

## Social Issues and Public Policy

Professor Winders

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M/W/F: 1:05-1:55pm

DM Smith, Rm 208

### Course Overview:

Social problems abound in society: poverty, hunger, racism, crime and violence, environmental degradation, and so on. Why do such problems exist? How do we identify or recognize “social problems”? What, if anything, can we do about them? In this class, we will address each of these questions.

The beginning of the course concentrates on perspectives to explain social problems. We will begin with the constructionist perspective, which centers around one question: why do we *recognize* some social conditions as ‘problems’ while simultaneously ignoring other conditions? Additionally, why do we recognize some social conditions as problems at one time, while during a later period we do not consider them problems? The answers to these questions, constructionists argue, have several elements, including claims-making and the media.

We will also consider perspectives that aim to explain why social problems exist, regardless of how important the public finds them. Here, we will examine the political and economic contexts that contribute to the existence of various social problems. This will supplement our analysis of the social construction of social problems by highlighting the importance of *power*, which is crucial to understanding why various objective conditions are recognized as social problems.

### Requirements:

Grades will be based on several criteria: class participation, two short papers, a current events journal, and two exams. In fulfilling these requirements, students are expected to adhere to the **Georgia Tech Honor Code** (see [www.deanofstudents.gatech.edu/Honor/](http://www.deanofstudents.gatech.edu/Honor/)). Honor code violations will be addressed appropriately and could result in an “F” on the assignment or in the course. I am happy to accommodate you if you need any special considerations due to a disability, but please let me know *as soon as possible* (do not wait until exam day!). You should contact the **ADAPTS Office** (see [www.adapts.gatech.edu/index2.htm](http://www.adapts.gatech.edu/index2.htm)).

#### *Class Participation (10%)*

Student participation is essential because much of each class session will include discussion. Make sure you *do the reading before class and come prepared to discuss*. **Do not assume that these are automatic points. You must earn them by contributing in class.** Furthermore, disruptive behavior (e.g., socializing in class, passing notes, coming to class late) will negatively affect your grade. If you have a question or comment or need something clarified, raise the issue in class.

Class attendance is important on three counts. First, you must be present in class to participate. Second, the lectures will contain information beyond what is in the readings. Third, regular attendance will raise borderline grades.

*Short Papers (15%)*

Students will complete two (2) short papers. Each paper will summarize one section of the course (i.e., threats to children, agriculture, crime, health care, poverty, or terrorism). These papers need to discuss how the problems in this area of life are socially constructed as well as the political economic context of the problems. In particular, students should discuss three issues: (1) why is this issue considered a problem (i.e., how was this constructed as a “problem?”); (2) how is the issue of power related to this problem; and (3) what solutions need to be considered. These response papers should be 5 pages in length (type-written and double-spaced), and they are due *no later* than **February 24** and **April 26**.

*Current Events Journal (15%)*

Social problems are especially noticeable in the media. Throughout the semester, you will locate items in popular culture media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, television, the Internet) and construct a current events journal. Each entry (you should attempt to find *at least 2 per week*) should include a full bibliographic citation. Further, you need to *provide a short discussion of the item*, perhaps explaining how the item relates to class. Students will turn in these journals on WebCt periodically.

*Exams (30% each)*

There will be two exams. The first exam will be on Wednesday, **March 1**, and the second exam will be on Wednesday, **May 3** at 2:50-5:40pm. These exams will be in-class and closed-book/notes. Each will consist of several essay and short-answer questions which will draw on course readings, concepts, and lectures. We will discuss these exams further as they approach.

Summary of grade breakdown:	Participation.....	10%
	Short Papers (2)...	15%
	Journal.....	15%
	<u>Exams (2).....</u>	<u>60%</u>
	Total.....	100%

**Required Books:**

The following books are required for the course:

- Best, Joel. 1993. Threatened Children.
- Chambliss, William. 2000. Power, Politics, and Crime.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. Sidewalk.
- Glassner, Barry. 2000. The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Fear the Wrong Things.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1989. The Communist Manifesto.
- Quadagno, Jill. 2005. One Nation, Uninsured.

There is one ***recommended*** book for the course:

- Heiner, Robert. 2002. Social Problems: An Introduction to Critical Constuctionism.

**These books are available at the Engineer’s Bookstore at 748 Marietta Street.**

Most readings for the class will come from these books. Additional readings will be available on reserve. Again, be sure to complete each day’s reading *prior* to class.

## Weekly Schedule

An asterisk (\*) indicates that the reading is on electronic reserve at the library.

### **How Do We Understand Social Problems?**

Jan. 9            *Introduction: What is this course about?*

Jan. 11           *Social Problems: What are they? How do we analyze them?*

Glassner, Barry. 2000. The Culture of Fear. "Introduction," pxi-xxvii; Ch 1 ("Dubious Dangers"), p1-20; and Ch 8 ("Plane Wrecks"), p181-202.

### **The Construction of Social Problems: Threats to Children**

Jan. 13           *"Don't Talk to Strangers": How do we construct threats to children?*

Best, Joel. 1993. Threatened Children. Ch 1 ("Rise of the Child-Victim"), p1-21; Ch 2 ("Rhetoric in Claims. . ."), p22-44.

Jan. 16           **No School: Martin Luther King Day**

Jan. 18           *"One is too many": How big was (is) the kidnapping threat?*

Best. Threatened Children. Ch 3 ("The Numbers Game"), p45-64; Ch 4 ("Definition . . ."), p65-86.

Jan. 20           *"It was on the news": What is the role of the mass media?*

Best. Threatened Children. Ch 5 ("Network News . . ."), p87-111; Ch 6 ("Popular Culture . . ."), p112-130; Ch 7 ("Fears and Folklore"), p131-150.

Jan. 23           *Mad Moms: How bad are our parents?*

Glassner. The Culture of Fear. Ch 3 ("Youth at Risk"), p51-83; Ch 4 ("Monster Moms"), p85-105.

Jan. 25           *Crime Waves: Why do social problems emerge when they do?*

Best. Threatened Children. Ch 8 ("Concern and Public Opinion"), p151-175; Ch 9 ("Competing . . ."), p176-188.

### **The Political Economy of Social Problems: Politics, Economics, and Power**

Jan. 27           *"The System": What problems are inherent to capitalism?*

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1989. The Communist Manifesto. Part I ("Bourgeois and Proletarian"), and Part II ("Proletarians and Communists").

Jan. 30           *The Power to Define: How do power, politics, and class shape social problems?*

\*Polanyi, Karl. 1944. The Great Transformation. Ch 6 ("The Self-regulating Market..."), p68-76; and Ch 7 ("Speenhamland"), p77-85.

Feb. 1            *Power and Social Problems: How important is power?*

Heiner. Social Problems. Ch 2 ("Inequality"), p20-62.  
Video: "The Johnstown Flood"

- Feb. 3 *Economic Inequality: How does it shape social problems?*  
Heiner. Social Problems. Ch 2 (“Inequality”), p20-62.
- Feb. 6 *Help for Farmers: What problem was “solved” during the Great Depression?*  
\*Conrad, David. 1965. The Forgotten Farmers. Ch 2 (“The Agricultural Adjustment Act”), p19-36; Ch 3 (“The Cotton Programs”), p37-63.  
Video: “Means Things Happening”
- Feb. 8 *Cleansing Our Food: When do concerns for meat safety emerge?*  
\*Kolko, Gabriel. 1963. The Triumph of Conservatism. Ch 4 (“Roosevelt as Reformer”), p98-112 only.

### **The Politics of Crime**

- Feb. 10 *Crime and Deviance: How much crime is there?*  
Chambliss, William. 2000. Power, Politics, & Crime. Introduction, p1-12.
- Feb. 13 *Politics of Crime: How does politics affect the crime rate?*  
Chambliss. Power, Politics, & Crime. Ch 1 (“Politics of Fear”), p13-31; and Ch 2 (“Marketing Crime”), p32-60.
- Feb. 15 *(Mis)Reporting Crime: How does the media influence perceptions of crime?*  
Glassner. Culture of Fear. Ch 2 (“Crime in the News”), p21-50.
- Feb. 17 *“Fear of a Black Planet”: How does race affect our view of crime?*  
Chambliss. Power, Politics, & Crime. Ch 3 (“Finding Crime I. . .”), p67-84.  
Glassner. Culture of Fear. Ch 5 (“Black Men”), p107-128.
- Feb. 20 *Spotting “Trouble”: How does social class affect our view of crime?*  
Chambliss. Power, Politics, & Crime. Ch 5 (“Finding Crime II. . .”), p108-130;  
Ch 7 (“Crime Myths. . .”), p141-175.
- Feb. 22 *Wars on Drugs: When do they emerge?*  
Glassner. Culture of Fear. Ch 6 (“Smack is Back”), p129-150.
- Feb. 24 *Just Say No: What factors shaped the current war on drugs?*  
Chambliss. Power, Politics, & Crime. Ch 4 (“War on Drugs”), p84-107; Ch 6 (“Trading Textbooks. . .”), p133-140.
- Feb. 27 *Constructing Crime: How is it shaped by politics and economics?*  
Chambliss. Power, Politics, & Crime. Ch 8 (“Summary. . .”), p176-180.
- Review**  
\*\*\*FIRST PAPER DUE\*\*\*
- Mar. 1 **Mid-term Exam**

## **The Politics of Health Care**

- Mar. 3 *Insuring Some, But Not All: What problems face the U.S. health industry?*  
Quadagno, Jill. 2005. One Nation, Uninsured. Introduction, p1-16; and Ch 4  
("Don't Rock the Boat"), p94-108.
- Mar. 6 *Doctors Against Insurance: How have doctors shaped the health care system?*  
Quadagno. One Nation. Ch 1 ("Doctors' Politics. . ."), p17-47.
- Mar. 8 *Workers' Health Care: How have unions shaped the health care system?*  
Quadagno. One Nation. Ch 2 ("Organized Labor's Health Benefits"), p48-76.
- Mar. 10 *The Issue of Race: How has race shaped the health care system?*  
Quadagno. One Nation. Ch 3 ("Provider Sovereignty. . ."), p77-93.
- Mar. 13 *The Visible Hand: What factors explain the expansion of the government's role?*  
Quadagno. One Nation. Ch 5 ("Cost Containment . . ."), p109-138.
- Mar. 15 *Window of Opportunity: Why was health care a central issue in the '80s & '90s?*  
Quadagno. One Nation. Ch 6 ("The Revolt of the Corporate Purchaser"), p139-  
168; Ch 7 ("The Insurers Triumphant"), p169-200.
- Mar. 17 *Healing the System: Will health coverage become universal?*  
Quadagno. One Nation. Ch 8 ("Why the United States . . ."), p201-213.

March 20-24 **NO CLASS: Spring Break**

## **Social Problems on the Street**

- Mar. 27 *Life on Street: How is it organized?*  
Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. Sidewalk. Introduction, p3-14; Part I ("Informal Life of  
the Sidewalk"), p17-111.
- Mar. 29 *Political Origins: How did the life on the sidewalk emerge?*  
Duneier. Sidewalk. Part II ("New Uses of Sidewalks"), p115-154.
- Mar. 31 *Street Problems: What are they, and how are they dealt with?*  
Duneier. Sidewalk. Part III ("Limits of Informal Social Control"), p157-228.
- Apr. 3 *The Law: How is the sidewalk regulated?*  
Duneier. Sidewalk. Part IV ("Regulating the People"), p231-289.
- Apr. 5 *A Different Life: How are some sidewalk vendors treated differently?*  
Duneier. Sidewalk. Part V ("Construction of Decency"), p293-311.
- Apr. 7 *Life on Street: How should we understand it?*  
Duneier. Sidewalk. Part V ("Construction of Decency"), p312-317; Afterword,  
p319-330; Appendix, 333-357.

## **Terrorism and Violence**

- Apr. 10      *Constructing Terrorism: What is it?*  
\*Mohammad, Fida. 1999. "Jihad as Terrorism: The Western Media and the Defamation of the Qu'ran." Pp303-318 in Making Trouble, edited by Jeff Ferrell and Neil Websdale.
- Apr. 12      *Politics in the World Economy: What was the political and economic context of September 11?*  
\*Blum, William. 2000. Rogue State. Ch 1, p29-32; Ch 2, p33-37; Ch 9, p79-86.  
Video on terrorism
- Apr. 14      *Historical Context: How can we understand terrorism against the U.S.?*  
\*Parenti, Michael. 2002. The Terrorism Trap. Ch 4 ("Afghanistan, the Untold Story"), p55-72; Ch 5 ("Why U.S. Leaders Intervene . . ."), p73-96.
- Apr. 17      *Everywhere we turn: Is terrorism a crime wave?*  
\*Jenkins, Philip. 1999. "Fighting Terrorism as if Women Mattered: Anti-Abortion Violence as Unconstructed Terrorism." Pp319-346 in Making Trouble, edited by Jeff Ferrell and Neil Websdale.
- Apr. 19      *Responding to Terror: Is the "cure worse than the disease"?*  
Hoffman, Hank. 2002. "Green Scare." *In These Times*. June 10, p3-4.
- Apr. 21      **TBA**  
\*\*\***SECOND PAPER DUE**\*\*\*

## **The Struggle to 'Solve' Social Problems**

- Apr. 24      *Preventing Challenges: Why do we have so many cars?*  
\*Whitt, J. Allen, and Glenn Yago. 1985. "Corporate Strategies and the Decline of Transit in U.S. Cities." Urban Affairs Quarterly. 21(1):37-65.  
Video: "Taken for a Ride"
- Apr. 26      *"More Pavement": How can we solve our traffic woes?*  
\*Whitt, J. Allen, and Glenn Yago. 1985. "Corporate Strategies and the Decline of Transit in U.S. Cities." Urban Affairs Quarterly. 21(1):37-65.
- Apr. 28      *Power to Define the Problem: How do less powerful groups exert influence?*  
\*Piven, Frances Fox and Richard Cloward. 1998. "Disruptive Dissensus: People and Power in the Industrial Age." In Reflections on Community Organization, edited by Jack Rothman, p165-193.
- May 3      **Final Exam** (2:50-5:40pm)