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The Construction of Social Problems as Buttresses of Inequalities

MURRAY EDELMAN*

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I. PROBLEMS AS IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Political developments in the news are important because they call for diverse interpretations that then influence the lives, the political behaviors, and the self conceptions of people who react to them. Ambiguity about political news is central, not an occasional aberration. From news accounts we construct spectacles that then shape the lives of their creators: ourselves. To put the point another way, we construct fetishes about the political scene: problematic conceptions that reflect our ideologies and then typically perpetuate and reinforce those ideologies.

What does this point of view suggest about the political uses of current social problems? The conditions that are defined as problems at any time are not facts, but social constructions that reflect and reinforce established beliefs about the self, the other, and the social setting in which we live. Among other uses, they rationalize inequalities based upon class, race, and gender.

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Poverty, unemployment, and discrimination against minorities and women are accepted as problems today, but through much of human history they were regarded as part of the natural order, while such issues as witches in league with the devil, American Catholics as agents of the pope, and Americans of Japanese descent as potential saboteurs were once widely accepted as problems.

Problems come into discourse and therefore into existence as reinforcements of ideologies, not simply because they are there or because they are important for well-being. They signify who is virtuous and useful and who is dangerous or inadequate, which actions will be rewarded and which penalized. They constitute people as subjects with particular kinds of aspirations, self-concepts, and fears, and they create beliefs about the relative importance of events and objects. They are critical in determining who exercises authority and who accepts it. They construct areas of immunity from concern because those areas are not seen as problems. Like leaders and enemies, they define the contours of the social world, not in the same way for everyone, but in the light of the diverse material situations from which people respond to the political spectacle.

In this paper I analyze the construction of conditions as problems, the diverse meanings of discourses and texts about problems in the context of the situations from which they are viewed, and some political uses of problem construction.

II. DAMAGING CONDITIONS THAT DO NOT BECOME PROBLEMS

If social problems are constructions, it is evident that conditions that hurt people need not become problems. Segregated restaurants, hotels, schools, and toilets in the South persisted for a century and a half without becoming problems, as have countless other racist and sexist practices everywhere. The impoverishment and massacre of a high proportion of the American Indian population was not a problem while it was happening, but only became one long after it was a *fait accompli*.

Peter Bachrach has called such phenomena "nondecisions."¹ Sometimes they occur because powerful political groups can block consideration of practices from which those groups benefit; but that form of nondecision is typically shortlived. The longer lasting instances stem from ideological premises that are so widespread in some people's everyday language that they are not recognized as ideo-

1. Cf. P. BACHRACH, *THE THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC ELITISM* 78 (1967); P. BACHRACH & M. BARATZ, *POWER AND POVERTY* 43-46 (1970).

logical at all, but accepted as the way the world is constituted. To people socialized to see Indians, women, or homosexuals as inferior, advocates of equal rights legislation are cranks; *they* may be a problem, but discrimination against disadvantaged groups is not.

Because there is ordinarily a consensus on longstanding social practices, only a small subset of them become problems, and these are not likely to be the most damaging. Agreement on most established practices, moreover, makes general toleration of a smaller set of "problems" all the easier. Perhaps the most powerful influence of news, talk, and writing about problems is the immunity from notice and criticism they grant to damaging conditions that are not on the list. The result of this aspect of problem construction is the creation of faith in the moral sensitivity of regimes and individuals while erasing lapses that would raise questions about that sensitivity.

III. PROBLEMS AS BENEFITS

A high proportion of the social problems in the news are present for long periods of time or only intermittently absent. Crime, poverty, unemployment, and discrimination against disadvantaged groups exemplify issues that have persisted as problems for centuries or longer.

The historical failure to pursue effective remedial action stems from a pervasive contradiction. A problem to some is a benefit to others; it augments the latter group's influence. For employers, unemployment and poverty mean reduced labor costs and a docile work force, an incentive that easily coexists with personal sympathy for the unfortunate. Discrimination against women or minorities means favored treatment for men and for majorities. The term "problem" only thinly veils the sense in which deplored conditions create opportunities.

What is the political import of terms that emphasize troubles and conceal benefits? They certainly mute conflicts of interest between social groups. They also reassure victims of problems and those who sympathize with them that concern for their plight is generally recognized. In these subtle ways language forms help moderate the intensity of social conflict.

As already suggested, there are other ways to refer to the benefits that problems yield: a plentiful labor supply, avoidance of governmental interference in labor and product markets, a favorable business climate, incentives to ambition, and a strong national defense. Such references erase the link between benefits and the problems with

which they are associated. The language is clearly vital to political maneuvering and to the construction of subjectivity.

Exposure of the general population to contradictions in their daily lives makes it easier to mask both the ineffectiveness of solutions and the benefits some groups derive from that failure. The capitalist economy in industrialized countries affords increasing comfort, a lavish output of consumer goods that provides a choice for some and a display for others, and impressive opportunities for recreation and cultural gratification, with all these developments encouraging still higher expectations for the future. At the same time there is growing anxiety about war and the survival of the species, a chronically high level of poverty and unemployment, especially among the young, women, and minorities, and rising risks of industrial illness, industrial accidents, and contamination of food, air, and water supplies. Conflicting cues about the meaning of the good life and the promise of governmental actions create ambiguity about the social world that readily transforms into ambivalence and acquiescence respecting public policy. Ambivalence does not typically yield indecisiveness. On the contrary, it provides support both for the regime and for challenges to the regime. Contradictions in experience encourage contradictions in political action.

IV. PROBLEMS AS AMBIGUOUS CLAIMS

A central theme of this analysis, then, is the diversity of meaning inherent in every social problem, stemming from the range of concerns of different groups, each eager to pursue courses of action and call them solutions. National security is a different problem for each of the parties concerned with it, such as the various branches of the armed forces, the General Dynamics Corporation, that firm's workers, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and potential draftees. The problem becomes what it is for each group precisely because their rivals define it differently. In this sense a problem is constituted by the differences among its definitions.

Just as problems are labels for congeries of differences, so their solutions are creations of the contradictions and vacillations that advocates of different policies promote. A problem, then, is a signifier pointing to the following features:

1. It focuses upon a name for an undesirable condition or a threat to well-being.
2. The governmental activities such a focus rationalizes comprise a sequence of ambiguous claims and actions that vacillate and change and are frequently inconsistent with one another because

they are responses to different group interests. In the name of "defense," regimes increase the arms budget, support research in universities, promote "arms control" or disarmament, build weapons systems, yield to pressures from contractors against rigorous enforcement of technical specifications, provide generous retirement programs for members of the armed forces, enrich people through cost-plus contracts, support some third world regimes and overthrow others, and so on. A similar list of diverse and inconsistent actions and claims could easily be drawn up to specify the content of policies to deal with crime, poverty, education, environmental pollution or any other problem.

3. Such a bricolage of actions and language claims sometimes ameliorates the condition and sometimes makes it worse; but some of the consequences of the policies pursued are always inversions of the value formally proclaimed as the goal of the activity. The escalation of armaments in rival countries typically decreases the security of both. In the name of curtailing domestic violence the judicial system puts people to death.

On occasion a "trend" signifying consistency persists for a time in the handling of a problem: a "New Deal" or a "War on Poverty," a tightening of criminal statutes and of their enforcement, a period of international détente or of the widespread repeal or the enactment of capital punishment laws. But a trend is a range of actions from which an observer constructs a label. In a period of détente there are also some provocations and escalations of tensions. The New Deal failed to help many workers, limited the help it offered to unions, and both hurt and helped businesses in many different ways. Its policies, like all policies, were semantically created as value laden interpretations of differences in action and in language. A "policy," then, is a set of shifting, diverse, and contradictory responses to a spectrum of political interests.

But its name is quite another phenomenon, with a different function, offering a ground for ignoring the inconsistencies to people inclined to do so. The name typically reassures, while a focus upon policy inconsistencies and differences might be disturbing. The names for policies reflect and rationalize the dominant pattern of ideologies. In doing so they heighten the sense of dynamism the political spectacle creates. They portray accomplishment, masking hesitations in action and counter-productive strategies that minimize, cancel, or reverse claims of success.

Plainly, problem construction is a complex and subtle occurrence, a facet of the concurrent formation of the self and of the social sphere, integrally linked to the endless construction and reconstruction of political causes, role structures, and moral stances.

V. THE CONSTRUCTION OF REASONS FOR PROBLEMS

Explanations for the social problems that persist are notable for the diversity of causes and of ideologies to which they point, not for their rigor, verifiability, or explanatory power. Explanations blame social institutions, social classes, those who suffer, or those who benefit. They may locate the cause of a problem in regional characteristics, nationality, ethnicity, climate, stage of historical development, personality, or a combination of several such categories. They may be concrete or abstract. They reproduce the typologies currently fashionable in other news reporting, popular discussion, and academic writing. Such diversity is as characteristic of social scientists' explanations as of popularly accepted ones. In this form of endeavor the scientific is also the political.

To evoke a problem's origin is to assign blame and praise. Blame for recurring wars and militarism depends upon whether they are seen as originating in the plans of aggressors, the authoritarian character structure of some cultures, the chance occurrence of a sequence of events with which diplomats cannot cope, the logic implicit in industrialized societies, or the will of God. Each origin reduces the issue to a particular perspective and minimizes or eliminates others. Each reflects an ideology and rationalizes a course of action.

A particular explanation of a persisting problem is likely to strike a large part of the public as correct for a fairly long period during which time it reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology of that era. Consider as examples the contrast in generally accepted explanations for international tensions in the decades preceding the second world war and in those following the war, or the contrast in dominant explanations of economic recession between the liberal thirties and the conservative eighties.

The "career" of an explanation of a problem manifestly hinges in part on the acceptability of the ideological premise it implies. Because a social problem is not a verifiable entity but a construction that furthers ideological interests, its explanation is bound to be part of the process of construction rather than a set of falsifiable propositions. In a crucial sense problems are created so that particular reasons can be offered for public acceptance, and, as I note below, so that particular remedies can be proposed.

An explanation for a chronic social problem can never be generally supported. It is offered to be rejected as much as to be accepted. Its function is to intensify polarization and thus maintain the support of advocates on both sides. The reasons offered are crucial to the self-esteem of concerned people and to the viability of interested groups,

organizations, and causes. They all draw support from the evocation of a spectacle that shows their rivals as threats. An explanation for a troubling condition is often more important to partisans than the possibility of eliminating the condition; the latter is a rhetorical evocation of a remote future time unlikely to be experienced, while the explanation is vital to contemporary political maneuvering and value allocation.

Because there are always conflicting explanations, any affirmation of an origin for a problem is also an implicit rejection of alternative ones; such an affirmation is bound to bring to consciousness whatever it denies. As Derrida notes, the trace of what is negated remains present and so continues to play a part in action and in attitudes, its difference from the affirmation constructing the meaning of the latter.²

Oppositions in expressed "opinion" accordingly make for social stability; they are almost synonymous with it, for they reaffirm and reify what everyone already knows and accepts. To express a pro-choice or an anti-abortion position is to affirm that the opposite position is being expressed as well and to accept the opposition as a continuing feature of public discourse. The well established, thoroughly anticipated, and therefore ritualistic reaffirmation of the differences institutionalizes both rhetorics, minimizing the chance of major shifts and leaving the regime wide discretion, for there will be anticipated support and opposition no matter what forms of action or inaction occur. As long as there is substantial expression of opinion on both sides of an issue, social stability persists and so does regime discretion regardless of the exact numbers or of marginal shifts in the members. The persistence of unresolved problems with conflicting meanings is vital.

It is not the expression of opposition but of consensus that makes for instability. Where statements need not be defended against counterstatements, they are readily changed or inverted. Consensual agreements about the foreign enemy or ally yield readily to acceptance of the erstwhile enemy as ally and the former ally as enemy;³ but opinions about abortion are likely to persist. Rebellion and revolution do not ferment in societies in which there has been a long history of the ritualized exchange of opposing views of issues accepted as important, but rather where such exchanges have been lacking, so that a consensus on common action to oust the regime is easily built.

2. J. DERRIDA, *OF GRAMMATOLOGY* (1976).

3. M. EDELMAN, *POLITICS AS SYMBOLIC ACTION* 46-47 (1971). For an insightful discussion of this point, see J. BAUDRILLARD, *SIMULATIONS* 131-38 (1983).

These observations seem counterintuitive only when opinion is conceptualized as growing in the individual mind, which then secretes it into the public domain. As soon as "opinion" is recognized as an ambiguous reference to texts, as bits of language that circulate in a culture and present themselves for acceptance or rejection, it becomes evident that opposing texts become bulwarks of one another while isolated texts, unsupported by opposition, are readily vulnerable to new language.

Language about origins is therefore not likely to convert people from an ideology to a contrary one very often or generate an opinion that persists in spite of exposure to changing language or new situations. Its effect, as already suggested, is to sharpen the issue, sometimes to polarize opinion, and in any case to clarify the pattern of opinion oppositions available for acceptance. The construction of problems and of reasons for them accordingly reinforces conventional social cleavages: those longstanding divisions of interest in which relative power, sanctions, and the limits of the rivalry are well established and widely recognized. The political result of such reinforcement is clear enough. Realignments, new coalitions, and unconventional forms of political action are excluded from common discourse and so become less likely. The evolution and reconstruction of origins are pervasive, constant, and central to political maneuvering, a linguistically generated process that creates concerned groups, pits them against one another for varying time periods, and gives the political process an appearance of dynamism and tension that rarely has any bearing upon its outcomes.

VI. THE CONSTITUTION OF AUTHORITIES

The language that constructs a problem and provides an origin for it is also a rationale for vesting authority in people who claim some kind of competence. Willingness to suspend one's own critical judgment in favor of someone regarded as able to cope creates authority.⁴ If poverty stems from individual inadequacies, then psychologists, social workers, and educators have a claim to authority in dealing with it; but if an economy that fails to provide enough jobs paying an adequate wage is the source of poverty, then economists have a claim to authority. Military threats, crime, mental illness, illiteracy, and every other problem yield claims to authority, though the chain is disputed in each case because diverse reasons for the problem compete for acceptance.

4. Cf. H. SIMON, *ADMINISTRATIVE BEHAVIOR* 133 (2d ed. 1957).

People with credentials accordingly have a vested interest in specific problems and in specific origins for them. A high proportion of political conflicts involve the advancement of such claims: foreign aggression versus American militarism as the problem; coddling criminals versus poverty; and human rights violations and despotism in a third world country versus Russian support for rebels. The definition of the problem generates authority, status, profits, and financial support while denying these benefits to competing claimants. It is hardly surprising, then, that virtually all political communication directly or implicitly constructs particular problems as crucial while denigrating others.

Occasionally a problem so extensively captures attention that many claimants to authority compete to become identified with it. The Russian threat is doubtless the paramount twentieth century example, with scientists, educators, politicians, security experts and many types of administrative officials offering their services to deal with it. In the middle 1980's child abuse was constituted as an urgent problem with the result that psychologists, police officials, teachers, physicians, and neighbors all found that it could help bolster their authority, and district attorneys tried to build political careers on the prosecution of alleged abusers.

Some efforts to secure benefits through an emphasis on a troubling problem are cynical, but most are doubtless sincere. Motivation is not the point, but rather the integral link between claims about problems and value allocations through politics. In this form of construction it is obvious that language and material benefits are part of the same transaction.

VII. THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROBLEMS TO JUSTIFY SOLUTIONS

Most academic writing accepts the same view of the link between social problems and attempts to solve them as public officials like to espouse: that as problems appear, responsible agencies search for the best way to cope with them, or they search for a solution that is satisfactory. The emphasis is on the rationality of the search process even if it is bounded.

But the striking characteristic of the link between political problems and solutions in everyday life is that the solution typically comes first, chronologically and psychologically. Those who favor a particular course of governmental action are likely to cast about for a widely feared problem to which to attach it in order to maximize its

support.⁵ This process is not necessarily conscious or deliberately deceptive. Those who recognize that the attachment of a favored course of action to a problem will get them what they want can easily persuade themselves of the rationality and morality of their rhetorical appeals as part of the process of persuading others. Discussions of problems arouse, widen, and deepen public interest by appealing to ideological or moral concerns, as already noted. In this sense the name for a problem is a condensation symbol, just as the name for a political goal is a condensation symbol. Goals are carrots and problems are sticks; both are inducements to support measures people might otherwise find painful, unwise, or irrelevant to their lives.

Those who favor tax reductions for the rich, or for the poor, are likely to espouse the cuts regardless of the state of the economy or the current tax structure and to see their proposal as helpful in curbing inflation, unemployment, recession, or any other economic problem currently in the news. The link between problems and preferred solutions is itself a construction that transforms an ideological preference into a rational governmental action. When the MX missile proposal was losing political support in the early 1980's because the missile silos were shown to be vulnerable to attack, President Reagan and other proponents of the missiles began to portray them as the solution to a different problem: that of enhancing national bargaining power in armaments negotiations. The MX became a "bargaining chip" after it was unimpressive as a weapon. Because the two problems appealed to different groups of people, proponents of the MX continued over the next several years to depict it as the solution to both these problems. The attachment of a solution to a problem that occasions wide concern couches discourse in rational form; the form is critical in winning public support.

Actions justified as solutions to a problem of wide concern often bring consequences that are controversial. Michel Foucault made the point with his usual acumen in an analysis of the consequences of what is labeled a "penalty," a solution to the commission of a crime:

Penalty would . . . appear to be a way . . . of laying down the limits of tolerance, of giving free reign to some, of putting pressure on others, of excluding a particular section, of making another useful, of neutralizing certain individuals and of profiting from others. In short, penalty does not simply "check" illegalities; it "differentiates" them, it provides them with a general "economy". And, if

5. This conclusion is similar to the premise of the "garbage can theory" of administrative decision making. See J. MARCH & J. OLSEN, *AMBIGUITY AND CHOICE IN ORGANIZATION* 26-27 (1976).

one can speak of justice, it is not only because the law itself or the way of applying it serves the interests of a class, it is also because the differential administration of illegalities through the mediation of penalty forms part of those mechanisms of domination.⁶

Foucault's point holds for solutions to some other problems as well. Therapy is help to the emotionally distressed, but it is also a signal of the limits of tolerance, a device for exerting pressure on some and giving authority to others, for differentiating, and for serving a class interest. Welfare benefits and unemployment compensation manifestly serve the same range of functions. Security checks and internal intelligence activities, "solutions" to the problem of subversion, do so in a more blatant way.

Not surprisingly, conflicting claims about which problem an action helps solve are endemic to politics, for the connection of a policy that benefits a specific group to a problem of broader concern widens support for the policy. Those who stand to gain financially or ideologically from a military contract see it, and depict it, as a contribution to national security. Medicaid does not win political support because it enriches affluent physicians but because it aids the poor. Any analysis of policy formation that accepts the wider issue as "the reason" for the action (as rational choice theories typically do) romanticizes the grounds for governmental action and so incorrectly predicts which policies will find organized and intense advocates.

VIII. THE CONSTRUCTION OF GESTURES AS SOLUTIONS

There are always people who benefit, or think they do, from a widespread belief that a problem has been solved or that there has been substantial progress toward its solution. When the number of such people is large or they occupy strategic positions, a regime has a strong incentive to depict any development that is associated with the problem linguistically, logically, or in fantasy as its solution.

The most common course is the enactment of a law that promises to solve or ameliorate the problem even if there is little likelihood it will accomplish its purpose. Though this device is rather widely recognized,⁷ it is perennially effective in achieving quiescence from the discontented and legitimation for the regime. Regulatory statutes that leave consumers vulnerable to economic power, disarma-

6. M. FOUCAULT, *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: THE BIRTH OF THE PRISON* 272 (1977).

7. Some works that examine gestures as solutions in this sense are: T. ARNOLD, *THE FOLKLORE OF CAPITALISM* (1937); M. BERNSTEIN, *REGULATING BUSINESS BY INDEPENDENT COMMISSION* (1955); M. EDELMAN, *THE SYMBOLIC USES OF POLITICS* (1964); A. LEISERSON, *ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATION* (1942).

ment treaties that permit or foster arms buildups, welfare actions that do little to help the distressed, and anticrime laws that have little impact upon the frequency or incidence of crime remain politically useful. The Reagan administration was successful in 1984 in focusing attention on a small decline in unemployment from the high levels it had reached in the President's first administration rather than on its absolute level, which remained higher than it had been when Reagan was inaugurated.

In some policy areas the focus upon an event that promises more than it delivers has become ritualized. In international diplomacy the publicized release of some prisoners is repeatedly depicted as a signal of progress toward guaranteeing human rights, even if torture, murder, or imprisonment of political opponents continues. The conspicuous scheduling of an election in a third world country known for its despotic rule is accepted as evidence of a turn toward democracy. Political maneuvering thrives upon publicized actions that mean less than meets the eye.

A closely related gesture entails the presentation of a development that benefits a particular group as one that serves everyone. The tax reductions of 1981 and 1982 were major benefits to the very wealthy and token gestures to the poor, but were generally described and accepted simply as a "tax cut."

The disposition to accept official interpretations of publicized actions about matters remote from daily experience is a major source of legitimation. That disposition is understandable as a response to the pervasive ambiguity of governmental actions. Their motivations, their consequences, and the problems to which they are attached are typically unclear and the focus of controversy. For a public anxious to understand them or only marginally interested, an official cue readily becomes the key influence.

The lesson of this pervasive phenomenon is that in politics there can be no conclusive test of the logical or empirical relevance of language or other actions. A verbal or physical gesture that takes the form of a response to a problem frees concerned groups to bargain in line with their resources: money, tactical skills, public sympathy, and bilateral or multilateral accommodations with one another. Ambiguous language is a sign and a facilitator of bargaining.

IX. THE PERPETUATION OF PROBLEMS THROUGH POLICIES TO AMELIORATE THEM

As noted earlier, attacks on troubling conditions are often half-hearted, inconsistent, and ineffective because of conflicting material

and ideological interests. The construction of problems sometimes carries with it a more far-reaching perverse effect: it helps perpetuate or intensify the conditions that are defined as the problem, an outcome that typically stems from efforts to cope with a condition by changing the consciousness or the behavior of individuals while preserving the institutions that generate consciousness and behavior.

Imprisonment may help perpetuate crime by exposing prisoners to knowledgeable criminals who teach them techniques. It also eventually releases most prisoners into a society from which they have become even more estranged than before their imprisonment and in which they lack resources to cope in any way other than renewed resort to crime. Similarly, the regulatory remedy for business practices that exploit consumers has overlooked the systematic capacity of established political and economic organizations to reproduce their own values in institutions such as regulatory agencies.

The study of antidiscrimination laws furnishes an explanation of the counterproductive effects of many efforts to solve social problems. Legislation declaring it illegal to discriminate against people because of their race or their sex may deter some offenses, and there are occasional prosecutions; but it is hard to say whether such laws have had a significant impact upon discrimination, even in the rare cases in which they have been enforced resolutely. Sophisticated research on this issue concludes that regardless of the formal actions it occasionally generates, this form of legislation reaffirms the very differences in dignity and treatment it is intended to eradicate. The law defines the people it ostensibly helps as victims in need of protection. This sign of their debased status legitimizes the view that is already widespread, adding to the ideological pressures against effective enforcement of the laws. More important, it contributes to a low sense of self worth in victims of discrimination and to the public view of them as inferior. In lengthy interviews with people who had suffered from discrimination, Kristin Bumiller found that they had internalized this view, with the result that in most instances people who had suffered discrimination chose not to pursue their legal remedies, having become convinced that it was not worth the trouble or that they deserved what they got. The enactment of antidiscrimination statutes salves liberals' consciences but also helps make discriminatory actions acceptable. Bumiller concludes that antidiscrimination law becomes part of the process of victimization.⁸ Her sensitive analysis flouts liberal and con-

8. K. Bumiller, *The Deconstruction of Anti-Discrimination Ideology: The Denial of Self-Respect by Victims Without a Cause* (June 1984) (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison).

servative ideology, but it offers an explanation that is applicable to other governmental remedies for social problems as well. Legal language and directives to administrative agencies to correct inequities reassure people who worry about fairness, especially those who do not themselves suffer from bias. In performing this function they make it politically and morally possible to acquiesce in prejudicial practices, the more so because the laws help induce victims of discrimination to accept their lot.

Proposals to solve chronic social dilemmas by changing the attitudes and the behavior of individuals are expressions of the same structure of power that created the problem itself. In publicizing remedies that fail to alter the structure these proposals help win public acquiescence in its continuation. Labels like "remedy" and their accompanying actions become buttresses of the problems they purport to solve.

X. PROBLEMS AS NEGATIONS OF OTHER PROBLEMS

The set of problems presented for public reaction at any time constitutes a system in the sense that changes in one problem typically bring determinant changes in some others as well. A focus upon some means a masking of others. Emphases or omissions convey information about the dominant current ideological posture and so establish probabilities about what kinds of future problems will be constructed.

The emergence of any problem may divert public attention from a different one that can be more threatening. Such covert masking of more ominous conditions is a property of discourse about public issues and often an explanation for the willingness of a large public to accept an issue as legitimate even if they have no particular interest in remedying it. That attention to a conspicuous problem may reduce interest in a more troubling one is sometimes consciously recognized but more often subconsciously sensed.

While sympathy for the poor animates many people who support antipoverty measures, for example, some liberals and many conservatives doubtless find poverty a palatable problem, at least in part, because concern with that issue makes it easier to avoid attention to inequalities. Both the New Deal of the thirties and the War on Poverty of the sixties did a great deal to alleviate poverty for a time, but neither lessened inequality, and they may have increased it.⁹ Anti-poverty programs cost money; but measures to lessen inequality

9. Cf. R. PLOTNICK & F. SKIDMORE, *PROGRESS AGAINST POVERTY* 104-05, 169-79 (1975).

threaten established institutions, authority, and privileges. The focus upon poverty permits people to sympathize with the poor while averting a threat to the basic institutions of the polity and the economy.

In the same way the appeal of an emphasis upon the pathologies of criminals and the utility of punishing them lies partly in what it negates: the tracing of crime to pathological social conditions. This observation applies as well to other problems that focus upon individual deviance: worker and student absenteeism, rioting, rebellion, divorce, and mental illness.

Discourse about social problems and their political management carries meaning concurrently on several levels. It is manifestly a dialogue about some named conditions and about appropriate courses of action; but the same discourse can be a latent statement about more troubling matters. To put the point another way, silence is meaningful when it represents avoidance of an issue that is divisive if mentioned. The strategic function of political language is apparent in such instances.

There is also a competition for attention among the problems that are publicly discussed. As some come to dominate political news and discussion, others fade from the scene. There seems to be a limit upon the number of issues people notice and worry about regardless of their severity. Anthony Downs has written about "issue-attention cycles": after a time an issue begins to bore the public and is replaced with something else even if it has not been resolved.¹⁰ Ghetto riots were headline news from the 1964 Watts riot until about 1970 and then were reduced to minor items, even though the ghettos continued to erupt in violent protest through at least the early seventies. The logic that explains official, public, and media attention to political problems does not turn on their severity but rather upon their dramatic appeals. These, in turn, are vulnerable to satiation of attention and to novelty.

Perhaps the most frequent application of this principle lies in the capacity of foreign threats to diminish attention to domestic conditions. Leaders have often maintained a supportive following by focusing attention on foreign threats that divert concern from unsolved domestic troubles. While each domestic problem typically hurts only a small proportion of the population, there are always foreign problems that can credibly be presented as pressing threats to everyone. Rebellion in a small third world country becomes a domino that will topple more important countries. National security is a key sym-

10. Downs, *Up and Down with Ecology—The Issue-Attention Cycle*, 28 *PUB. INTEREST* 38 (1972).

bol because fear of foreign attack is a contagion that spreads widely and rapidly.

The news, then, conveys some covert information about the set of problems of which the public is aware, even when it purports to deal with a specific issue. The world people experience as the wider setting for their everyday lives is a chameleon world that transforms its contours with the changing cues that news accounts convey: the context of public knowledge and of problems that compete for attention. To ask people to react to the name of a problem in a survey therefore has little bearing on their reactions as they go about their daily affairs. The very mention of a problem evokes a reaction, so that its prominence or its absence in the media or in other situations is a key element which a survey inevitably distorts. A change to a socialist government in Grenada was hardly perceived as a problem or even prominently reported until a subsequent American invasion of the island retroactively gave that governmental change an ominous significance. The single problem takes its meaning from the constellation of problems with which it overlaps and from the narratives about its past and its future consequences.

The past, the present, and the future are all transformed as new problems seize attention. After defeat in Vietnam, past military ventures became suspect for a time and future ones even more so; and after Reagan's election, a part of the public repudiated these suspicions of military strategies and reinvented a future in which military might guarantees peace. The past and the future people construct are bound to be rationalizations of their current social worlds and of the public policies to which they subscribe.

News accounts therefore reconstruct social worlds, histories, and eschatologies, evoking grounds for concern and for hope and assumptions about what should be noticed and what should be ignored, who are respectable or heroic, and who are not respectable. News items displace others and in turn take their meaning from other accounts, always in the context of a perspective about history and ideology. Little wonder, then, that interest groups try to shape the content and the form of television and printed news, for to create a world dominated by a particular set of problems is at the same time to create support for specific courses of action.

XI. THE USES OF INVISIBLE SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The evidence for some social problems is the experience of their victims, while others become known only from the claims of people with an interest in publicizing them. High unemployment, toxic

materials in the air or water, assaults in the city streets, and foreign invasions are examples of conditions that their victims experience in their everyday lives. Each such problem creates some support for measures to counter it. Although there is always controversy about how severe the condition is, what caused it, and what should be done about it, information comes from a wide range of credible sources.

The case is different for warnings about the hostile intentions of domestic or foreign regimes, charges that welfare checks destroy character or are spent for luxuries, or allegations that fetuses feel pain as they are aborted. Such claims cannot find confirmation in anyone's experience; but they win support for policies nonetheless. They are typically more effective in attracting political support than the problems that can be examined, for those who find such claims ideologically appealing need not worry about counterevidence. Few are likely to deny that a recession or industrial accidents are problems even if they are unaffected themselves, for it is apparent that such conditions can be documented. The absence of controversy about their existence leaves room for disinterest, apathy, or only intermittent attention to them. To the advocate of strong measures to countersubversive activities, by contrast, apathy becomes evidence of softness toward enemies; moral passion is inflamed against people who deny that the problem exists or refuse to see it as threatening.

A central function of some public administrative agencies is the publicizing of narratives about threats remote from daily experience, for those narratives create the rationale for intelligence organizations, national police agencies, and departments of defense. Groups that benefit from public concern about such threats provide an active constituency for these organizations. They focus on an otherwise amorphous, diffuse set of interests and afford them an enhanced opportunity for influence both through their recounting of stories and through the spectacle they create of dramatic action to cope with enemies who are ordinarily unseen.

XII. THE DEFINITION OF EVENTS AS CRISES

The terms "problem" and "crisis" are inducements to acquiesce in deprivations. For most people they awaken expectations that *others* will tolerate deprivations. "Problem" connotes a condition that is resistant to facile solution because it stems from entrenched institutional features or entrenched character flaws. Those who are untouched by it, those who benefit from it, and those who suffer from it all learn that it is likely to continue. A "crisis," by contrast, heralds instability; it usually means that people must endure new forms of

deprivation for a time. In the conventional view, then, problems are chronic (though curable in principle) and crises are acute; but the distinction turns out to be arbitrary when the catalysts of crises are examined.

More often than not a crisis is an episode in a long sequence of similar problems. No characteristic of any episode makes it the precipitant of a crisis; it is apparently possible to elevate any incident to that role. Troop movements in a potentially hostile country that are ignored or explained away as routine on some occasions become evidence at other times that a war crisis has developed. In 1974, signs that swine flu might become widespread the next winter were treated as heralding a health crisis, justifying alarmist warnings and forced inoculations that themselves killed many people, though similar signs and a higher incidence of flu in other years were treated as routine. The positioning of Russian missiles in Cuba in 1962 precipitated a "Cuban Missile Crisis," though the stationing of American missiles as close to the Soviet Union even earlier was not defined as a crisis by either country. A crisis, like all news developments, is a creation of the language used to depict it; the appearance of a crisis is a political act, not a recognition of a fact or of a rare situation.

Like "problems," crises typically rationalize policies that are especially harmful to those who are already disadvantaged. Wars, recessions, depressions, severe earthquakes, and steep price rises impose especially heavy burdens on the poor and the powerless, while they also justify increases in the power of regimes. The class-based result of crisis labeling is unintended. It does not stem from plotting but from a skewed structure of opportunities and protections and from ideology inherent in language interpretation that reinforces that skewed structure.¹¹

XIII. AUDIENCES AS CREATORS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Whether a condition is a social problem hinges, by definition, on whether a sizable part of the public accepts it as one. But more than tautology is involved here, for it is audience acceptance that makes it possible for interest groups, public officials, or anyone else to portray a set of conditions as a problem, just as obliviousness to conditions that are ruinous to many people prevents their labeling as problems.

Public attention to troublesome but remote conditions is likely to be ephemeral, changing forms as the news highlights different issues

11. For a discussion of some other connotations of the term "crisis," see M. EDELMAN, *POLITICAL LANGUAGE* 43-49 (1977).

or unrecognized facets of old ones. An equally striking characteristic of public attention lies in its capacity to be both present and absent: to be selective in the occasions it manifests its existence. Those who assume they cannot influence a condition do not clamor for governmental action to change it, no matter how serious it may be for them. The condition then seems to be regarded as fated: an inevitable feature of the universe, therefore not a problem to be resolved. Urban decay, structural unemployment, inadequate public transportation, farm surpluses, and many other noxious social conditions have come to be accepted as unpleasant aspects of the contemporary world over which people have little or no control. While they are present as abstract problems and as physical phenomena, they are absent as pressing political issues and remain unnoticed by much of the population much of the time. The accepted modes of reference to them deplore them as nuisances or as evils while avoiding proposals to use resources to eliminate them. It is largely problems that are damaging to the groups with few resources for influence that are treated as fated, uncontrollable, or invisible.

In a rather similar way, warnings that a course of action will occasion severe future problems are easily ignored as long as such claims rest upon premises that are not readily understood or are ideologically unpalatable. They may even be believed but remain in a different universe of discourse from discussions of ameliorative action; Watergate in the 1972 election campaign and high deficits in the 1984 campaign are examples.

Unless their audience is receptive to the depiction of a condition as a problem, leaders and interest groups cannot use it to their advantage. As just noted, interpretations are likely to be diverse and they are often unstable or ambivalent. At some level of consciousness people doubtless sense that they wield this kind of power to acquiesce in elite definitions of problems or to nullify them by ignoring them. The obliviousness of "the masses" to a high proportion of the issues that seize the attention of those with an avid interest in public affairs is a potent political weapon for most of the people of the world though it remains largely unrecognized in academic writing.¹² "The news" is made, reported, interpreted, and read by a small fraction of the population, some of whom it preoccupies; and it is ignored, resisted, or only intermittently noticed by the overwhelming majority.

The evidence of general political apathy and quiescence in the face of determined and continuous efforts to awaken interest in "public affairs" is persuasive: widespread ignorance of the information

12. Cf. J. BAUDRILLARD, *IN THE SHADOW OF THE SILENT MAJORITIES* 1-64 (1983).

that is most often publicized and stressed in news reports and in early schooling; the inconsistency of many beliefs about "important" political issues; and a high incidence of nonvoting.

Political activists and public officials find obliviousness to their causes frustrating when, as is often the case, the actions they favor entail sacrifice or suffering for the apathetic population. That is clearly the consequence of military actions, tax increases, and other policies that bring material or moral deprivations. Advocates of such policies see the costs as necessary to cope with problems, so they try to impress upon the nonactivists that sacrifice is a warranted, even noble, enterprise that is difficult if their potential audiences are not paying attention. Advocates of these policies succeed on occasion; but they know that they would be successful more often if their audiences were as politicized as they.

It is not surprising, then, that there are constant efforts to bring such politicization about: polemics about the duty and efficacy of voting; dramatically presented news stories that emphasize alleged threats to personal well-being and the public interest; growing reliance upon politicians and interest group spokespersons who are persuasive "communicators"; and ubiquitous resort to the contriving of dramatic events ("pseudoevents") in order to win media publicity. The politicized minority assumes that its target public needs alarms, shocks, and titillation to make it pay attention to the issues that bemuse that minority. It assumes as well that these devices need to be supplemented with a measure of coercion to win acquiescence in the more severe forms of sacrifice "in the public interest." Policies that can be implemented without immediate public acquiescence and whose later consequences are not easily traced to the actions that initiated them are exceptions. Monetary policy, for example, involves technical controls over money supply and interest rates that receive little publicity, while their ultimate consequences in unemployment or higher prices appear to be the fault of market forces against which there is no recourse.

Whether the large number of people who pay little or no attention to most news accounts thereby damage or enhance their well-being depends upon what we assume news accounts do. In the conventional view, they provide information that enables people to act in their own interests. In the view generally accepted by students of discourse and of political language, they construct the social reality to which people respond and help construct the subjectivity of actors and spectators as well; in the process, they reinforce established power structures and value hierarchies. The second perspective therefore

suggests that preoccupation with the news is more nearly a form of subjugation than an aid to autonomy. People are not helpless before the influence of news makers and media; but there is constant straining to maintain detachment and autonomy.

XIV. THE DEVALUATION OF EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE

Even when it can be confirmed, news of public affairs consists largely of stories about events remote from everyday life: statements by public officials and others that are familiar only through their constant appearance in the media; troop movements and natural disasters in distant places; crimes by and against people one does not know; statements about "trends" in opinion, prices, population movements, and welfare rolls; and predictions of the future by people one does not know. To hear or read the news is to live intermittently in a world one does not touch in daily life; and not to read it ordinarily makes little difference, with the important exception that the mind does not then focus on the realities news stories construct.

Most experiences that make life joyful, poignant, boring, or worrisome are not part of the news: the grounds for personal concern, frustration, encouragement and hope; the conditions that matter at work, at home, and with friends; the events people touch, as distinct from those that are "reported"; the experience of financial distress or of opulence; children in trouble; lovers; and alienating or gratifying jobs.

On occasion news reports and personal experiences converge. The unemployed woman who witnesses a television portrayal of long lines of applicants for unemployment insurance benefits sees her worry mirrored in the lives of others. That example helps us understand how the media and everyday life interact and also in what ways they remain insulated from each other. News about "public affairs" encourages the translation of personal concerns into beliefs about a public world people witness as spectators rather than as participants. The quality of daily life and of personal well-being becomes a private affair, divorced from the realm of public affairs, which is constructed as the sphere that really matters insofar as governmental policy is concerned. Everyone is taught that influence should be exerted in the public realm even though the news reports from that world also imbue the public with the view that stronger and more fundamental forces than their own wishes are critical: economic conditions, military imbalances, majority votes, psychological needs and impulses, and other constructs that teach people how impotent they are against complex, remote, and untouchable developments. In this sense the

news helps everyone to accept their experienced lives by creating another world of symbols and fetishes. The political spectacle encourages people to support good causes and leaders and to oppose enemies, to sacrifice for the common welfare and to acquiesce in the inevitable. In doing so it encourages acceptance of the stable social structures and the inequalities that shape their experiences.

Here we touch on a central consequence of the construction of public problems. It denigrates the concerns of everyday existence and personal well-being so as to highlight the constructions that originate in reports about the political spectacle. These change often. They call attention to the long odds against success in changing social conditions and to the irrelevance of personal sensibility. Though the spectacle takes place in a remote universe, it discourages resistance to immanent conditions and it rationalizes acceptance of the world as it is.

XV. SOCIAL PROBLEMS AS TEXTS: PROLIFERATION, ERASURE, TRACES, SUPPLEMENTS

These various constructions and uses of social problems typically act together rather than as single influences. They evoke each other, or they complement, rationalize, displace, or qualify one another. A problem constructed to justify a course of action, for example, gives rise to an explanation that rationalizes still other policies. Gestures that have little impact upon the problem they purport to solve may occasion new policies that get attached to a different problem. Problems that are displaced by more dramatic ones reappear in changed circumstances, calling for new explanations, new gestures, and perhaps still other displacements, negations, or a crisis, even while the proliferating spectacle devalues everyday experience.

In short, each action or term carries the trace of others, constructing an exploding set of scenes and signs that move in unpredictable directions and that radiate endlessly, with actions and the language that defines their meaning evoking still other acts and terms that are supplementary, contradictory, or logically irrelevant.

We are born and are socialized into a world in which wealth, white skin, and maleness bring status, resources, and deference. The conditions that are defined as problems and the laws that prescribe how beneficiaries and victims of those conditions are to be dealt with are powerful forms of fetishism, rationalizing and reinforcing the inequalities that are well known and generally accepted; yet they are always confronted with some measure of ambivalence and guilt.