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BOOK REVIEW

Charles Zastrow and Lee Bowker, *Social Problems: Issues and Solutions*, Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1984. 604 pp. $24.95 (cloth).

In this review, four criteria will be employed to evaluate this new text: the overall organization of sections and chapters, readability and presentation, its introduction to the nature and study of social problems, and the quality of the substantive chapters.

Overall organization. One of the difficulties teachers of social problems courses inevitably encounter is that of organizing a series of substantive topics into a sequence that makes sense to students. Students should be able to discern that topics are related and not merely a sequence of unrelated problems. And, though many of these problems lend themselves to multi-disciplinary treatment, students should be able to identify a unique sociological perspective (this latter concern will be less of an issue when the social problems course serves programs in addition to sociology, such as social work or human services). Unfortunately, this text fails on both counts.

Zastrow and Bowker's text contains a single-chapter introductory section ("The Sociology of Social Problems") with substantive topics organized in three parts. Part 1, "Individual Problems," contains chapters on crime and delinquency, emotional and behavioral problems, drug abuse, family, human sexuality, and aging. Part 2, "Inequality Problems," includes racial issues, sex roles and sexism, and poverty. Part 3 "Global Problems," covers health, violence, urban problems, big business and big government, work, and population and the environment.

Instructors who take pains to emphasize the difference between personal and social problems may be dismayed by the title given to Part 1 as well as by the problems considered "individual." The subsequent treatment of these problems, it should be noted, does not reflect this characterization and thus the chapters can be assigned in other sequences without creating, or contributing to, any confusion.

Readability. This book is quite well written and uses a minimal amount of sociological jargon (a glossary of terms is included as well). The "boxes" in which illustrative material is excerpted or paraphrased from well known works are placed in sufficient context to be profitably read by students taking their first sociology course. In giving examples,

the authors have attempted in several places to use well-known events in order to make the material more relevant to students. Though they generally succeed in this, a few examples are probably too dated to hit home with today's undergraduates (e.g., the Manson murders, the law and order emphasis in Nixon's 1968 campaign). The photographs which intersperse the text are generally complex and descriptive (rather than symbolic) and thus provide good discussion material for the instructor who is inclined to use them.

Introduction to social problems. The authors use a standard pedagogical technique by defining the term "social problem" and then expanding the basic components of the definition:

> A social problem exists when an influential group asserts a given social condition affecting a large number of people is a problem which may be remedied by collective action (4).

Many will have problems with their subsequent elaboration. In particular, "a large number of people" is not contrasted with "a small number of people" but, rather, with "isolated individuals." The phrase "collective action" is said to "include strikes, demonstrations, public service advertising, lobbying and forming interest groups" (8). Here the authors seem to confuse attempts to draw attention to the problem with attempts to remedy the problem; conspicuously absent are governmental policies.

More serious confusion arises from their distinction between "personal problems" and "social issues" where they claim that Oscar Lewis "uses a personal troubles approach when he seeks to explain poverty" and "Lewis's explanation is an example of the *microsociological* approach . . . primarily concerned with explaining the behavior of small groups" (22). I doubt that many sociologists would agree with this line of reasoning. Fortunately, again, these characterizations do not influence subsequent chapters, although it is unfortunate that the book's worst chapter is also its first.

Substantive chapters. After such an inauspicious start, I was surprised to find that the remaining fifteen chapters were quite good. In general, the dominant theories are introduced briefly with more space devoted to descriptions of the nature and pervasiveness of the problems covered. The authors are especially sensitive to a weakness that characterizes many social problems and introductory texts: namely, treating

categories of problems as unidimensional. For example, preceeding an excellent description of various types of crime is the observation that "many diverse forms of behaviors are classified as crimes, with the only common thread being a violation of a criminal statute" (49). The result of this sensitivity are chapters that contain descriptions of American society (and occasionally that of other nations) that are rich in detail.

Two weak points characterize most chapters. First, the authors' own reformist position becomes obvious through their minimal inclusion of conservative views and their almost total exclusion of contributions made by "conflict perspective" sociologists. Second, the references given are not always sufficient to track down the presumed original source of statistics or a representative work in a particular tradition. Those instructors who wish to locate such materials in order to expand on the text material will often be frustrated.

Finally, each chapter concludes with a series of reforms (generally not "solutions" as the text's subtitle implies). While, again, ignoring radical approaches, these discussions do provide a good basis for class discussions of steps society can take to alleviate these problems. This is no small contribution as many texts can produce feelings of despair among students.

Summary. In spite of several serious deficiencies, some sociologists will be swayed to adopt the text because of the excellence of the substantive chapters. In such cases, instructors will probably wish to supplement the text with readings representing analyses and critiques guided by positions to the left (and perhaps to the right) of the reformist center occupied by Zastrow and Bowker. Hopefully, a second edition will address the more serious deficiencies of the text.

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