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TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS: SOCIAL CONDITIONS, VALUE-JUDGMENTS, AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS*

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Two major approaches to the study of social problems are examined: the functionalist statement by Merton, and the value-conflict view of Waller, and Fuller and Myers. The ambiguities of the relationship between the concepts "objective conditions" and "social problem" contained in the statements of these writers are identified and analyzed. Some preliminary suggestions are made to define the subject matter of the sociology of social problems as a specialized area of study.

A comprehensive theory of social problems does not yet exist, although it may be in the making.

Merton and Nisbet, 1961, vii
1966, v
1971, v

INTRODUCTION

The above statement, unchanged over a ten year period, through three editions of what may be the most prestigious and widely used work on the topic, suggests that perhaps a comprehensive theory of social problems has *not* been in the making. This time perspective may easily be expanded from ten to 30 years if we examine the criticisms by Waller (1936) and Fuller and Myers (1941a, b) of the social problems books of their time. Then, as now, the field was characterized as descriptive, topical, lacking in perspective and theoretical integration, and devoid of distinctive subject matter or research traditions. Given the exponential developments in such related fields as deviance, and given the great demand for texts on social problems, it is striking that so little progress has been made in this area.

* This paper was developed in a seminar on social problems conducted at Northwestern University in the Spring Quarter, 1972. We wish to thank the members of the seminar and our colleagues in the department for their comments and criticisms.

Is a sociology of social problems possible? Is there any distinctive subject matter and set of processes that may usefully be grouped under this title, apart from the demands of teaching service courses and producing textbooks for them? To answer this question we will first examine two major approaches to definitions of the field and show that neither succeeds in defining an unambiguous field of study, nor in distinguishing the subject matter of social problems from other categories of sociological analysis. These two approaches are the functionalist formulation of Robert Merton, and the so-called value-conflict approach of Waller, Fuller and Myers, and others. The statement of the former is found in the epilogues to the three editions of Merton and Nisbet's *Contemporary Social Problems*. While we will cite only from the third edition, we note that there is not substantial change in the position from the first to the third edition. Indeed, the only changes are the addition of short replies to critics and presumed critics.¹

The value-conflict position is stated

¹ There is very little change in the third edition itself: a chapter on the military and one on the metropolis are dropped from the second, one on poverty and another on youth in politics are added.

in a series of articles beginning in the mid-20's (Bain, 1935; Case, 1924; Frank, 1925; Fuller, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1942; Waller, 1936) and culminating in Fuller and Myers' papers early in the 40's (1941a, 1941b). More recently, Becker (1966:1-31) and Blumer (1971) have re-stated and extended this point of view. In some ways the value-conflict approach is an opposite approach to the functionalists, epitomized by Merton. Where the functionalists stress the study of objective conditions and dysfunctions, the value-conflict approach stresses subjective definitions and takes a more interactionist perspective. Merton (1971: 806) has highlighted the clash of the two approaches in criticizing the "heedless subjectivism" of the value-conflict approach, while they in turn have mounted attacks on the assumptions of functionalism and social disorganization theory.

From our point of view, both approaches have failed to produce a viable approach to the sociology of social problems. While a full-fledged theory of social problems would presumably offer propositions to explain and interpret the phenomenon, i.e., account for its variation and extent, an *approach* to such a theory should provide the following:

1. A definition of the phenomenon, the subject matter for analysis, in a clear and unambiguous manner amenable to empirical investigation.
2. Justify the addition of the new conceptual category "social problem" by distinguishing its content from that of other previous or related categories.

As long as social problems is just another name for social disorganization,

pathology, deviant behavior, value-conflict, or dysfunction, there is little hope that any theory of social problems will ever develop.² Is anything added to the study of deviant behavior by calling it a social problem? Do we increase our understanding of crime or poverty by pointing out that it is a social problem? Do drug addiction, war, poverty, and community disorganization have anything in common so that they may usefully be grouped in the same category? Does knowledge of one of these areas enlighten our understanding of the others? Both Merton and Fuller and Myers would seem to answer "yes" to each of these questions.

MERTON'S FORMULATION

Merton (1971:799) defines a social problem as "a substantial discrepancy between widely shared social standards and actual conditions of social life."

² Some current treatments of social problems make little or no attempt to define a distinctive subject matter for social problems. Rubington and Weinberg (1971), for example, are content to treat social problems successively as social pathology, social disorganization, value-conflict, deviant behavior, and labelling. Apparently in their view, social problems are either a constantly changing phenomenon, or some single but undefined phenomenon going under several different names.

Similarly, in the new collection by Smigel (1971), purporting to be not a text, but a handbook, no consistent definition of social problems dominates the work. Only the article by Tallman and McGee (1971) deals with the definitional problem. (They take a view similar to the one taken here.) Others make no use of either their formulation or that presented by the editor in the introduction. Some authors seem to feel no need to relate their contributions to the specific topic of social problems at all. Quinney (1971), for example, assumes that, of course, the history of criminology is something that every student of social problems must study.

He elaborates this definition in two ways, each of which leads away from, rather than toward, the specification of subject matter distinctive of this field of study. Both of the social problems typologies Merton presents—social disorganization or deviant behavior as social problems and manifest or latent—hinder and inhibit the development of a sociology of social problems.

In introducing the "two broad classes" of social problems, social disorganization and deviant behavior, Merton (1971:819) assures us that

we can be reasonably sure that the two concepts are analytical, not depictive; abstract, not concrete. They do not describe classes of events in all their complexity but refer only to selected aspects of them. That is why we find in each of the concrete problems examined in this book . . . evidence of both social disorganization and deviant behavior, though in differing compound.

Thus any social problem, however it is to be identified by the sociologist, will turn out to be part social disorganization and part deviant behavior. But this seemingly simple assertion leads not toward empirical analysis, but toward the elaboration of functionalist abstractions (Merton, 1971:820).

Social disorganization refers to inadequacies or failures in a social system of interrelated statuses and roles such that the collective purposes and individual objectives of its members are less fully realized than they could be in an alternative workable system . . . the structure of statuses and roles is not as effectively organized as it, then and there, might be. This type of statement, then, amounts to a *technical judgment about the workings of a social system*. And each case requires the sociological judge to supply competent evidence that the actual organization of social life can, under attainable conditions, be technically improved.

The potential student of social prob-

lems must view this prolegomenon with ambivalence or alarm. It suggests that in order to study social problems at all, one must show with "competent evidence" that the system could be improved under "attainable conditions." Or analogously, since social disorganization consists of the "resultant of multiple social dysfunctions" (1971:839), before a social condition be considered a social problem, the sociologist would have to show that the condition was in fact dysfunctional to the society in which it occurred. This means the researcher would have to know all of the consequences of a given condition or activity in all sectors of a society. Then he would have to show that, overall, these consequences tended to erode or undermine the "proper" functioning of the society. This, of course, would require that the sociologist have a rather complete model of what constitutes that "proper order" and how one could tell when it was being "threatened." Quite apart from these objections, Merton's definition assumes that how a society is organized or how it might be improved is a *technical* issue, for which there are technical (i.e., objective) criteria. In our view, the issues and criteria are more properly conceived as *political* rather than technical.

Clearly these difficulties in Merton's formulation pose formidable if not impossible obstacles for the development of a sociology of social problems. In discussing the difficulties applying criteria of disorganization, Merton (1971:820) acknowledges that

to find such evidence is no easy task. This is why, perhaps, diagnoses of social disorganization are often little more than moral judgments rather than confirmable technical judgments about the workings of a social system.

Unfortunately his own typology of disorganization and deviant behavior does not contribute to the clarification of these difficulties. Nor does it help to define the field by establishing a distinctive subject matter. Rather it imposes a system model in which the analysis of social problems fades into functionalist abstractions.

In developing a distinction between manifest and latent social problems, Merton does recognize that the definition of the subject matter of social problems is an important issue. However, it is a far from simple task, as it turns out, to recognize "substantial discrepancies between widely shared social standards and actual conditions of social life" as required by his definition (1971:806).

For the sociologist to confine himself only to the conditions in society that a majority of people regard as undesirable would be to exclude study of all manner of other conditions that are in fact at odds with the declared values of those who accept these conditions . . . Not all conditions and processes of society inimical to the values of men are recognized as such by them . . . Apart from manifest social problems—those objective social conditions identified by problem-definers as at odds with social values—are latent social problems, conditions that are also at odds with values current in the society but are not generally recognized as being so.³

³ Note within this passage, an ambiguity within Merton's formulation. He refers both to "the majority of people" and to "problem definers" as the defining criterion for manifest problems. In other parts of his discussion he refers to "various categories of men in society" (1971:808), "Those occupying strategic positions of authority and power" (1971:803), and "A functionally significant collectivity" (1971:817). If we include the introduction by Robert Nisbet, the co-editor, we find reference to the following definers of social problems: "A substantial part of a social order" (1971:1), "large numbers of people" (1971:3), and "A

Thus in some instances the members' definitions are to be accepted as the bases for identifying a social problem, but in other instances they are not. Merton's position seems to be that when the sociologists and the members of a society disagree on whether a condition is a substantial discrepancy between expectations and actuality, the sociologists' definition is to be favored. In fact, this decision is based implicitly on agreements or disagreements on the three components of Merton's definition:⁴ the sociologist and members of the system may agree or disagree in assessing what the conditions actually are; they may agree or disagree in determining what the socially shared standards are that are relevant to those conditions; finally when they are agreed on both of the above, they may agree or disagree as to whether or not a discrepancy exists between conditions and social standards. The consequences of these patterns of agreement and disagreement may be represented in the following paradigm:

Cells 2 and 3 are the cases at issue, both of which may be produced by member/sociologist disagreements. In Cell 2, which might be called "spurious" social problems as conceived by the sociologist, are cases where there is "much ado about nothing"; in Cell 3 there is *no* ado about *something*—

determining number of the American people" (1971:12). These ambiguities raise serious methodological problems within the framework of their formulation: how much consensus and in what quarters must it be found for there to be a manifest social problem?

⁴ For the purpose of argument here, we assume that the ambiguities of which members and how many of them must decide that a problem exists may be resolved. In point of fact we do not believe this to be empirically possible.

TABLE 1

		Sociologist's Definition	
		Social Problem	No Social Problem
Members' Definition	Social Problem	(1) "Manifest" Social Problem	(2) "Spurious" Social Problem
	No Social Problem	(3) "Latent" Social Problem	(4) "Normal" Social Condition

from the sociologist's point of view. From the members' perspective, of course, these labels would be reversed.

Let us examine the three points where the sociologist and the members of a society might disagree. In assessing the actual conditions of a society, sociologists might disagree with members of a society, but only reluctantly and after careful analysis. Sociological research may result in different assessments of a condition than a common sense view taken by members of a society, a difference the sociologist might suggest is due to the laymen's lack of technical training, or their inability to see the forest for the trees. But surely the sociologist is on much weaker grounds when he disagrees with the members of a society about what *their* values or socially shared standards are, or on which particular value or standard is to be applied to a given condition. In the area of assessing and measuring values, sociologists have only begun to scratch the methodological surface of the problems of measuring these subjective and cultural phenomena. Here the sociologist is much more dependent on the opinions and statements of his informants and respondents. If the sociologist disagrees with the members of a group or society

about what *their* values are, on what basis may he do this?

Merton avoids or ignores this question, for he follows his definition of manifest and latent problems directly with the following comment: "The sociologist does not impose his values upon others when he undertakes to *supply knowledge* about latent social problems" (1971:806 emphasis added). This passes over the prior question of whether the sociologist imposes his own values in identifying conditions as "latent" problems in the first place. If the members' definitions of some social conditions may be accepted as the bases for identifying some social problems ("manifest") but not for others ("latent"), on what basis is the sociologist to make these discriminations? If we accept Merton's definition, members of a society must accept the sociologist's standards, or his view of their standards, in order for a social problem to be manifest. Following this logic, all social problems would become "manifest" when all members share the sociologist's standards and perceive the actual conditions of social life with the same degree of accuracy and perspicacity.⁵

Does the sociologist's discovery of a latent function *ipso facto* transform it into a manifest function? In his discussion of social problems, Merton speaks of the "analytical process of *making latent social problems manifest*" (1971:807, emphasis added). Thus he hints that when a sociologist discovers or studies a latent social problem, somehow this very process

⁵ In this regard, we note that Merton's use of the terms "manifest" and "latent" in the social problems context departs from his use of them in his discussion of functionalism. There, "manifest" and "latent" largely refer to intended and unintended.

transforms it into a manifest problem. Truly latent problems must be those conditions about which the sociologist and the members of a society *would* disagree, *if* the sociologist studied them, *but which he has not yet studied*, for by studying them, he makes them manifest according to Merton.

To summarize, Merton offers neither a clear definition of the subject matter of the sociology of social problems, nor a distinctive theoretical approach to such a subject matter.⁶ To state the matter in another way, Merton's sociology of social problems is a sociology of *social conditions*, within the general framework of functional analysis, although stressing dysfunctions rather than functions. This tendency to reduce the study of social problems to the study of social conditions is strong and general, even among those who explicitly state a distinction between them. We turn now to an examination of another case in point.

THE "VALUE-CONFLICT" POSITION

In contrast to Merton, the value-conflict approach, as expressed by Fuller and Myers, sets forth a distinctive conception of social problems. Their definition of a social problem contains elements that closely correspond with Merton's (1941b:320) terms:

A social problem is a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norm which they cherish.⁷

They differ significantly, however, on

⁶ For other views of Merton's formulation, see the critique by Skolnick and Currie (1970:10-16) and the appreciative review by Schur (1963).

⁷ Compare the terms in Merton's definition: "actual conditions of social life," "discrepancy," and "socially shared standard" (1971:799).

the specification of the perspective of the problem-defining agents. Merton's definition is ambiguous as to whose standards and whose perceptions of actual conditions and discrepancy are being indicated. As we have noted, this ambiguity leads to the conceptual confusions generated by "manifest" and "latent" social problems. Fuller and Myers specify a "considerable number of persons" who subscribe to the social norm in question, perceive the condition as a deviation from them, and define it as a social problem. This being so, it follows that "if conditions are not defined as social problems by the people involved in them, they are not problems to those people" (1941b:320). They go on to say:

Sociologists must, therefore, study not only the objective conditions phase of a social problem but also the value-judgments of the people involved in it which cause them to define the same condition and means to its solution in different ways (1941b:321).

Fuller and Myers stress both the objective conditions and the subjective awareness of social problems. They view the objective conditions as not *sufficient* (but rather as only *necessary*) for the existence of a social problem. This leads them to be concerned equally with explaining the causes of the objective conditions and the process by which they become defined as social problems.⁸

Here their formulation becomes confused. They use values, value-judg-

⁸ It should be noted that Merton pays lip service also to the dual nature of social problems: "Social problems are not subjective states of mind; they are also objective states of affairs" (1971:788). However, his discussion of manifest and latent problems indicates quite clearly that the objective state of affairs takes precedence over subjective states of mind in the definition of social problems.

ments and value-conflicts in several ways, leading them, in our judgment, to stray from the course they initiate in their definition of the field. Waller and Fuller and Myers use the concept of values in three senses. First, value-judgments lead people to denounce conditions as undesirable and repugnant to them and to define such conditions as social problems. This is the import of their statement that "value-judgments lead people to define conditions." Thus values are the key element in explaining the subjective elements of social problems.

Second, in his attempt to *explain the objective condition* as well as its definition as a problem, Fuller (1938:419) invokes values again:

Value-judgments themselves are in most instances a formal cause of the *condition* which is regarded as undesirable.

In their typologies of social problems, Fuller and Myers (1941a) classify problems as to whether *the causes of the conditions include* physical events, value-judgments, or moral ambiguity.

In a third usage, value-judgments "not only help to create the condition but prevent its solution" (1941a:29) as well:

A value-scheme which prohibits frank discussion of sex problems in the home and school is a causal item in the existence of the condition, venereal disease. The same taboos which contribute to the causation of the condition frustrate public programs which are designed to eradicate it. Similarly, value-judgments which deny social acceptance to the mother of a child born out of wedlock, not only contribute causally to such conditions as abortions, infant mortality, and abandoned children, all of which are socially disapproved, but such value-judgments also obstruct efforts to solve the illegitimacy problem by impeding free discussion of it (1941a:26).

Here Fuller and Myers point out with

irony that the very people (social workers, liberal statesmen, and assorted other "do-gooders" among whom they included sociologists) who invoke their humanitarian mores to define conditions as social problems, themselves subscribe to and support policies *based on those same mores*, that insure the persistence of the social condition without alleviation, amelioration, or eradication.

Without questioning the validity of these last two formulations, we believe that the Fuller and Myers attempt to explain both the objective and subjective aspects of social problems deflects the thrust of their original statement. While they move away from the functionalist position that conditions in themselves are sufficient for the existence of social problems, they do not move to the position that objective conditions are *not necessary*. To the extent that they attempt to explain the existence of the objective conditions themselves, their position comes close to the very social disorganization formulation of which they are so critical (see especially Fuller, 1939). This is particularly clear in their statement that values both cause the condition and inhibit its solution, and in Waller's position that conflicts *in and between the mores themselves* produce social problems, with the implication that different values or mores, acting independently, may interfere with each other or work at cross purposes. To the extent that values, rather than individuals or groups of people, are seen as the active agents in the society, the formulation becomes elliptical, reified, and abstracted.

Thus, their attempt to explain both the existence of the objective conditions and the process by which some condition, real or imaginary, becomes

defined as a problem introduces an ambiguity into their position on just what the role of values is in the production of social problems. The result is that values seem to be the active forces everywhere: in producing the condition, in leading people to define the condition as a problem, and finally, in inhibiting a solution. We interpret this ambiguity as a hedge against the charge of subjectivism, solipsism and worse. The logic of their formulation, however, does not require a statement of position on the question of whether or not an objective condition "in fact" exists. Becker (1966:6) in his re-statement of the value-conflict view acknowledges that group definitions of social problems *usually do* have reference to some empirically verifiable social conditions. Groups do not typically get upset over "nothing." Our position is that one need not assume nor explain the existence of this objective condition; indeed, to do so would deflect attention from investigation of the definitional process. The definition *may* be accompanied by empirically verifiable claims about the scale, intensity, distribution, and effects of the imputed social conditions; but it *may not* and theoretically it *need not*.

In our view, the relevance of the objective conditions in the analysis of any specific social problem is an empirical question, not a question of definition. Evidence of objective conditions may depend on the availability of instruments or techniques to detect and measure the extent of the condition. With regard to some imputed conditions, such instruments or techniques may be matters of commonsensical judgments shared by scientists and members of the society—assertions about the existence of "traffic jams"

might be an example of this. The documentation of other conditions may require more sophisticated technology. For example, in order to document air or water pollution to the satisfaction of control agencies, trained experts might be required to take numerous samples of air or water and subject them to chemical analysis. Similarly, the development of reliable intelligence tests early in this century made possible a more precise documentation of "feeble-mindedness" or mental retardation as a condition, replacing less rigorous "pre-scientific" methods.

Still other imputed conditions are neither easily recognized by ordinary citizens nor easily measured by experts. "Hard data" on such conditions as the inequality of female-male relations, the oppression of blacks, or the lack of legitimacy of the political order, that are acceptable as relevant and valid by contending groups, may be extremely difficult to produce. If such issues concerning the "quality of human existence and interaction" are indeed the bases of the social problems of the 70's as Miller, Roby, and Joslin (1971) predict, agreement about the "empirical facts" of social problems is likely to become increasingly problematic, thus, altering the problems of making claims and assertions about these conditions.

Similarly, the causes of the conditions would enter the analysis of social problems only as such causal analyses were used by groups making assertions and claims and in constructing their strategies. For example, a group's analysis of a given condition might lead them to make their assertion to one agency rather than to another. Here *their* causal analysis, not the sociologist's, is the crucial input.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS PROCESS

Our analysis of the two major approaches to social problems leads us to propose that the explanation of the "subjective element" of social problems—the process by which members of groups or societies define a putative condition as a problem—is the distinctive subject matter of the sociology of social problems. Thus, we define social problems as *the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions*. The emergence of a social problem, then, is contingent on the organization of group activities with reference to defining some putative condition as a problem, and asserting the need for eradicating, ameliorating, or otherwise changing that condition. The central problem for a theory of social problems, so defined, is to account for the *emergence and maintenance of claim-making and responding activities*. Such a theory should comprehend the activities of any group making claims on others for ameliorative action, material remuneration, alleviation of social, political, legal, economic disadvantage or other consideration.

The existence of social problems depends on the continued existence of groups or agencies that define some condition as a problem and attempt to do something about it. To ask what are the effective causes of social problems, or what keeps social problems activities going, is to ask what keeps these various groups going.

Fuller and Myers, in answer to this question, saw the causes of social problems in value-judgments and value-conflicts that lead members of a society to call attention to conditions that they find offensive. Values may lead some

groups to become indignant about some condition and call for its change. This is the force behind humanitarian reformers, crusaders, and do-gooders.

However, not all social problems activities spring from this sort of "disinterested" principled activity. Humanitarian crusaders by definition set out to improve the lot of more disadvantaged others. They are not, themselves, victims of the conditions they set out to ameliorate. When those who complain are themselves the victims of the conditions, we will call them an "interest group." Interests may be defined as real and material advantages or stakes in the outcome of a given line of activity. Interest groups are those who have something to gain or lose, not just as everyone else would be affected, but over and above the way everyone in a society would be affected by a given change in law or policy.

Groups defining conditions as social problems then, may be kept going by interests or values, or any mixture or combination of them. Some of the interesting varieties might include the following:

1. Value groups may find that as they raise a condition as a social problem, they gain as allies other groups who have a vested interest in their position. Similarly, they may be opposed by groups who have a vested interest in the *status quo*.
2. Interest groups may find that the dialogue of public debate must take place in terms of values or ideals. Thus, in order to present its claims effectively, or argue its position, it must acquire a set of values that legitimate their claim.
3. A given protest group may find

a convenient overlap between their interests and their values. That is, the things they want to ask for are just those things that are easily justified and legitimated.

4. Alternatively, a group may find itself cross-pressured when their interest requires them to sacrifice or ignore some strongly felt value, or their values require them to work against their own best interests—the liberal position on school busing may be an example of this.
5. To the extent that a disinterested value-oriented group is successful in their activity, they may develop various interests to protect organizations, careers, reputations, etc. They may face a crisis of the “routinization of disinterest” when they become vulnerable to the charge of being interested and self-serving rather than humanitarian.

In the preceding pages, we have attempted to define a subject matter for the study of social problems in a clear and unambiguous manner amenable to empirical investigation. It remains now to justify the addition of this new conceptual category “social problems” by contrasting it to previously used or related and overlapping categories. We have suggested that previous treatments of social problems failed to distinguish their own subject matter from such related fields as social pathology, social disorganization, value-conflicts, and deviant behavior. As we have indicated, our approach has little (or nothing) in common with social pathology or disorganization formulations of social problems. We begin our analysis with

the activities of individuals and groups in a society, not with a formulation about what any society must do or have for its survival, nor with any idea about whether protest activities are good (functional) or bad (dysfunctional) for its maintenance. Nor does our approach share the concerns of the study of deviant behavior conceived as the analysis of the etiology of certain acts or behaviors that violate norms or result in official responses to these acts. Such a conception forms a fundamentally different subject matter from our sociology of social problems. We are interested in the activities of making claims, and the response to these claims *as claims*. Deviant acts are not usually taken to be claims nor does the response to them typify them as claims. However, when claims and grievances are responded to *as deviance*, then these processes would be subject matter for investigation within our formulation (cf. Horowitz and Liebowitz: 1968).

The approach we take does, however, contain an affinity with some developments in the so-called labelling perspective on deviance. It shares an interest in the process by which a phenomenon (an act or a condition) comes to be defined in a specific way. It shares also an insistence that acts or conditions may be intelligibly studied only with difficulty or not at all if such definitional processes are ignored. Further, some studies within the labelling formulation provide examples of the initial processes that we take to be the bases of the phenomena we wish to identify as social problems. Becker's (1963) discussion of moral entrepreneurship and of the development of the marijuana tax act exemplify this theoretical articulation

(see also Cook: 1969 and Dickson: 1968).

In addition to these several social problems categories, our formulation invites comparison to the study of social movements and to the study of interest groups. Indeed, our definition of social problems could be interpreted to include the whole of "political sociology." This, however, is not our intention. Specifically, the rise of political parties or revolutionary groups whose aim is to take control of social institutions falls at the margins of our definition, although they comprise the core of the study of social movements and political sociology. For the most part, groups that create social problems do so by making demands on existing institutions, not by trying to form institutions themselves. They share a concern to "get someone to do something" about the putative conditions. Such groups, of course, may transform themselves into genuine political parties if they fail to gain satisfaction from the existing regime. In doing so, however, their specific "social problems" are likely to be lost or transformed by intra- and inter-organizational political processes and concerns. By proposing these analytic distinctions, we wish to provide for the investigation of organized protests and social movements that do not conform to the models of political parties or revolutionary movements and thus tend to be ignored by political sociologists.

Finally, our formulation bears a similarity to the so-called "group approach" to politics exemplified in the classic formulations of Bentley (1908) and Truman (1951). It will, however, be instructive to contrast Truman's definition of interest group with our distinction between interest groups and "dis-interested" or value-oriented

groups. Truman (1951:33-4) defines interest groups as

any group, that, on the basis of one or more shared attitudes, makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance or enhancement of forms of behavior that are implied by the shared attitudes. These shared attitudes (deal with) what is needed or wanted in a given situation, observable as demands or claims upon other groups in the society. The shared attitudes, moreover, constitute the interests.

Truman's definition is much broader than our own conception and would include both interested and dis-interested groups. In our formulation, an interest may be defined as any social arrangement upon which some individuals or groups claim to depend, rely, use, or need in the conduct of their daily activities. The scope of this definition is intentionally broad; it is meant to suggest that almost any aspect or object in social life may become the focal point for social problems activity. Not all groups that enter the social problems arena, however, do so to defend some interest. Similarly, not all activities of interest groups lead to the emergence of social problems.

As Truman (1951:38) points out, many interest groups are highly altruistic, supporting causes in which they have no vested interest. Although the vocabulary of motives in contemporary society leaves little room for altruism and self-sacrifice as explanations of conduct, we recognize that individuals and groups may be moved by moral indignation and outrage to demand that "something be done." Thus, our approach modifies Truman's conception of interest groups to recognize differences between those affected by the condition and those participating

in the social problems enterprise for other reasons.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to review the two dominant approaches to the study of social problems; and more specifically we have explored the question of why these approaches have failed to develop a vigorous body of theory and research. The answer, we believe, is that both approaches harbor crucial ambiguities as to the distinctive nature of the phenomenon of social problems and the kind of theory one would have to develop to account for it.

We have presented a definition of social problems drawn from our analysis of the functionalist and value-conflict approaches. It proposes that the explanation of the "subjective elements" of social problems—the process by which some groups successfully define a condition as a problem within their society—is the distinctive task of the sociology of social problems.

We believe the theoretical approach to this subject matter contains three elements. One is a theory of interests, for many of the groups that participate in the process of definition do so in order to pursue or protect their own social, political, economic, and other interests. A second element is a theory of moral indignation, for some groups attempt to define a condition as a social problem because it offends their sense of values; it seems wrong to them that the condition exists at all. The third element is a theory of natural history, because we conceive social problems not as static conditions or instantaneous events, but rather as a sequence of activities that may move through different stages.⁹ These dif-

ferent stages may be characterized by different casts of characters, different kinds of activities, different dilemmas, and call for different kinds of analysis. Furthermore, the development of social problems through these stages may be marked by critical contingencies that impede or facilitate it.

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⁹ Blumer (1971) has recently proposed a five stage career model of social problems that begins to address this question.

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS SYSTEMIC COSTS*

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Three categories of approaches to the sociology of social problems are distinguished. Social disorganization approaches define problems as phenomena which fail to fit the structure of the given society. Plebiscitary approaches define problems according to the dictates of popular opinion or the majority of people. A systemic costs approach defines problems as costs of the given society measured against the yardstick of real alternative societies. All three approaches make legitimate use of social science theory and method. The third, however, is least tainted by a conservative and ethnocentric bias toward the existing order. The study of systemic costs is offered as an approach to social problems which is relevant for the cause of structural change.

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