casual observation and reflection shows clearly that the recognition by a society of its social problems is a highly selective process, with many harmful social conditions and arrangements not even making a bid for attention and with others falling by the wayside in what is frequently a fierce competitive struggle. Many push for societal recognition but only a few come out of the end of the funnel.

I would think that students of social problems would almost automatically see the need to study this process by which given social conditions or arrangements come to be recognized as social problems. But by and large, sociologists do not either see the need or detour around it. Sociological platitudes, such as that the perception of social problems depend on ideologies or on traditional beliefs, tell us practically nothing about what a society picks out as its social problems and how it comes to pick them out. We have scarcely any studies, and pitifully limited knowledge, of such relevant matters as the following: the role of agitation in getting recognition for a problem; the role of violence in gaining such recognition; the play of interest groups who seek to shut off recognition of a problem; the role of other interest groups who foresee material gains by elevating a given condition to a problem (as in the case of police with the current problem of crime and drugs); the role of political figures in fomenting concern with certain problems and putting the damper on concern with other conditions; the role of powerful organizations and corporations doing the same thing; the impotency of powerless groups to gain attention for what they believe to be problems; the role of the mass media in selecting social problems; and the influence of adventitious happenings that shock public sensitivities. We have here a vast field which beckons study and which needs to be studied if we are to understand the simple but basic matter of how social problems emerge. And I repeat that if they don't emerge, they don't even begin a life.

Legitimation of Social Problems

Societal recognition gives birth to a social problem. But if the social problem is to move along on its course and

not die aborning, it must acquire social legitimacy. It may seem strange to speak of social problems having to become legitimated. Yet after gaining initial recognition, a social problem must acquire social endorsement if it is to be taken seriously and move forward in its career. It must acquire a necessary degree of respectability which entitles it to consideration in the recognized arenas of public discussion. In our society such arenas are the press, other media of communication, the church, the school, civic organizations, legislative chambers, and the assembly places of officialdom. If a social problem does not carry the credential of respectability necessary for entrance into these arenas, it is doomed. Do not think because a given social condition or arrangement is recognized as grave by some people in a society—by people who indeed attract attention to it by their agitation—that this means that the problem will break through into the arena of public consideration. To the contrary, the asserted problem may be regarded as insignificant, as not worthy of consideration, as in the accepted order of things and thus not to be tampered with, as distasteful to codes of propriety, or as merely the shouting of questionable or subversive elements in a society. Any of these conditions can block a recognized problem from gaining legitimacy. If the social problem fails to get legitimacy it flounders and languishes outside of the arena of public action.

I want to stress that among the wide variety of social conditions or arrangements that are recognized as harmful by differing sets of people, there are relatively few that achieve legitimacy. Here again we are confronted with a selective process in which, so to speak, many budding social problems are choked off, others are ignored, others are avoided, others have to fight their way to a respectable status, and others are rushed along to legitimacy by a strong and influential backing. We know very little of this selective process through which social problems have to pass in order to reach the stage of legitimacy. Certainly such passage is not due merely to the intrinsic gravity of the social problem. Nor is it due to merely the prior state of public interest or knowledge; nor to the so-called ideologies of the public. The selective process is far more complicated than is suggested by these simple, commonplace ideas. Obviously, many of the factors which operate to affect the recognition of social problems continue to play a part in the legitimation of social problems. But it seems evident that there are other contributing factors through which the elusive quality of social respectability comes to be attached to social problems. We just do not have much knowledge about this process, since it is scarcely studied. It is certainly a cardinal matter that should be engaging the concern of students of social problems.

Mobilization of Action

If a social problem manages to pass through the stages of societal recognition and of social legitimation, it enters a new stage in its career. The problem now becomes the object of discussion, of controversy, of differing depictions, and of diverse claims. Those who seek changes in the area of the problem clash with those who endeavor to protect vested interests in the area. Exaggerated claims and distorted depictions, subserving vested interests, become commonplace. Outsiders, less involved, bring their sentiments and images to bear on their framing of the problem. Discussion, advocacy, evaluation, falsification, diversionary tactics,

and advancing of proposals take place in the media of communication, in casual meetings, organized meetings, legislative chambers, and committee hearings. All of this constitutes a mobilization of the society for action on the social problem. It seems scarcely necessary to point out that the fate of the social problem depends greatly on what happens in this process of mobilization. How the problem comes to be defined, how it is bent in response to awakened sentiment, how it is depicted to protect vested interests, and how it reflects the play of strategic position and power—all are appropriate questions that suggest the importance of the process of mobilization for action.

Again, as far as I can see, students of social problems by-pass concern with and consideration of this stage of the collective defining process. Our best knowledge of this stage has come from students of public opinion. Yet their contribution is fragmentary and woefully inadequate, primarily because of a lack of detailed empirical analysis of the process. The students of the public opinion process tell us little about how given social problems come to survive in their confrontations and how they are redefined in order to achieve such survival. Similarly, they tell us next to nothing about how other social problems languish, perish or just fade away in this stage. That students of social problems should overlook this crucial stage in the fate of social problems seems to me to be extraordinarily shortsighted.

Formation of An Official Plan of Action

This stage in the career of social problems represents the decision of a society as to how it will act with regard to the given problem. It consists of the hammering together of an official plan of action, such as takes place in legislative committees, legislative chambers, and executive boards. The official plan is almost always a product of bargaining, in which diverse views and interests are accommodated. Compromises, concessions, tradeoffs, deference to influence, response to power, and judgments of what may be workable—all play a part in the final formulation. This is a defining and redefining process in a concentrated form—the forming, the re-working and the recasting of a collective picture of the social problem, so that what emerges may be a far cry from how the problem was viewed in the earlier stage of its career. The official plan that is enacted constitutes, in itself, the official definition of the problem; it represents how the society through its official apparatus perceives the problem and intends to act toward the problem. These observations are commonplace. Yet, they point to the operation of a defining process that has telling significance for the fate of the problem. Surely, effective and relevant study of social problems should embrace what happens to the problem in the process of agreeing on official action.

Implementation of the Official Plan

To assume that an official plan and its implementation in practice are the same is to fly in the face of facts. Invariably to some degree, frequently to a large degree, the plan as put into practice is modified, twisted and reshaped, and takes on unforeseen accretions. This is to be expected. The implementation of the plan ushers in a new process of collective definition. It sets the stage for the formation of new lines of action on the part of those

involved in the social problem and those touched by the plan. The people who are in danger of losing advantages strive to restrict the plan or bend its operation to new directions. Those who stand to benefit from the plan may seek to exploit new opportunities. Or both groups may work out new accommodative arrangements unforeseen in the plan. The administration and the operating personnel are prone to substitute their policies for the official policy underlying the plan. Frequently, various kinds of subterranean adjustments are developed which leave intact central areas of the social problem or transform other of its areas in ways that were never officially intended. The kind of accommodations, blockages, unanticipated accretions, and unintended transformations of which I am speaking can be seen abundantly in the case of many past attempts to put official plans into actual practice. Such consequences were conspicuous in the implementation of the prohibition amendment. They are notorious in the case of the regulatory agencies in our country. They are to be seen in the case of most new law enforcement programs designed to combat the problem of crime. I scarcely know of any facet of the general area of social problems that is more important, less understood, and less studied than that of the unforeseen and unintended restructuring of the area of a social problem that arises from the implementation of an official plan of treatment. I am unable to understand why students of social problems, in both their studies and their formulation of theory, can afford to ignore this crucial step in the life-being of social problems.

I hope that my discussion of the five discernible stages in the full career of social problems brings out the need for developing a new perspective and approach in the sociolgical study of social problems. It seems to me to be indubitably necessary to place social problems in the context of a process of collective definition. It is this process which determines whether social problems are recognized to exist, whether they qualify for consideration, how they are to be considered, what is to be done about them, and how they are reconstituted in the efforts undertaken to control them. Social problems have their being, their career, and their fate in this process. To ignore this process can yield only fragmentary knowledge and a fictitious picture of social problems.

My discussion should not be construed as denying value to the conventional way in which sociologists approach the topic of social problems. Knowledge of the objective makeup of social problems (which is their aim) should be sought as a corrective for ignorance or misinformation concerning this objective makeup. Yet, such knowledge is grossly inadequate with regard either to the handling of social problems or to the development of sociological theory. In the handling of social problems, knowledge of the objective makeup of the social problem area is of significance only to the extent that the knowledge enters into the process of collective definition which determines the fate of social problems. In this process the knowledge may be ignored, distorted, or smothered by other considerations. For me, it is self-evident that sociologists who wish their studies of social problems to bring about improved conditions had better study and understand the process of collective definition through which changes are made. On the side of sociological theory, knowledge of the

objective makeup of social problems is essentially useless. It is useless because, as I have sought to show, social problems do not lie in the objective areas to which they point but in the process of being seen and defined in the society. All the empirical evidence that I can find points indubitably to this conclusion. I would welcome any evidence to the contrary. Sociologists who seek to develop theory of social problems on the premise that social problems are lodged in some kind of objective social structure are misreading their world. To attribute social problems to presumed structural strains, upsets in the equilibrium of the social system, dysfunctions, breakdown of social norms, clash of social values, or deviation from social conformity, is to unwittingly transfer to a suppositious social structure what belongs to the process of collective definition. As I have said earlier, no one of these concepts is capable of explaining why some of the empirical instances covered by the concept become social problems and others do not. This explanation must be sought in the process of collective definition. If sociological theory is to be grounded in knowledge of the empirical world of social problems, it must heed and respect the nature of that empirical world.

STABLE WORKERS, BLACK AND WHITE*

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A study of stable working and middle-class men, both black and white, shows two comparative tendencies: 1) the two races are similar on job aspirations and satisfactions, both races indicating economic ambition, a sense of personal security in employment, adequate advancement on the job and in consumption, and high hopes for children; 2) the two races differ in political perspectives, with the blacks indicating a sense of partial marginality to the system reflecting discrimination, and a determination to protest. Putting the two tendencies together, it is concluded that stable jobs among blacks are associated with high levels of personal satisfaction but not with political conservatism, since awareness of group deprivation and desire to protest are independent of personal achievement and are not frustrated responses to blocked ambition.

There has been much interest in recent years in sociological studies of American Negroes. Most of this interest, however, has been directed at the

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