The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems

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CHAPTER 5

Social Problems in Global Perspective

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Abstract

For decades, sociological inquiry and praxis about social problems have developed a primary orientation focused on the nation-state and policy solutions within the nation-state system. We argue for globalizing the study of social problems by adjusting analytical frames that explain, address, or remedy social problems. We first examine several transnational processes that illuminate ways that public issues are bursting the seams of nation-states while weaving new spaces for the emergence of, and contest over, global social problems. We then briefly recap a recent history of globalization, suggesting that both the forms of world-historical processes and their consequences trigger new, globally specific social problems. Adapting social problems theory, we then present an analytical framework for globalizing social problems inquiry and praxis. Two cases illustrate this globalized approach to social problems. Last, we conclude with a view toward the future of global social problems research, its place in the wider sociological project, and the importance of transnational intellectual and organizational praxis.

For decades, sociological inquiry and praxis about social problems has developed a primary orientation focused on the nation-state and policy solutions within the nation-state system. Yet, human history speaks to a more complex interdependency of social problems and social relations than a nation-centered approach to social problems can fully address. This history is grounded in a century of social science inquiry that has acknowledged the world-historically interdependent social relationships from precolonial to postcolonial contexts, and conceptualizes the nation-state system as an artifact of these world-historical processes. There is now an abundance of sociological literature tracing inequalities and power relationships that preceded the configuration of modern nation-states but are now embedded in the nation-state system.

In this chapter, we argue for globalizing the study of social problems. Even as social problems scholars have advanced a global perspective, a continued reorientation is needed to unsettle the "zombie category" (Beck 2007) of the nation and further globalize our inquiry and praxis by adjusting
analytical frames that explain, address, or remedy social problems. Bound by an ontological preeminence of the nation-state in post–World War II sociology, it was pragmatic nonetheless that most solutions could be found there. But many contemporary social problems mock the borders of nations and conspire to expand their ever ephemeral status. For Beck (2007), the presumed centering of the nation-state within sociology can obscure the complex, variegated, and patterned processes, relationships, and forces that may be at work. Beck refers to this danger as "methodological nationalism," and calls for a perspective that takes into account the global and transnational dimensions.

Beck proposes a "cosmopolitan sociology," an approach that would resolve methodological nationalism by disrupting the standpoint of the West, or the denial of the "existence of one fixed point" (Lillemets 2013, 3), and reframing the reference unit of analysis. Particularly, Beck pushes us to consider historical and contemporary relations through the lenses of marginalized groups, in for example, the contexts of settler-colonialism, postcolonial relations, and neoliberal globalization, with attention to how social inequality is shaped across borders. This can also be understood as a shift in episteme, decentralizing a privileged point of view — such as a Western-centric approach to history — and those relationships grounded in false or limited dualities, such as those of the colonizers and the colonized. This opens up possibilities for social problems researchers to construct new understandings of social inequality that capture transnational processes and experiences within a more cosmopolitan world. This is also significant for the identification of new forms of solidarity and mobilization of strategies for building transnational alliances and coalitions to respond to social problems through different "political units other than the nation-state" (Lillemets 2013, 4).

However, Kreckel (2008) maintains that individual states and borders are still relevant, shaping the social experiences of and mediating the impacts of the world capitalist order on its residents and beyond (through processes of inclusion and exclusion) (Lillemets 2013). Taking Beck and Kreckel together, we assert that a global approach to social problems requires recognizing the twofold character of national borders. On the one hand, national borders are real because they are socially constructed as real. National borders are defined on maps as specific material locations, giving the illusion of a naturalized, predestined fact even as these borders may and do change over time and throughout history. In contemporary times, national borders are often marked with state authorized border-crossing locations and officers that are imbued with the authority to permit or deny the movement of people and goods across those borders. The symbolic and material realities of borders are infused by the practices embodied in national government and policies, laws, administrative agencies and offices. These hardened structures of the state, some of which were designed to solve some problems, may also perpetuate or create new social problems.

On the other hand, we can also see that national borders and nation-states are socially constructed in their permeability, as social and natural forces transcend these borders through trafficking in drugs and people, multinational corporations moving capital, manufacturing industries, and work, and the vagaries of pollution and climate change. In these ways, social problems seem to mock the social construction of nations, revealing how ephemeral they are even as they are still contained within a system of relations.

Lillemets (2013) details a global framework for the contemporary study of global inequality that is quite relevant for globalizing the study of social problems more generally. Her global framework consists of three variables, namely global history, global entanglements, and global fluxes, each drawing from and contributing to a rich history of sociological approaches that address global or transnational dimensions.

Global history refers to the past transnational interactions and their legacies in shaping for example the post-colonial inequality structures. In essence, global entanglements mean cultural and institutional interconnections of nation-states and transnational movements, and global fluxes consist of flows of trade, capital, people, ideas and information. In this model, the interactions of these variables, which also reflect the coexistence of historical entanglements between Western and non-Western societies, unfold into a variety of interconnected inequality paths. (5)

In each major institutional sphere — of the global capitalist economy, the international state system and multilateral governance bodies, global cultural and media processes, and global civil society networks — inequalities pervade. Even where more reflexive attempts among transnational social movement organizations seek remedies, the inequalities behind the global North-South postcolonial order persist even in the social movement sector.

Nowhere are these inequalities more acute than in the global economic sphere, where "nearly 40% of the control over the economic value of TNCs (transnational corporations) in the world is held, via a complicated web of ownership relations, by a group of 457 TNCs..." (Vitalis, Glattfelder, and Battiston 2011, 6). This form of global capitalism, with international financial corporations at the center of these owner networks, relies on numerous multilateral institutions that govern world trade (e.g., World Trade Organization), social and global finance (e.g., International Monetary Fund), and development finance (e.g., the World Bank). In 2010, over 70,000 parent corporations owned more than 900,000 affiliates in foreign countries. These multinational corporations compose the bones and sinew of globalization. They link together production, trade, and investment in countries throughout the world. In 2014, the largest 500 companies employed 65 million people worldwide and their total revenues represent nearly two-thirds of all corporate revenues. About 60 percent of all world industrial output is derived

Transnational Processes: Reimagining the Domestic

The history of social problems research has largely resided within the nation-state.
from the 900 largest multinational corporations (MNCs) (Fortune.com 2015). Among the largest world corporations, the corporate elite are extensively networked among boards, social events, and business associations. Smith (2008) refers to this sociopolitical conglomeration of transnational corporate elite as a neoliberal network.

The world capitalist economy is buttressed by the international state system, which remains instrumental to the operation and enforcement of corporate legal interests, standards, and rules for production and trade, and the arbitration of disputes between corporate and state interests. But the multilateral institutions, with the United Nations at the center, do more. They maintain sites for routine political cooperation, communication, and problem solving. A human rights framework has emerged alongside this system and has been an active and growing site for a network of globalizing NGOs and transnational social movement organizations. As a whole, global civil society advocates have latched onto this "complex multilateral system," to press as Jackie Smith (2008) describes, alternatives to the neoliberal model of globalization and toward a democratic global vision. As the transnational "democratic globalizers" have, at times quite contentiously, pressed for solutions to the contradictions and social problems set in the wake the current neoliberal form of globalization, they have opened new public spaces between and across borders and are not confined to nation-states.

The international state system is also the sphere where military alliances and conflicts take shape, patterns of global spending on militaries and armed personnel are sustained—which directly subsidize the arms industry—and where forms of mass violence and social disorganization are a reality. The war system is vast with global military expenditures exceeding $1.5 trillion in 2013. The United States and Russia are the main suppliers of weapons to the world. Reflecting the interconnected transnational processes, the global profit-centered mass media often devolves into a champion for the spectacle of global violence and terrorism (McChesney 2008; Kellner 1995).

In sum, transnational processes include economic, political, cultural, and civil networks that are complex and vast in each sphere, and even more so in their manifold interconnections and conflicts. Set in motion with successive waves of globalization, these organizational networks continue to alter nation-states by creating new spheres for global interconnections that create global social problems and open avenues to challenge these problems.

A (Very) Brief History of Globalization

In most popular accounts of globalization, human beings are presented as passive observers to a process that appears to be of its own making. When viewed in this way, as an anonymous hand of 'history,' the forms of power and collective agency that underlie globalization are relegated to the shadows. Below we contextualize the project of globalization emerging from the new institutions and actors at the centers of power after the fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War.

Accounts of the postwar (1945-70) transformation in international institutions and global capitalism abound (cf. Evans 1995; Ruggie 1998). Generally, scholars agree on many key developments within that period. In the twenty-five years after World War II, for example, scholars often highlight the importance of the militarization of the United States and USSR during the Cold War, the collapse of the formal colonial system and subsequent decolonization, the expansion (in both size and operational scope) of US multinational corporations, and the buttressing of American economic and political power through international institutions. Collectively, these diffuse transformations contributed to a deep restructuring of the world system wherein the United States and the USSR emerged as world superpowers. This phase of globalization involved the United States' growing political power alongside the success of its multinational firms in the areas of finance, manufacturing, advanced technology, and energy; in many cases, the growth of these corporations was fueled by the successful globalization of their operations which included both foreign production and entry into non-US consumer markets. In tandem with these changes, a new international division of labor closely linked to the colonial system quickly took forms in the postcolonial order. With infinite local derivations, the political conflicts associated with decolonization and other postcolonial conflicts became tightly fused with Cold War politics. This drew local struggles for autonomy into the highly politicized economic development strategies associated with the two global powers. The geopolitics, foreign policy, and military interventions of the United States often reflected its interest in shaping and preserving a global "free enterprise system" (Arrighi 1994).

Within this broader context, state and corporate leaders in the United States—who worked closely together during the war while hosting the United Nations and sponsoring negotiations for founding the Bretton Woods system—successfully founded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (see Domhoff 2002). What became known as the "Grand Area" strategy in elite foreign policy circles included major US foreign policy projects, including expanding influence in Southeast Asia and Japan, and the establishment of international financial and military institutions. Domhoff (2014, 10) cites the Council on Foreign Relations' Economic and Financial Group, which "concluded that the full productivity of the American Economy...could only be realized if corporations were able to invest, purchase raw materials, and sell products in Western Europe, South America, and the British Empire." International economic interests were formulated by corporate elite and channeled through the policy discussion circles to government officials, resulting in a concerted push to expand international trade and investment and boost American corporate interests. Expanding global economic power and market opportunities were thus driven not only by state elite, but also by corporate elite who worked closely with the state during and after World War II.

With successive tariff reductions through the GATT by the end of the 1960s, tariffs dropped globally and export processing zones grew in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. The postwar institutions and policies expanded markets for globalization US corporations and fueled a rapid reinindustrialization of Europe, Japan, and several emerging, or newly industrializing countries. This era of relatively open trade was embedded in a postwar social accord that assured some protection to many citizens from the costly dislocations that can stem from the international trading system. Yet armed conflicts, anticorporal movements, and mass movements throughout the core nations reflected deepening contradictions in this system. By the late 1960s, historical conditions were set for a new era of globalization. The coming neoliberal politics would weaken many of those social protections.

At the beginning of the neoliberal era in the 1970s (Farley 1995; Drelling and Darwin 2016), corporate elite in the United States and Europe moved political coalitions among business to the right politically. The strident defense of free markets internationally offered an ideological upper hand to more conservative economic voices domestically. Today, free trade and free markets at home fused in a neoliberal economic ideology and a politics of domestic deregulation and trade globalization that, by the mid-1990s, gained hegemonic status in many countries across the globe, anchored strongly in US-led institutions.

Neoliberal globalization has since involved highly uneven patterns of growth and development across and within countries as well as reproducing racial/ethnic and gender inequalities. Research on gender and globalization over the last three decades, for example, has captured the gendered nature of globalized processes in export processing zones, military bases, sweatshops or maquiladoras, and the feminization of...
labor, migration, and poverty (Enloe 2007). Scholars generally agree that women’s experiences with economic globalization have been uneven and contradictory, at times allowing them new opportunities to break away from restrictive patriarchal relations, but often through work opportunities that are insecure, low paid, demeaning, or unsafe (Pyle and Ward 2003). An intersectional approach (McCall 2009) brings attention to how work opportunities are not only gendered, but also defined, shaped, and constrained in racialized, classed, and globalized ways (Braun 2011; Plenaryk-Visela 2012). Women have also been active agents for change, resisting and challenging inequality in formal and informal ways to shift power dynamics and promote political change locally and globally (Basu 2010; Braun and Dreiling 2010; Ferree and Tipp 2006).

Many of the social problems attributable to the functioning of global capitalism, such as new environmental toxins, overconsumption, the precarity of labor, economic inequalities, etc., operate at both the national and (perhaps more insistently) at the global level. Furthermore, viewing global capitalism in its contemporary form through the lens of transnationalism and the centrality of finance capital and its uncertainty, the upending of industrial capital from older manufacturing centers to new globalized regions of production, and an unprecedented concentration of capital and wealth among a global elite. Indeed, some global social problems are particular to the functioning of the historically specific form of capitalism. Thus, globalization processes are creating new terrain for social problems to develop and for claims to be articulated and mobilized around while also shoring up in global transnational avenues for mitigating social problems.

Social historical processes of capitalism, class dominance, racism, patriarchy and heterosexism, in both form and consequences, generate and reproduce global social problems. Thus, globalization a social problems perspective shifts the scope and scale of our analysis, while inviting forms of praxis that transnationalize privilege and power in emerging global public spaces. This is where the sociology of globalization and transnational processes is useful and can inform a critical approach to global social problems perspectives. In the next section, we present an analytical framework for thinking about social problems and then we illustrate the transnational dimensions of contemporary social problems that arise within an increasingly globalized world.

An Analytical Framework for a Global Social Problems Perspective

Nearly sixty years ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills explained the difference between “personal troubles” and social problems. “Social issues or problems have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life…An issue is a public matter” (Mills 1959, 8). “Personal troubles” occur in the immediate sphere of individual life, involving the character of the individual and her immediate relations. These “troubles,” as Mills writes, are “private matters” to be resolved in the specific context of one’s life circumstances. Mills pointed to this difference as a way to illuminate the idea of a sociological imagination, but the formula proved useful for decades of sociological work on social problems, and as we explain, remains applicable to the project of globalizing social problems.

Mills’s notion of social issues and problems was formulated in a national context where the public sphere conceptually and practically orbited the rational state and remained confined by its borders. Globalizing social problems, in our view begins by crossing those borders to pursue a twofold task. As we discussed above, the first reflection on transnational processes involves identifying those social issues that collide with historically constituted apparatuses of states. Immigration, war and international violence, human trafficking, famine, movement of refugee populations, global crime and drug trafficking, and commodity production and trade standards, to name a few. States attempt to control and regulate these processes, with varying success. Second, and these are not mutually exclusive, is an array of human and environmental social issues that bypass borders and explicitly challenge the fiction of border materiality. Notable among these are industrial disasters, such as the Chernobyl or Fukushima nuclear meltdowns, or global climate change. Therefore, at the transnational intersection of borders we can find imprints of social problems – each of these examples extended above, and many others, leave lasting signatures on what states do (not) and can (not) do at their borders Examining these encounters with a global imagination reveals how public issues, in the Millsian sense, resist being confined to the public sphere of the national state.

Ultimately, the world state system produces the conditions for a global public around which social and environmental issues can find expression. And it is at the borders that we find their sharpest articulation. Consequently, and to borrow from Mills, in this global sociological imagination, we find the need to conceptualize a globalizing public space where transnational social problem claims, contests, and remedies are made by actors within and across nation-states.

As we globalize social problems inquiry and praxis, it is important to reiterate another distinction from Mills: with personal troubles, even if (global) public issues, people experience negative stress. Sociologists cannot define social problems simply as human suffering. Human suffering may arise from a number of sources: sometimes from personal troubles, sometimes from natural events, and sometimes from social problems. For this reason, social problems – or the gap between personal and social problems in four distinct areas: the scale of the condition, the persistence of the condition, the pattern of impact on specific groups, and finally, the transpersonal nature of social problems. Each applies to our notion of globalizing social problems.

First, in terms of scale, social problems involve large numbers of people that experience distress over a common, shared social condition, even as the people affected change over time. For example, poverty among nations and across the globe impacts billions of human beings. Yet, we know that the particular local derivations of poverty vary by gender, age, race, and region. Poverty, like all social problems, impacts large numbers of people.

Second, social problems arise out of conditions that pose persistent troubles for people over time. Many social problems persist over time because some people profit from the problem. Consider for instance the growing incidence of diabetes among children, not just in the United States, but globally. Is there a correlation between increased diabetes rates among children and the growth in the consumption of refined sugars and fats? Understanding the persistence requires interrogating the food commodity system that stretches across borders – even while homogenizing culture and food aesthetics – and resists with market and political power any policy, cultural, or regulatory efforts to dramatically curtail the consumption. The proximate causes and even problems also persist over time because the social conditions that create one persistent condition are interconnected with other social problems. Solving one problem often requires addressing other, related social problems.

Third, social problems, unlike personal troubles, have definite patterns of who gets affected. Global social problems arise from, and generate patterns that may simultaneously harden one feature of borders while provoking or even challenging others. Shifts in global corporate investments, for example, rely on corporate-friendly trade and investment rules that soften and even weaken certain elements of nation-state authority while reinforcing economic divisions between nations.

Finally, social problems – unlike many personal troubles – transcend the decisions of any single person. Indeed, social problems are made in a series of choices and
actions that are often part of the everyday operations of society, and when we globalize our perspective, we see our society, and the dynamics within, as part of a wider set of transnational relationships and processes.

Following Mills and others, Dello Buono advances a praxis-oriented sociology that centers a structurally material, or objective analysis of social problems but also retains the subjective elements of social constructionism and claims-making, "preserving its most salient insights and incorporating them into a more powerful synthesis of social problems inquiry" (Dello Buono 2013, 796).

Below we consider the objective and subjective dimensions of social problems inquiry, using the example of climate change.

Objective Elements of a Social Problem

When defining social problems, two criteria in the social problems literature are important to consider for a global perspective. One is the objective element of a social problem, referring to real and observable social or environmental conditions that impact the physical and mental well-being of humans or the larger natural environment. From a global perspective, these conceptual distinctions become more problematic and fuzzy across significant differences in cultural, linguistic, and historical power relations. When too few decent jobs are available in a city or small town, joblessness becomes a social problem. When African Americans are refused home loans at four times the rate of whites, even when controlling for income and credit history, then racial bias objectively exists.

Some objective conditions speak more directly to people and their needs. An increase in spousal violence, battering, and murders in a town will speak more directly and immediately to people in that town than a slow, invisible seepage of nuclear waste into their water supply. Both involve objective injury to humans, but one may go unnoticed for a generation.

Power relations are crucial in determining whether or not objective violations of human needs will be considered a social problem or dismissed. Globalizing social problems requires methods that can reliably detect power structures (whether in the form of social movements or elite countermovements) and their role in advancing or denying social problem claims.

Subjective Elements of a Social Problem and Critical Intellectual Praxis

The second criterion of a social problem refers to the subjective element of social problems. Subjective aspects of social problems mean that what is seen as a social problem for some may not be seen as a problem for others: What gets defined as a social problem will differ depending on where and when one is situated in society. Sociologists use this distinction for two reasons. The first is because social problems are often defined as violations of norms or rules that a culture uses to guide certain forms of behavior deemed important to that group.

The second reason sociologists distinguish subjective from objective elements of a social problem is because objective conditions that threaten people’s well-being may exist in a society but people may be unaware of them or interpret their affliction in a way that is unrelated to the cause of their suffering. For instance, a rural community exposed to pesticides may not experience the effects for a generation. In this case, for the condition to become a social problem, someone or some group must call attention to the situation. The cause, intensive pesticide use and its drift to rural communities and agricultural workers, may elude their “construction” of the problem for some time. How a problem is defined will shape how people respond to the conditions. This impacts public praxis.

Any social condition that systematically benefits one group at the expense of a second group is suspect and likely a reflection of some form of oppression. For this reason, a sociological perspective on social problems requires standing on intellectual guard, remaining skeptical of claims where powerful groups define more marginal social groups as the source of social problems (or ignore their needs entirely). A critical intellectual praxis brings awareness to forms of social power that distort or obfuscate issues, opening the door to other forms of sociological praxis and advocacy.

Remaining on-guard intellectually encourages us to consider the relationship between the social power of a group and its claims to social problems within a global and transnational approach. For sociologists, staying on intellectual guard involves conducting research to evaluate subjective claims of social problems that are not clearly linked to objective social conditions, and critically evaluating the ways in which social problems are framed and explained within larger processes of power and inequality that cross local, community, national, and transnational levels.

Globalizing the Construction of Social Problems

Sociologist Herbert Blumer wrote that "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" (Blumer 1971, 202). And vice versa: gross human suffering need not be present for groups to claim that a social problem exists. Throughout this section, we draw on the global social problem of climate and refer to Table 5.1 for some of the highlights discussed below.

Making Transnational Public Claims

Social problems emerge in society when groups of people successfully define or construct a social condition as a problem. As stated earlier, the social conditions may include situations where widely shared values are violated or situations where human needs are systematically left unmet for groups of people. When these conditions become the concern of enough people who then define the situation as a problem, then we have a social problem.

There are ample examples that reveal one of the great paradoxes of studying social problems: social conditions, while possibly negative for millions of people, do not automatically become the basis for public claims of a social problem. A sociological perspective invites us to look beneath prevailing public ideas, taking a critical stance toward what passes for a social problem and what gets ignored. Global social problems praxis entails the critical sociological research, but also an active engagement with affected communities and institutions to more effectively construct a frame that resonates publicly.

Groups establish a social problem through the process of "claims-making." A claim that a social problem exists is an argument or appeal. Best (2001) and others break this process down into four steps. First, groups must successfully make the claim that some negative condition exists. For example, the claim that climate change exists is the first step toward it becoming a problem. The same could be said of any number of social problems. Though some of these claims may be obvious, particularly to people oppressed under those social conditions, it is the first and necessary step for translating oppression into a public issue. The second step is to claim that the condition poses some risk to human well-being. Some people may wonder why global warming would be problematic. In fact, in 1958, Guy Stewart Callendar, who first proposed the simple model of global warming, did not consider it a threat. Global warming was not a risk to humans among early scientists in this field. By shifting the attention from the claim that the problem is not with the planet getting warmer per se, but with climate change: that the consequences of melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels, changing climate patterns,
Table 5.1. Climate Change as a Global Social Problem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key concept</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transnational scope and scale?</td>
<td>Climate change acts on human societies irrespective of national borders even as the consequences of climate change are experienced through the world geography of national states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective elements</td>
<td>Quantifiable greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by human industrial, agricultural, and consumption activities; increase in concentration of atmospheric CO₂; increasing temperatures of oceans and atmosphere. Disruption in climate patterns, affecting food production, rising sea levels, increase in frequency of high intensity weather events, climate refugees from low-lying islands, and much more. Fossil fuel energy development for transportation, electricity, and materials manufacturing by capitalist firms and state corporations. Energy isomorphism across world-historical system. Early industrial countries or Global North responsible for most emissions. Fossil fuel energy corporations among the largest in the world, expend resources to influence political systems for access to fossil fuel reserves, subsidize development, transport and consumption. Related pollutants deleteriously effect human and nonhuman health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective elements – claimmakers counterclaims</td>
<td>Climatologists and geophysicists in the scientific community; environmental organizations and activists; sympathetic political elite and publics; first-wave climate refugees. Fossil fuel corporations, key energy corporations, their foundations, sponsored think tanks and politicians. Private and state energy corporations; affiliated transport, chemical, financial, and manufacturing industries. Scientific associations; transnational governance bodies; educators; social and environmental movements; national and provincial regulatory agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power structures benefiting</td>
<td>Fossil fuel production and consumption was understood quite clearly to be the cause of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by the 1970s. In 1982 even Exxon scientists warned top management that continuing global warming &quot;would require major reductions in fossil fuel combustion&quot; to avoid potentially &quot;catastrophic consequences&quot; (cited in McKibben 2016). In 1998, after President Bill Clinton agreed with the Kyoto climate accords, oil industry interests devised a &quot;Global Climate Science Communications Plan&quot; with the sole aim of promoting uncertainty of the science on climate change. This leaked plan read: &quot;the Clinton Administration and environmental groups...have conducted an effective public relations program to convince the American public that the climate is changing, we humans are at fault, and we must do something about it.&quot; To prevent Congress from ratifying the agreement, the fossil fuel corporations spent millions of dollars to expose what they termed &quot;a very high degree of uncertainty&quot; in the science. The goal was to sow seeds of doubt and denialism over scientific and environmental movement assertions about climate change. To avoid accountability, fossil fuel corporations mounted this multidecade campaign to deny and obfuscate public understanding of climate science and its consequences (McCright and Dunlap 2003; Brulle 2013; Farrell 2015, 2016). The necessity of interpreting facts about global warming and climate change is the reason why fossil fuel corporations invested so much money in preventing progress on a global climate treaty for decades. And this is why critical intellectual praxis is needed, to inform and engage in decision-making and the inevitable power struggles in the process. Indeed, who, or what is defined as the cause will shape the next step: what to do about the problem. The fourth step of the claim proposes some course of action to solve the problem – that, for example, a rapid reduction in greenhouse gases (GHG) through fossil fuels could minimize the threats of global climate change. Environmental activists have escalated movement tactics toward this end, pressing institutions to divest from fossil fuels and blocking the export of tar sands from Canada through the Keystone XL pipeline. Climate change has emerged as a global social problem because objective conditions of a warming planet met the successful claims by globally organized scientists (e.g., the founding of the International Panel on Climate Change), local and transnationally organized environmentalists, proactive institutional leaders and the first wave of climate refugees, documented brilliantly in the documentary film by that name. Even as these claimmakers face a powerful countermovement by fossil fuel interests, the problem continues to gain traction globally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis and change agents</td>
<td>Fossil fuel corporate interests wielded sufficient organizational and cultural power to change the content of media coverage, bring the Republican Party into the denialist camp, and conservative ideology with climate change denialism (ibid). The corporate campaign lobbied to prevent the United States from ratifying the Kyoto Protocol under both the Clinton and Bush presidencies, preventing global solutions to this global problem. As this example was meant to demonstrate, groups often define their position on social problems according to their interests, not the truth or falsity of the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Claimmakers and Social Power

Social problem constructs are not neutral. Sociologists agree that when certain definitions of the problem are established, they "serve not only to structure subsequent policy choices, but also to give affirmation to a particular conception of reality" (Elder and Cobb 1984, 115). Social problem constructs, and the claims people make, are shaped by the ideologies that frame how people define, understand, and react to social and political issues. But social problem claims are contingent on some form of organizational and cultural power that successively elevates the claim. Challenges to social problems claims are also conditioned by power.

Expounding further on the global warming example shows the congruence of vested social interests and power. Building on the "climate denial machine" (McCright and Dunlap 2000), Brulle (2013) provides an analysis of the financial and network mobilization of the "climate change countermovement" (CCCM), which was able to "institutionalize delay" by raising obstacles to ecologically rational energy policy through the collective power of key energy corporations, their foundations, sponsored think tanks and politicians. Farrell's (2015, 2016) analyses on Brulle's and identify "network power" as opposed to just "sheer financial power" – as the driver of influence on "acritical similarity" between climate contrarian organizations and news media. The twenty-year campaign by fossil fuel corporate interests wielded sufficient organizational and cultural power to change the content of media coverage, bring the Republican Party into the denialist camp, and conservative ideology with climate change denialism (ibid). The corporate campaign lobbied to prevent the United States from ratifying the Kyoto Protocol under both the Clinton and Bush presidencies, preventing global solutions to this global problem. As this example was meant to demonstrate, groups often define their position on social problems according to their interests, not the truth or falsity of the.
claims about the problem. By promoting the claim that climate change is not a problem, many groups – particularly industries and corporations that profit from fossil fuels – shaped the issue in a way that was favorable to their interests.

Based on our example, it is clear that claims about social problems are shaped by two important conditions. First, all claim-makers have interests in a social problem. Those interests might be based on moral commitments, such as a shared belief in fighting for justice, or ideals that aim to hold powerful groups accountable. Or, groups may be interested in a social problem because they stand to gain or lose from the way a social problem is defined.

Second, a group’s ability to act on their interests and influence public views and social change around a global problem depends on their social power. Social power is necessary to create and diffuse a social problem claim. Without it, claims about a problem will go unheeded. It is only with some form of social power that the voices and concerns of people get heard in the larger public. How do groups with few resources create power? And how do powerful brokers from social problems contain and control marginal groups who challenge the problem? To understand social problems and how they get noticed (or ignored) in society it is necessary to extend a global conception of power.

Organizational and Cultural Power

The significance of a critical sociology is to reveal the patterned ways in which power is both structurally organized and wielded through political, economic, and cultural processes and practices. We begin with the view that social power is both organizational and cultural. Various theories of power provide considerable nuance, but for our purposes we offer a basic discussion of the concept as it relates to the analytical framework of global social problems (see Lukes 2005; Mann 1986; Boulding 1986).

The first and most commonly understood form of power is coercive power, which involves actions and structures that use the force of threat – do X or else Y. This type of power is employed at all levels of human society. Groups and institutions that use coercive power likely control valuable resources in the society. Power, in this generic sense can be concentrated as in an “iron triangle” (Adams 1981), or in empire, for Hardt and Negri (2000), a “diffuse, anonymous network.”

Because a threat, especially when backed by credible force, stokes fear in human beings, coercive power can be viewed as power over others. Stanley Milgram (1974), a social psychologist, described the kind of obedience that stems from fear as the “psychological mechanism” that links individuals to systems of social domination. For this reason, coercive power easily becomes the basis for domination structures in society. Domination structures combine ideologies with organizational hierarchies that reproduce inequalities with the tacit submission of people. Ideological, economic, military, or political institutions can mesh coercive norms and organizational structures into intersecting social networks of power” (see Mann 1986, 1). Sociologists are equipped with tools to analyze these intersecting networks that form the foundations of organizational power. These same structures can be the source of social problems and obstacles to their resolution. Forms of collective action, such as social movements, can challenge these power structures by mobilizing new organizational capacities toward collective goals.

Challenging coercive power or domination structures rooted in that power also requires facing forms of cultural power that reinforce taken-for-granted views of inequality and the social world. Cultural power involves the capacity to define a situation and achieve hegemony, or group consent to the world as defined. For cultural theorists, this capacity resides in both signification through communicative practices as well as material productions of meanings (Lull 1993; Williams 1985). Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that forms of culture can empower or disempower collective actors, which offers avenues for the production and reproduction of hierarchy and domination, as classes and other social cleavages distinguish through habits and taste. Confronting hegemonic cultural frameworks that reinforce global social problems is one of the chief tasks behind social change efforts, whether through social movements, education, or policy projects. Critical media studies help illuminate the political economy of corporate media and how their role through advertising and entertainment produce forms of culture in ways that exacerbate global social problems, from consumerism, sexual violence, and racism to the glorification of violence and war. Demystifying forms of cultural power involves what sociologist Douglas McAdam (1999) refers to as “cognitive liberation.” Cognitive liberation is accompanied by a growing recognition that things can be different and that acting together, society can be changed. People oppressed under domination structures, whether it is a system as vast as slavery or an abusive domestic arrangement, remain oppressed until they stop identifying with the ideology associated with the domination structures. As this cognitive liberation occurs, people must then create alternative forms of social power to challenge (or exit) the domination structures.

The significance of a critical sociological inquiry is to reveal the patterned ways in which power is structurally organized and wielded through political, economic, and cultural processes and practices. Praxis bring this knowledge into public life, and with precision, can contribute to social change prospects around the social problem.

Global Health: Embedded Problems, Global Governance Solutions

The case of global health reveals how local variations of health circumstances and vulnerability may reflect and constitute larger global processes that are increasingly addressed through transnational cooperation and global initiatives.

In 1978, the World Health Organization and its representatives signed the Declaration of Alma-Ata, urging a strategy for “Health for all by the year 2000.” This optimistic and thoughtful declaration could not anticipate the changes in the world that would cut this dream short. While there have been many public health improvements since then – for example, higher life expectancy and lower infant mortality in many parts of the world – many of these improvements are now stalling. As Dr. Lee Jong-Wook, Director General of the World Health Organization declared in 2003, “Turning the vision of Alma-Ata into reality calls for clarity both on the possibilities and on the obstacles that have slowed and in some cases reversed progress towards meeting the health needs of all people. This entails working with countries – especially those most in need – not only to confront health crises, but to construct sustainable and equitable health systems” (WHO 2003, viii). Global efforts have continued to emphasize the priority of health care to national and global well-being, and to cast health care not simply as a “luxury” but, indeed, as a basic human right.

More affluent nations, like the United States, face health care problems that in large part stem from unequal access to health services and lifestyles promoted by sedentary work and living environments. In poorer regions of the world, health care problems are vast. Not only do inequalities plague these regions, but problems common to the nineteenth-century United States are also prevalent, such as typhoid, cholera, and dysentery. The spread of infectious diseases, especially HIV/AIDS, scarcity of medical resources and personnel, high maternal, infant and adult mortalities, and the spread of tobacco-related and other noncommunicable diseases, all confront the poorest people in the poorest countries of the world.

Child Mortality in the World

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the challenge of providing adequate health care to children is greatest in the poorest regions of the world.
Since the mid-1960s, nations around the world have worked together to make it possible for millions of children to live well into adulthood. These efforts saw notable gains from 1970 to the present. Whereas about 147 children five years and younger died for every 1,000 live births in 1970, in 2002, about eighty children died for every 1,000 live births (WHO 2003), and in 2015 the global under-five mortality rate was forty-three deaths per 1,000 children (United Nations 2015). Yet, in 2011, the child mortality rate in the world’s poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia was twenty-nine times greater than in industrialized countries: 175 deaths per 1,000 children compared with 6 per 1,000 in industrialized countries (WHO 2011).

Every day in 2015, 16,000 children under five died, mostly from preventable causes (United Nations 2015).

Some regions of the world have seen more modest reductions in child mortality, while many countries in Africa and, recently, in Eastern Europe, have witnessed increases in child mortality. These gains and setbacks mirror changes in the income and wealth of these societies. While HIV/AIDS has played a large part in these reversals, growing disparities in health care resources in many developing countries are also to blame. Analyses by international organizations conclude that attempts to improve child health since the 2000s have not been effective in reaching poor people.

Infectious and parasitic diseases continue to be the major killers of children in the developing world. Although notable success has been achieved in certain areas (for example, polio), six conditions still account for about 70 percent of all child deaths: acute lower respiratory infections, mostly pneumonia (15%), diarrhea (18%), malaria (8%), measles (15%), HIV/AIDS (5%), and neonatal conditions, mainly preterm birth, birth asphyxia, and infections (37%) (WHO 2011). The tragedy in these numbers is that many of these communicable diseases can be prevented or treated with simple, affordable, known interventions. Additionally, many of the deaths stemming from neonatal conditions, many of which involve malnutrition, can also be prevented with support for diet and nutrition. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has made this only worse, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

**HIV/AIDS**

In the span of barely three decades, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) has become one of the leading causes of death due to infectious disease among adults throughout the world. The scale and scope of HIV/AIDS, as well as the great risks to well-being that the disease poses, clearly identify HIV/AIDS as a global social problem. Millions die and millions more suffer—from the burden of the disease, losses to families, and the heavy toll on financial security. Persons infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) who do not receive treatment will almost certainly die. The impact of the disease is so extensive that it has reversed life expectancy rates for some of the hardest hit, poorest regions of the world.

The World Health Organization named the HIV/AIDS pandemic as “a major global health emergency” (WHO 2003, 43). Approximately 37 million people in the world are currently infected with HIV/AIDS, including about 2.6 million children. By 2014, the World Health Organization estimated that 34 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses since its discovery. In 2014 alone, 1.2 million people died from AIDS-related causes around the world and approximately 2 million people were newly affected with the virus. The vast majority of people living with HIV/AIDS live in low and middle income countries (WHO 2014).

AIDS is caused by HIV, which undermines the body’s immune system. Because HIV can remain hidden within an infected person for up to ten years, it is difficult to detect the disease without regular blood tests. Of course, in the industrialized world, blood tests are more readily accessible. Without established medical systems and access to medical facilities, detection—and treatment—becomes difficult, enabling the disease to spread rapidly. Once the immune system is compromised by HIV, other diseases such as pneumonia or tuberculosis become deadly.

Complicating matters, HIV/AIDS is not caused by the same behaviors everywhere. This means that multiple prevention strategies are needed and public health officials must develop a variety of educational and treatment institutions to confront the spread of AIDS. In addition, the public health infrastructure is different—and sometimes nonexistent—in various parts of the world, which means that attempts to prevent the spread of the disease must consider both regional variations in how the disease spreads as well as the infrastructural limitations in many parts of the developing world. In some regions, for example, AIDS is mostly transmitted through sexual activities. There, information and education can help. In the case of Thailand, an aggressive condom promotion campaign targeting military personnel and sex workers has resulted in significantly fewer new infections. In other settings, where HIV transmission is linked more closely to injecting drug use, it is best to use prevention strategies that incorporate the provision of clean needles as well as community therapy programs for drug dependence. Overall, a multipronged effort is needed to prevent and stem the tide of the disease.

The relationship between gender inequality and HIV/AIDS began to be a central aspect of the global response to HIV/AIDS, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring that “gender inequalities are a key driver of the epidemic in several ways” (WHO 2000). Gender inequality, particularly in education, the workforce, and sexual and reproductive health, has been a major factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Africa, for example, women have lower levels of education and healthcare access than men, and they are more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS than men. This is due to a variety of factors, including cultural norms that dictate that women should remain virgins until marriage, and that men should have more sexual partners than women. In addition, women are more likely to become infected with HIV/AIDS because they are more likely to become infected through sex with men who are already infected.

In conclusion, HIV/AIDS is a global epidemic that affects people of all ages and in all countries. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which attacks the body’s immune system. Without treatment, HIV/AIDS can lead to a variety of serious health problems, including opportunistic infections and cancers. The disease is spread through sexual contact, needle sharing, and mother-to-child transmission. In order to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, it is important to use safe sex practices, avoid needle sharing, and get tested for HIV.

HIV/AIDS has been a subject of considerable debate and concern internationally as the disease spreads throughout sub-Saharan Africa and, increasingly, southeastern Asia.

**HIV/AIDS and Activism in Southern Africa**

Infection rates have been and remain particularly high in countries in Southern Africa, especially among youth and women. Among other factors, issues of inequality—such as socioeconomic conditions, gender inequality, and uneven access to medical treatments rooted in global inequalities—shape the contours of the extent and severity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region and the challenges and opportunities for addressing and mitigating the consequences of the disease. Over time, activists, organizations, and even states and transnational institutions framed the pandemic in ways that connected the related social problems of gender inequality and uneven access to medical treatment while making claims that advanced rights for women and called for a public health response at the national, regional, and global levels (see Table 5).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the relationship of gender inequality and HIV/AIDS began to be a central aspect of the global response to HIV/AIDS, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring that “gender inequalities are a key driver of the epidemic in several ways” (WHO 2000). Gender inequality, particularly in education, the workforce, and sexual and reproductive health, has been a major factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Africa, for example, women have lower levels of education and healthcare access than men, and they are more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS than men. This is due to a variety of factors, including cultural norms that dictate that women should remain virgins until marriage, and that men should have more sexual partners than women. In addition, women are more likely to become infected with HIV/AIDS because they are more likely to become infected through sex with men who are already infected.

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Table 5.2. HIV/AIDS as a Global Social Problem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key concept</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transnational scope and scale?</td>
<td>Global spread of HIV/AIDS irrespective of national borders even as the consequences of HIV/AIDS are experienced in relation to local prevalence rates, social and cultural conditions of risk, and access to medical facilities and treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective elements</td>
<td>HIV infection can develop to AIDS, advanced stage of HIV, and lead to eventual death if not treated. Treatment can provide longer, healthier life for HIV infected persons but requires ongoing regimen, including specialized care for preventing mother-to-child transmission. Prevalence rates highest in Southern Africa and parts of Asia. Exposure to risk varies by location, such as by cultural conditions (like gender inequality) and associated behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical research, development, and manufacturing of medicines and treatments by capitalist pharmaceutical corporations. Unequal access to treatment due to uneven distribution of medical infrastructure and medicines, and prohibitive costs of treatments. Early industrial countries in Global North responsible for most pharmaceutical research and development and receive most of the profits generated. Pharmaceutical corporations among the largest in the world, expend resources to influence political systems for patenting of medicines and treatments, affecting their control over access, delivery, and costs of medicines and treatments. In high prevalence regions, there are patterns of consequences related to secondary social issues such as financial, emotional, and labor stress on caregivers and families; rise in orphans due to AIDS in high prevalence regions, increasing their vulnerability to future poverty, lack of education, trafficking, and risky survival strategies; societal stress as HIV/AIDS affects youth and working-age adults reducing labor productivity in economy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective elements – claimsmakers counterclaims</td>
<td>Medical and public health professionals in the scientific community; medical, public health, and human rights organizations and activists; sympathetic political elite and public; patients. Conservative, anti-LGBT organizations and activists; religious, health and cultural organizations and individuals with alternate explanations for virus/disease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power structures benefiting</td>
<td>Private pharmaceutical corporations, affiliated chemical, medical, and manufacturing industries. Scientific and medical associations; transnational governance bodies; educators; medical and public health advocates; social and human rights organizations; national and provincial regulatory agencies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Praxis and change agents          | The expansion of alliances among women’s rights groups and transnational feminist networks, particularly in the late 1990s, coincided with another important regional political shift: the expansion of health rights campaigns in postapartheid South Africa. A vibrant AIDS activist movement developed in South Africa in the years following the transition from Apartheid (Johnson 2006; Natrass 2004; Schneider 2002). By the late 1990s, this movement initiated a number of legal, educational, and direct action campaigns, challenging the pharmaceutical industry and the government of South Africa. For example, South African President Thabo Mbeki had taken some controversial positions on HIV/AIDS and its treatment. He famously questioned whether HIV led to AIDS and if antiretroviral treatments (ART) were safe and effective. AIDS activists were effective in pressuring the administration through highly publicized legal challenges and protests. Their legal success forced the government to distribute ARV medicines and, in 2006, Mbeki publicly committed to increased availability of ARVs. Over the course of this struggle, this movement “contributed to the reshaping and expansion of international rights discourse to include a serious consideration of socioeconomic rights” (Johnson 2006, 608). Even the South African government, especially evident in the contentious Medicines Control Act, eventually attempted to frame the epidemic of AIDS in ways that helped link socioeconomic conditions, such as poverty and gender inequality, to the spread of the epidemic (Johnson 2006). South Africa’s Medicines Control Act, which attempted to reduce costs of essential medicines, irked large pharmaceutical companies who stood to benefit from controlling the access and cost of HIV treatments prompting a series of legal challenges at the national and transnational (e.g., World Trade Organization) levels. Protecting the market and property rights of large pharmaceutical corporations was the central rationale in the corporate challenge to the constitutionality of the amendments to the act, reminding us that neoliberal principles enable corporate interests to be framed as human rights. The 1998 legal battle helped give rise to the kind of AIDS activism in South Africa that linked HIV/AIDS to socioeconomic conditions, effectively raising questions of power and rights (Johnston 2006). Resonating increasingly with the evaluations by international health agencies, AIDS activists and the South African government helped open alternative framings for activists to create a regional agenda rooted in shared social problems, many stemming in part from the patriarchal sex norms that set the foundation for the unique magnitude of the AIDS crisis and the uneven access to health care infrastructure and HIV treatment. In 2003, the HIV/AIDS epidemic reached devastating proportions in Southern Africa with nearly one-quarter of the adult population (aged 15-49) living with HIV in Swaziland, Botswana, and Lesotho. Internationally, the objective magnitude of the problem fueled claims for greater resources and action including the establishment of a UNAIDS initiative, the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA), in 2004 which "works at global, regional, and national levels to advocate for improved AIDS programming for women and girls" (GCWA 2006, cover). Following the commitment from national governments to address gender inequality in their fight against AIDS, GCWA specifically called on national governments and the international community to act to meet "our shared objective of providing universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services" (GCWA 2006, preface). This convergence of international AIDS advocacy work and grassroots initiatives identifying the interrelated issues driving and resulting from the epidemic, along with the devastating economic impacts of HIV/AIDS becoming clear in Southern African economies, added to pressure on African states to address the gendered elements of the AIDS crisis and on pharmaceutical companies to modify the pricing and availability of antiretroviral treatments. Regional NGOs were able to draw on this mobilization to push for solutions, such as the criminalization of gendered violence and advancement of women’s rights in the region, while also...
challenging big pharmaceutical companies' exploitation of the epidemic and advocating for public health solutions to this global social problem.

Table 5.2 presents HIV/AIDS in the global social problem framework. It is necessary to note that this table is not comprehensive, and each of these points can be investigated in multiple directions and across different scales. Attempts that focus on country-level solutions, while needed, will not address the globally nested structures of inequality underlying many of the problems within nations. Our review of this chapter reveals the twofold dilemma we outline above: even as some social problems transcend borders, the nation-state remains a fixed point for policy makers, NGOs, and activists to resolve these problems. Where global institutions are engaged, as in both the HIV/AIDS and climate change examples, a global imagination of the problem is often present, but the structures of inequality and power in the world economy and nation-state system inhibit the kind of global problem solving that is needed.

Organizations like the United Nations or World Health Organization are still bound to the contours of the international state system and global political economy. Even as these institutions reflect a globalization of problem solving, they are reluctant to address the deeper structural schisms of power and inequality at the world systemic level that underlie many global social problems. For transnational movement organizations and civil society actors, and for a critical sociological praxis, it is necessary to expose this contradiction that global inequalities in wealth and power are themselves sources of persistent social problems. Without addressing this gulf between the Global North and South, these global social problems will persist because the gulf itself is a problem. To work within countries to reduce global emissions or improve health care options is a necessary but not sufficient solution, as the structural dimensions must also be addressed to undercut these persistent global problems. This is why critical sociology can inform transnational movement organizing and other forms of praxis to address global social problems.

Toward a Critical Global Perspective of Social Problems

In this chapter, we have made the case for globalizing the study of social problems. Far from only a contemporary concern, C. Wright Mills critiqued "social pathologists" who saw social problems in "a fragmentary way...not focused on larger stratiﬁcations or upon structured wholes...failing to consider whether or not certain groups or individuals caught is economically underprivileged situations can possibly obtain the current goals without drastic shifts in the basic institutions which channel and promote them" (Mills 1943). At the beginning of the twenty-ﬁrst century, we are compelled to extend this vision to a world-historical context.

For US sociology, and sociologists working within Western academia, this is a political move to recognize the ways that the absence or omission of a transnational or global understanding in our analyses serves to erase or minimize the role of the United States as a hegemonic power within highly unequal global relations, and the ways in which that power has been wielded to preserve privilege. Contextualizing the historical relations in such a way also compels us to consider the role of colonization, settler-colonialism, imperialism, and militarization in shaping relations of inequality, wealth, and well-being.

Illuminating the social relationships of power and inequality that form the objective conditions and social constructions of global social problems can help "transformational solutions to urgent social problems," which Dello Buono argues, "can only grow out of an insurgent praxis that actively engages and defies the structural regime with a strategic and decidedly emancipatory agenda" (Dello Buono 2013, 793). This will challenge how we theorize and explain social problems and what we count as evidence in our arguments for social change. It will push us to consider silences, or

absences, in our analyses, to question what is centered and naturalized and what is missing or marginalized, whose voices count and get amplified and whose are not heard, and how our approaches to social problems relate to relations of power in both the diagnosis of the social problem and the prognosis for social change.

Reflexivity is implicit in the sociological study of social problems. Staying intellectually alert to the complex claims about social problems globally is a needed feature of the critical sociologist. To dissect those claims, understanding the interests and power behind them, is a necessary step toward an effective public sociological voice on the matter. From a mode of inquiry that critically examines the structural and subjective dimensions of social problems, sociological praxis can facilitate greater public reflexivity on the issue. A sociology that does not self-consciously find this public role misses the opportunity for social problems knowledge to inform social change.

Glossary

Cognitive liberation The recognition that things can be different and that society can be changed by people acting in concert.

Cultural power The capacity to define a situation and achieve hegemony, or group consent to the world as defined.

Domination structures Social networks (e.g., a system of slavery, an abusive domestic arrangement) that use coercive power to combine ideologies with organizational hierarchies that reproduce inequalities with the tacit submission of people.

Globalizing public space The social arena where transnational social problem claims, contests, and remedies are made by actors within and across nation-states.

International state system The sphere that operates and enforces corporate production and trade, arbitrates disputes between corporate and state interests, sustains global military expenditures, and administers mass violence and social control.

Neo-liberal network The sociopolitical conglomeration of elite transnational corporations.

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Note

1. Interestingly, we do not need to speculate on this. In 1977, Exxon's chief scientist James Black reported to upper management that "there is general scientific agreement that the most likely manner in which mankind is influencing the global climate is through carbon dioxide release from the burning of fossil fuels" (quoted in McKibben 2010, 2). Exxon executives were aware that their industry was driving up CO₂ in the atmosphere and increasing the temperature. However, by the 1990s, Exxon, along with other fossil fuel corporations, suppressed this research and began funding climate contrarians and skeptics, ushering in a period of denial of this growing problem.


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