**5**

**Identities, Problems, and Movements**

Some things clearly need fixing. Any society produces pathological, dysfunctional, cruel, shameful, and maybe even evil conditions. Political or moral leadership entails getting people to recognize the problem and then to set about solving it.

This view of social problems sees them as objective: The situation in question is real, can be identified, and can be objectively measured, and just about everyone will agree that the situation is indeed “a problem” once they know about it. Sexually transmitted diseases are an example. We can clearly identify an STD as any disease spread primarily though sexual contact; thus, syphilis is an STD, whereas cancer is not. We can objectively measure their occurrence: X percent of the population is currently infected with syphilis as opposed to Y percent in 1950. And surely everyone would agree that STDs are a social problem; in fact, they used to be called “social diseases.” No decent society can do less than put resources toward reducing the incidence of STDs and working toward cures for them.

Although this objective view of a social problem is attractively straightforward, its assumptions are vulnerable. What is an STD? Certain types of cancers are more common to people who have had syphilis, even though they crop up years after the syphilis has been cured; are such cancers STDs? Diseases like preeclampsia are associated with pregnancy; because pregnancy is “sexually transmitted,” should preeclampsia be considered an STD? Depression may result from a sexual relationship gone sour; is depression an STD as well? Posing questions like these clearly shows that there is no “bright line” separating STDs from other forms of illness; the line results from a social decision.

As for objective measurement of rates of occurrence, this is much harder than it seems. STDs are stigmatized and disproportionately associated with poor people or people on the margins of society like heroin addicts who spread AIDS with needles. Such people are notoriously difficult to count—similar to the problem the U.S. Census has with counting the homeless—or to bring into the medical system for testing. So, any statement about the rates of an STD in a population, and especially a statement about a trend over time, is an educated guess.

Even with a less than precise definition and measurements, surely there can be no doubt that STDs are social problems, can there? Yes, in fact, many people question this. Traditionalists argue that sex outside of marriage is “the problem,” and if that problem were solved, STDs would largely disappear. Defenders of privacy rights regard required testing for STDs to be an invasion of privacy, so in many states pregnant women cannot be compelled to be tested for HIV, despite the risk to their babies. This position defines the “problem” as the government prying into people’s private concerns. In the notorious Tuskegee experiments, the U.S. Public Health Service allowed some poor black men to leave their syphilis untreated for years, defining their disease not as a problem but as an opportunity for medical research (Jones 1992).

So, social problems are not always clear and straightforward, as the objective approach seems to assume. Instead, they are constructions (Loseke 1999). The essence of the constructionist approach is that only when a situation has meaning for a specific group of people and that meaning is a negative one can the situation get defined as a social problem.

In other words, a social problem is a cultural object, produced by specific agents; Loseke calls them “claims-makers.” It is interpreted by a specific group of recipients, whom Loseke regards as the “audience” for the claims being made. “Simply stated, a social problem is created when audiences evaluate claims as believable” (37). If recipients accept the producers’ definition, it becomes “a problem,” and if they become mobilized to take action, it becomes a social movement.

To understand the implications of this constructionist approach, we begin with the claims-makers (creators) and audience (recipients). Calls for action are generally aimed at some collectivity. This might be an organization, as when advocates address a church to raise money for that cause, or it might be a group of people that share a sense of being a “we,” as when Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization targets its pink-ribbon appeals to women. In other words, the construction of a social problem depends on the prior construction of a collective identity.

**Constructing a Collective Identity**

Identity can also be seen either as objective or as a construction. Recent thinking emphasizes the constructionist view, which thinks of identities as not so much given and fixed but malleable, fluid, and subject to interpretation. People can easily change their group memberships, the causes they support, or the people they hang out with. With greater effort, they can change their religious and institutional ties, their physical appearance, or their occupations; with even greater effort, they can change their citizenship or their sexual characteristics. An Algerian Muslim man could become a French Catholic woman; such an identity change would be radical but not unheard of. Moreover, what it means to be a man or a woman, a Muslim or a Catholic, is subject to interpretation.

Alberto Melucci (1989) has emphasized how collective identity is not fixed but a process. Consciously or not, you have to work at being a woman or a Catholic or an Algerian; otherwise these are just labels, categories that have little to do with your behavior. In his words,

*Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place*.… Collective identity formation is a delicate process and requires continual investments. As it comes to resemble more institutionalized forms of social action, collective identity may crystallize into organizational forms.… In less institutionalized forms of action its character more closely resembles a process which must be continually activated in order for action to be possible. (34–35; italics in original)

We see in this definition the link to social problems and social movements. When a collective identity is activated, it produces a shared way of thinking (a social mind) that perceives certain situations as troubling and in need of attention. This cognitive activation can lead to action.

To better understand collective identity as a construction rather than an objective “given,” let us consider race and ethnicity, which seem to shape identity very powerfully. Sociologists once thought that increasing modernization would erode ascribed differences like those of race and ethnicity, religion and kinship group, nationality, and even gender. This convergence model—modern individuals and societies would become more and more alike—was compatible with a view of eventual racial and ethnic assimilation, known in the United States as the melting pot, wherein ethnic and racial differences would disappear into a homogenized American identity. And while the world at large was not envisioned as a huge melting pot, modernization theory supported the idea of Marshall McLuhan’s “global village,” in which media technology would link all humanity, with ethnic, racial, and national differences growing less and less important.

The 1960s changed the picture dramatically, both in the United States and abroad. At home, the civil rights movement brought African Americans’ lack of assimilation to the forefront of American consciousness. Soon after, other ethnic groups—Native Americans, Poles, Italians, Hispanics, and Irish—began asserting ethnic pride. They emulated the Black Pride rhetoric, and they were reflected in and assisted by the culture industries that produced and promoted festivals—Cinco de Mayo has become more of an American holiday than a Mexican one—and mass cultural goods for ethnic niche markets (Jacobson 2006). Racial and ethnic divides shifted but did not disappear (Lee and Bean 2007). The old melting pot ideal no longer seemed either accurate or desirable. This change had parallels worldwide: Nationalist leaders of newly independent countries and the generation of political leaders that followed them rejected the convergence model and asserted their own distinctiveness. Third World nations declared their independence from either U.S. or Soviet domination, regardless of whether they were actually able to get along without support from one of the two big powers. In the 1970s, the human rights movement focused attention on the treatment of minority groups within nations. All of these new movements emphasized and even celebrated persistent ethnic differentiation.

Expressive culture played a major role in both American and foreign expressions of ethnic pride. If African leaders of the 1940s and 1950s wore suits from Savile Row and Paris as they negotiated with representatives of the colonial powers, the next generation of African leaders wore agbadas and dashikis. Often, however, they wore military uniforms, as political and economic changes proved more intractable than cultural changes. And cultural distinctiveness, often centered on differences in language and religion, tore apart many new nations as the old dreams of assimilation and convergence seemed more and more distant.

Cultural assertiveness of a specific collective identity, however—based on ethnicity, race, religion, language, or some combination of these—is likely to persist for a number of reasons. First, its expression through cultural objects is psychologically satisfying yet often relatively low cost. An African American youth can wear a cap with a Malcolm X symbol or follow specific hip-hop groups more easily than he can effect change in his school, his neighborhood, or his job opportunities. Even when cultural allegiance is extremely costly, as in the enmity between Serbs and Croats in the Balkans, an individual may find it easier to apply simple rules of affiliation—she’s a Serb, so she’s my enemy—than to negotiate new interaction patterns. Second, such assertiveness engages the ethnic or racial group’s intellectual leaders, who then have a stake in its perpetuation. If urban schools with a large Puerto Rican component in the student body start offering courses in Puerto Rican poetry, someone has to teach them, and these teachers then have a stake in their continuation. Third, political leaders seeking votes find it easy and convenient to appeal to ethnic sentiments, as shown by the political luminaries who turn out for the St. Patrick’s Day parades. This is why the issue of a gay Irish group marching in New York City’s parade has been so vexed: On one hand, the parade is privately sponsored so theoretically the sponsors can exclude whomever they want, but on the other hand, New York’s politicians are reluctant to alienate the gay community. The interaction between cultural and political agendas escalates the conflict, and because it is “colorful,” the media treat the dispute to lavish coverage.

The cultural expression of ethnicity is less straightforward than might first appear, precisely because collective identity is a process and not a given, a construction and not an objective fact. Ethnic and racial groups have their subdivisions, often invisible to outsiders, and the question of whose culture gets promoted and taken as the culture of the entire group may be hotly contested. In the United States, many Spanish speakers resent being lumped with one another as “Hispanic,” pointing out that Dominicans and Argentineans have little in common. West Indians and African Americans eye one another warily; Koreans fear the economic inroads being made by Thais, while Thais look over their shoulders at Vietnamese. These divisions get played out in local negotiations over multiculturalism. It is all very well to represent different cultures in the curriculum, but how many cultures? Do differences between northern and southern Italians get expressed in the Columbus Day celebration—traditionally associated with Italian ethnicity—and how do the claims of Native Americans get represented in a celebration of the “discoverer” of their lands?

Ethnicity itself is a cultural object, with different creators and different recipients, all constructing different meanings. When I’m in Europe, I’m clearly an “American”; when in America, I’m variously a “WASP,” an “Anglo,” a “Yankee,” a “white,” and a “Midwesterner.” To a radical Islamist, I might be a “Crusader.” And in Nigeria, I am—along with anyone else having white skin—a “European.” My person is a cultural object with ethnic characteristics that different creators use to communicate with different audiences (cf. Morning 2009).

Nigeria exemplifies some of the difficulties of ethnic representation. Within this country of some 88 million people are at least 250 distinct languages associated with different ethnic groups (some put the count as high as 400). The three majority languages—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—are spoken by roughly two thirds of the population. Although no one is happy with English as the lingua franca, none of the three majority linguistic groups wants to give way to another, whereas the many minority groups fear domination by the “big three” and therefore strongly support the use of English for commercial and governmental transactions. Thus, the evening news broadcast by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) is read in English; at the close of the program, the announcer says goodnight in Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo—much to the disgust of the minority Nigerians, who strongly protest this bit of symbolism. What seems a low-cost gesture to NTA is an arrogant expression of would-be cultural domination to the Efik, Ibibio, Tiv, and dozens of other minority ethnic groups.

Racial and ethnic affiliations seem natural, matters of blood and bone. But once again, sociologists point out, both are cultural constructs. This is a key argument of the burgeoning field of whiteness studies (e.g., Wray 2006). A person who is one-eighth black is “white” in Jamaica but “black” in Louisiana. Trinidadians and Belizeans, who come from countries a thousand miles apart and regard themselves as having little in common, become ethnically lumped as “West Indians” when they immigrate to Britain, just as British racists apply the derogatory term *Pakis* to Hindu Indians, Muslim Pakistanis, and any other South Asians who happen to be around. A “Paki” is not a person but a cultural object.

Even though people may be lumped together by outsiders or by historical circumstances, they may also take advantage of this imposed ethnicity. Stephen Cornell (1988) studied how Native Americans came to recognize a shared identity and common political agenda. For Native Americans living on reservations during most of the twentieth century, tribal and subtribal affiliations were the significant markers of identification both to themselves and to others with whom they came into contact. But in the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers came to such cities as Los Angeles and Chicago, seeking the economic opportunities that their desolate reservations lacked. Here, they clustered in the same down-and-out neighborhoods, dealt with the same bureaucracies, hung out at the same bars, and sometimes were subject to the same prejudices as “dirty Indians” or “red niggers.” Now the cultural identity that mattered was not Oglala or Cree but “Indian.” This recognition of shared identity led urban Indians to assert common cultural and political claims. One of the most visible and influential fruits of this new supratribalism was the aggressive organization known as AIM (American Indian Movement), which pressed Indian issues in the 1970s. The collective identity of Native America expanded further in the late twentieth century; the number of Americans who identified themselves as “Indians” tripled between 1960 and 1990 (Nagel 1995).

Cultural expressions of ethnicity, like the African American holiday of Kwanzaa, designed by a California professor in the late 1960s, are often cases of the “invention of tradition,” not of venerable ritual. Ethnicity and race are artificial constructs, collective identities that are the results of historical contingencies. At the same time, they exert enormous motivational influence, instilling fierce loyalties and equally fierce hatreds. Heterogeneous states and social groups (e.g., communities, schools, and organizations) are thus obliged to find ways to acknowledge and perhaps celebrate cultural diversity while constructing a common culture, of which the different ethnic or racial groups are subcultures, that successfully claims the primary allegiance of every citizen. No simple task, this is made harder by local habits and prejudices. Many Chinese in Malaysia feel stronger ties to Chinese elsewhere than they do to Muslim Malays, who have severely restricted their opportunities. Some American Jews donate vast amounts of money to Israel, often more than they do to local charities. The claims of ethnicity, resting on what has been termed a “constructed primordialism” (Appadurai 1990), remain strong enough to frustrate the cosmopolitans, resulting both in indisputable pride and in unspeakable bloodshed.

Gender and sexualities have followed a parallel path. In the 1970s feminist theory, popular cultural representations of women’s concerns (*Ms. Magazine* [1971]; *Our Bodies, Ourselves*[1973]), legislative changes (Title IX [1972]), linguistic changes (from “he” as a universal pronoun to “he/she” or the somewhat self-conscious use of “she” as the universal), and “women’s studies” programs challenged male-centered norms. As with “whiteness,” however, soon “masculinities” and heteronormativity were themselves undergoing deconstruction. By the turn of the century the thinking had evolved from male/female or gay/straight binaries to seeing genders and sexualities in systemic terms, the roles and identities contingent rather than fixed, performed rather than biologically mandated. (For representative recent work on the construction of gender, see Silva 2008; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Anderson 2009; for a empirically well-grounded study of sexual collective identity construction, see Armstrong 2002).

So race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and indeed all collective identities are constructions, not givens. At the same time, we must recognize that these particular constructions (and other key bases for collective identity like gender and religion) create powerful “we” groups that influence our thinking and behavior in multiple ways. One of these ways is that people making claims about a social problem will try to reach people through their collective identities, saying, for example, “You, as a Latina or as a black woman or as a Roman Catholic, ought to be concerned about this.” In the next section, we examine how this process works.

**Constructing a Social Problem**

Poverty, crime, teenage pregnancy, high infant mortality rates, racism, urban decay, unemployment, drugs, drunk driving, inadequate health care—and on and on. Most of us can reel off a list of pressing social problems without hesitation. Although such a list has roots in problems that cause human suffering universally—such as violence, hatred, and premature death—the forms that these problems take are specific to each culture and society.

Americans regard teenage pregnancy as a social problem, for example. For the Hausa of Nigeria, where most girls marry at the age of twelve or thirteen, young women who reach their twenties *without* having children are the problem. For the Chinese, whose government addresses its population problem by vigorously enforcing a one-child-per-family policy, any pregnancy is problematic. If the family has no children, the problem is whether or not the baby will be a son (desirable) or a daughter (less desirable). Infant girls often show up abandoned near orphanages, left to the charity of strangers so that the parents can try for another pregnancy (virtually all babies in Chinese orphanages are females or severely handicapped males). If the family already has a child, the pregnancy must be hidden or else the mother may be forced to abort. Even in America, labeling “teenage pregnancy” as the problem may be misleading. Few would regard a pregnant nineteen-year-old with a working husband as worrisome, but many such are included in statistics and stories about the “dramatic rise in teen pregnancy.” Kristen Luker (1991) found that concerns about “babies having babies” has more to do with public disapproval of the welfare system, racial prejudices, and concerns about teenage sexual activity than with actual demographic changes.

Media define and focus attention on social problems. Consider *The Jungle,* Upton Sinclair’s indictment of the meat-packing industry that helped provoke passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sensational depiction of the horrors of slavery that transfixed northern U.S. readers. If culture can draw attention to social problems, can it also sometimes create the problem? And if so, what might be the role of culture in the solution of these problems it has helped bring about?

**Making Trouble**

We have seen that culture imposes meanings on an otherwise chaotic and random universe. Cultural systems turn events and objects into cultural objects with meanings specific to each culture; a business card is meaningful to a Japanese in a way that it is not to an American. In just this way, we can see how certain phenomena in the social world are made meaningful and transformed into cultural objects and, more specifically, into social problems.

Consider what takes place when things that “just happen” become cultural objects. We have all seen the fatalistic bumper stickers that proclaim “Shit happens.” The world *is* full of painful occurrences, private tragedies, and large-scale and persistent deprivations; life is neither fair nor kind nor naturally and obviously meaningful. Sometimes, though, the human misery that “happens” is transformed from a mere happening into a meaningful cultural object, and the cultural object gets designated as a social problem. When this transformation takes place, it becomes possible for people to seek solutions, for the existence of a “problem” implies the existence of a “solution.” (Thus, we do not regard death as a “problem,” for it has no “solution.”)

What happens when we see poverty as a social problem in the United States? In this case, it becomes a cultural object read against a horizon of expectations (e.g., America is a rich country), interpreted (e.g., given our abundance, America should not have any significant poverty), assumed to have a creator (e.g., what forces and actions shape this cultural object of American poverty?), and seen as something to be overcome (e.g., with a “War on Poverty,” Lyndon Johnson’s program of the 1960s). If poverty is not seen as a social problem—the poor are always with us—its more painful consequences can be alleviated, but poverty itself is not seen as something to be solved. Considered as a cultural object, on the other hand, poverty (and any other social problem) can benefit from the same type of cultural diamond analysis as any other cultural object, asking who creates the definition of the problem, who receives and interprets it, what meanings it contains, and in what social world it is meaningful.

**From Happening to Event to Social Problem**

First, let’s consider how “happenings” turn into “cultural objects.” The creation of a cultural object is like the creation of an event, which anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1985) describes as the relationship between a happening and a structure, a relationship created by interpretation. How do happenings become cultural objects identified as social problems? It appears that for a cultural object first to be created and then to be identified as a social problem, it must articulate with an interlocking set of ideas and institutions. Schematically, this process looks like [Figure 5.1](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781452289403/epub/OEBPS/ch05.html#figure5-1).

Consider the social problem of drunk driving, a case that sociologist Joseph Gusfield (1981) examined closely. The relevant set of happenings might include auto accidents; traffic fatalities; transportation patterns, including the American reliance on cars and the under-funding of public transportation; car design emphasizing style or affordability over safety; and American individualism, including an attitude that seatbelts limit one’s personal freedom. How, asked Gusfield, out of all these, have the American people singled out the “drunk driver” as the single meaningful cultural object and social problem?

The answer lies in American ideas and institutions. Our culture emphasizes individual responsibility, so a fatal accident must be some individual’s fault; blaming it on “the system” is not the American way. Our history of temperance movements has left a lingering association of alcohol with immorality (taxes on liquor and cigarettes are called “sin taxes”). The flipside of our emphasis on personal freedom (with the car and the open road emblematic of this emphasis) is our belief in personal control. Drunkenness is individually “sinful” in two ways: The individual has made a bad decision (to get drunk; to drink and drive), and she has given up her ability to control herself, her body, and her car. Hence, the concept of the “killer drunk” fits a number of strands in our common web of ideas. It fits our institutions as well. Auto manufacturers and liquor distillers support the construction of the “problem” as poor individual decision making rather than booze or unsafe (or too many) cars. And our legal system is better equipped to take on individuals who may have committed criminal acts than to go after organizations or systems (though in recent years, class action suits have made inroads).

**Figure 5.1** Transforming Happenings Into Cultural Objects

Even the response to auto fatalities fits the ideological and institutional context. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) has been highly effective in getting tougher laws on the books and enforced. The very name of this organization sets up a morality play pitting the mother defending her young against the villainous drunk driver who imperils them. It also forecloses debate (who would be *for* drunk driving?) and renders certain solutions (e.g., better public transportation, a high tax on gasoline) unthinkable. MADD accords prestige to women who have actually lost children in accidents involving drunk drivers. A grieving mother is a powerful image in Christian societies, not because Christian mothers love their children more than other mothers but because the image of the *pieta—* Mary holding the dead Christ—is a familiar cultural icon. The maternal grief evoked by MADD focuses attention squarely on individuals—individuals who drink, drive, kill, die, grieve, and act—and not on organizations or systems.

In Nigeria, death on the highway is also an event and a cultural object, but its meaning within the cultural system is quite different. A deadly combination of deteriorated roads, nonexistent traffic law enforcement, crowded conditions, uninhibited drivers, and vehicles that are often overloaded and poorly maintained give rise to enormous carnage on the roads, a fact that all Nigerians acknowledge. The Nobel Prize–winning playwright Wole Soyinka has made danger on the highways a recurring theme in his plays. But Nigerians don’t point to the drivers, the pedestrians, or the vehicles as the social problem; for them, the problem is “the road.” In Nigerian culture, the road is always a place of danger as well as excitement, a place where witches and destructive spirits lurk to trap the unwary (Bastian 1992). Ben Okri’s novel *The Famished Road* (1991) tells of a road that actually devours its victims. As Gusfield (1981) would point out, by defining a public problem in such a way—constructing it as a cultural object with meanings involving spirits and fate—the Nigerians are focusing attention on some types of solutions (placate the spirits; don’t travel) and not on others (fix the roads; build sidewalks).

Thus, social problems tend to show a comfortable fit with the ideas and institutions of the society in which they are found. Witches are a social problem in Nigeria because the surrounding culture contains a set of ideas that support a belief in witchcraft, a set of remedies to counter a witch’s influence, and a set of institutions, including media—especially the tabloid press, always eager to spread the word about new cases of witchcraft—and markets eager to trade in remedies against bewitching. Suspected witches are killed, and innocent people (often children) are killed to make medicine against witches. As the sociologist W. I. Thomas (1966) pointed out long ago, if people define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences.

**The Career of a Social Problem**

If social problems are culturally defined, it stands to reason that problems wax and wane in popularity over time. Stephen Hilgartner and Charles Bosk (1988) tried to identify what accounts for the “rise and fall of social problems,” beginning with what gets identified as a social problem in the first place. These authors envision a public arena in which competition takes place among the conditions that potentially could be labeled as social problems. This competition occurs in two forms: (1) in the framing or definition of the problem itself (e.g., Is the problem one of drunk drivers or of overreliance on automobiles?) and (2) in capturing the attention of institutions—government, media, and foundations—that have limits on their resources or “carrying capacities.” Those conditions that get selected as social problems are phenomena that have specific characteristics: They are or can be made dramatic; they resonate with deep mythic themes in the culture; and they are politically viable, often because they are linked with powerful interest groups. Winners in this competition achieve the status of widely acknowledged social problems. Making similar arguments, Adut (2008) shows that publicity is essential for transforming sexual transgressions into scandals, while Auyero and Swistun (2008) show that toxic environmental contamination requires interpretation if it is not merely to produce uncertainty rather than action.

Consider the AIDS epidemic as an example. In the early 1980s, it became clear to epidemiologists and some members of the homosexual men’s community in a few cities that a new, highly contagious, and invariably fatal disease involving the collapse of the immune system was spreading widely. Yet it was several years before public arenas—including federal and local government, the medical establishment, and much of the gay community itself—took alarm and identified AIDS as a major social problem (Shilts 1987). Within the American gay subculture, a strong emphasis on sexual freedom as political expressiveness meant that, for some time, medical warnings about safe sex fell on deaf ears. The disease was highly dramatic, especially in the wasting away of its youthful victims, but few media outlets exploited its dramatic potential at first, for it was believed to be confined to members of a stigmatized group. The same was true outside the United States. For several years, governments in East Africa were reluctant to address AIDS, despite its epidemic proportions in their countries, because they associated the disease with male homosexual behavior, which Africans consider abhorrent. Because of this association, the disease was “culturally impossible” and therefore did not merit recognition as a social problem. In both East Africa and the United States, AIDS did not initially resonate with mythic themes, nor did it link up with powerful political actors; indeed, quite the opposite.

As Hilgartner and Bosk might predict, once AIDS could no longer be ignored, there was competition over the very definition of the “problem”: Was it AIDS, sexual promiscuity, or (as some religious conservatives claimed) homosexuality itself? Although the struggle over problem definition was fierce, the gay men’s viewpoint was helped by their high level of education, political savvy, and access to the arts and media. By the mid-1980s, gay men and their supporters had dramatized the epidemic in highly effective ways, through the NAMES Project Foundation AIDS Memorial Quilt, plays such as *The Normal Heart* that reached a liberal and affluent constituency, books such as Randy Shilts’s *And the Band Played On,* and public rituals, such as releasing hundreds of balloons for each AIDS death, that offered good visuals for the evening news. Celebrities helped, both those who died of AIDS (Rock Hudson, Liberace, Michel Foucault, Perry Ellis, Arthur Ashe) and those who used their prominence to urge support for AIDS research (Elizabeth Taylor). Not only did the gay men’s associations engage in lobbying, but the rapid spread of the disease and its identification with non-gay populations also removed the stigma associated with it; if “normal, decent people” could get AIDS from a routine blood transfusion, it became everybody’s problem. Under the conservative Reagan administration, the U.S. Surgeon General sent a brochure to every household regarding safe sex, and condoms moved off pharmacies’ back shelves into the limelight.

Media attention continues to be intense and crucial, as in a notorious Benetton advertisement showing not the firm’s clothes but a family embracing a young man dying of AIDS (the pieta motif again). AIDS-related cultural objects command attention. Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993, and Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* won it in 1999; both have AIDS as a central theme. The widely praised film of *The Hours,* with such box-office stars as Nicole Kidman and Meryl Streep, has magnified the impact of this work. In making such a film, actors like Kidman and Streep become “operatives” in Hilgartner and Bosk’s model, helping AIDS compete for public attention.

The career of AIDS offers a clear example of how cultural values and themes shape (or obstruct) the very definition of a social problem. The social problem itself is a cultural object, with those who produce or create it (as a social problem), those who constitute its public or audience, and a set of meanings that interpreters use to relate it to the social world. Not all social problems appear with the relative suddenness of AIDS, however. Some, such as poverty or crime, are always present but rise and fall in terms of public attention. Others are associated with long-term structural changes. But whether the situation is new or old, once its creators (operatives, claims makers) have succeeded in getting it defined as a social problem, the question becomes, Will anyone be moved to try to solve it? Will the social problem generate a social movement? For this to happen, the problem (as cultural object) has to connect with an audience (as recipients) in such a way that some of the recipients are moved to action.

**Constructing a Social Movement**

Even if a particular audience recognizes something as a social problem, that in and of itself does not mobilize anyone to do anything. Poverty might be acknowledged as a social problem, for example, but if people take a fatalistic view (the poor are always with us; there’s nothing that can be done) or a judgmental one (their poverty is their own fault), this recognition will not produce any action. And of course the definition of whether or not there is a problem requiring some action varies across cultures; most Americans and Europeans view female genital mutilation as a social problem whereas many Africans regard it simply as a tradition.

Social movements require motivating people to recognize that a problem exists, to accept the possibility of its being solved, and to regard a certain line of action as being likely to produce this result. “The trick for activists,” according to William Gamson (1995:85), “is to bridge public discourse and people’s experiential knowledge, integrating them in a coherent frame that supports and sustains collective action.”

What is needed to bring off such a trick? Connecting an audience to a problem requires casting the problem in such a way that the audience accepts its relevance. This is usually seen as a problem of framing.

According to sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), a frame is an interpretive scheme that enables people to make sense of what they experience. For example, at the sight of a crippled beggar in Calcutta, a Hindu frame might prompt the observer to interpret the beggar’s condition as the result of sins in a past life. A Christian frame might suggest that the beggar’s suffering is a God-sent opportunity for charity. And a social activist frame sees the same suffering as bearing witness to economic injustice.

David Snow and colleagues have shown how social movements need to align the frames (interpretive schemata) of potential recruits. Frame alignment is “the linkage of individual and SMO [social movement organization] interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al. 1986:464; see also Benford and Snow 2000). An SMO supporting some new environmental protections, for example, might try to acquire the mailing lists of other environmental organizations under the assumption that the SMO’s goals and the values of these individuals would be congruent. Other times, an SMO seeks to get individuals to extend their frames or to draw specific conclusions in line with the SMO’s goals. For example, an activist promoting registration of all firearms might assert, “As parents (family frame), you have to be concerned about keeping guns out of the wrong hands (gun control frame).” The frames of individuals are to a great extent defined by their sense of collective identities. If someone doesn’t consider himself “a parent,” the gun control activist’s efforts at frame alignment will fail.

Framing leads to action only when recipients accept the proposed fit between problem and solution. When Amy Binder (2001) compared creationist and Afrocentric attempts to change school curricula, she found that the creationists had less success because few people believed that Christian evangelical students faced discrimination, so curricular change was a solution without a problem; on the other hand, there was widespread acceptance of the educational problems of African American youth, so the proposed solution got a hearing. The framing of the problem also suggests the relevant institutional solutions. If sexual harassment is seen as employment discrimination, its solution focuses on employers; if it is seen as a problem of violence, its solution focuses on criminal law (Saguy 2003).

The framer (creative agent, claims maker) needs to bridge the gap between his or her view of the problem and the audience’s view. But the framer also needs to stir people up, to move people. This requires making not simply a cognitive appeal but an emotional one. Movement activists will often use stories (Polletta 2006) or art—posters, masks, street theatre, or music—to reach the hearts of potential converts to their cause.

Eyerman and Jamison have written a book called *Music and Social Movements* (1998) with a two-pronged subtitle “Mobilizing Traditions” that nicely captures their argument. Activists draw on traditional musical forms to convey their messages to relevant audiences, to move them emotionally, and thus to mobilize them for action. Civil rights leaders used hymns like “Lift Every Voice” and spirituals like “Let My People Go” to move African Americans to more active forms of protesting their condition. Earlier in the twentieth century, the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) drew on both traditional folk music and popular songs to propagate their message about the working man, and union members ever since have sung “Solidarity Forever” and “Joe Hill.” In songs like “Deportees” and (more obliquely) “This Land Is Your Land,” Woody Guthrie used traditional folk idiom to carry a savage critique of capitalism. Music, in this analysis, helps fashion what they call a “cognitive identity” whereby people link their sense of being a “we” with a specific form of oppositional action. Music makes this link because it is an effective type of “exemplary action”; it suggests how the audience should feel and what they should do.

[T]he exemplary action of music and art is lived as well as thought: it is cognitive, but it also draws on more emotive aspects of human consciousness. As cultural expression, exemplary action is self-revealing and thus a symbolic representation of the individual and the collective which are the movement.… This exemplary action can also be recorded in film, words, and music, and thus be given more than a fleeting presence. (Eyerman and Jamison 1998:23)

Sandra Barnes (2005) similarly shows how gospel music mobilizes congregants for community action.

“More than a fleeting presence” highlights the critical role played by media. Social problems are always competing for the attention of relevant audiences. Media help problems win and hold this attention. A novel like *The Hours* appears, and the small but influential class of people who read serious fiction is reminded about the personal tragedies involved in AIDS. Then *The Hours* wins the Pulitzer, and newspapers, TV, magazines, and other media trumpet this event; people hear about the book, and its subject, even if most will never actually read it. Then a film is made, and filmgoers who don’t think much about AIDS but are fans of Nicole Kidman get reminded of the scourge. Media amplification of this sort helps fix a social problem in the minds of a necessarily fickle public.

For better or for worse, media can shape both the problem and its solution for huge masses of people, constructing a social movement in ways that are anything but the outcomes of democratic deliberation. Arvind Rajagopal (2001) suggests that in India’s political and moral vacuum following the decline of the Congress Party’s hegemony, Hindu nationalism was one of many social movements that offered competing solutions to India’s lack of direction during the 1980s. The Vishva Hindu Parishad, founded in 1964, was a cultural organization devoted to spreading Hindu values, using traditional Hindu symbols and popular culture to encourage Hindu identification and a turn from materialism to a spiritual/scientific ideal. Not a party, it has been closely associated with the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But Hindu nationalism was only one ideological position among many.

Then in 1987 producer Ramanand Sagar began showing the Ramayan serial—based on the epic tales of Lord Ram—on state-controlled Indian television. It was hugely popular, and it seemed to offer a solution.

While Ram Rajya, the golden age of the rule of Ram, has long been held as a utopia, and has repeatedly been utilized as a mobilizing symbol, the realist convention adopted in Sagar’s dramatization and the extended serial format of the presentation gave the symbol a discursive detail and a verisimilitude it can seldom have had before. Moreover the claim of a panacea for modern society in ancient Hindu culture, offered as a nationalist message on a state medium, had clear political implications. (Rajagopal 2001:104)

Rajagopal links the televised epic to the violence in Ayodhya beginning in the early 1990s and to the political success of the BJP.

We can translate his account into the conceptual scheme of this chapter. Creative agents frame the problems of Indian society in such a way that they appeal to an audience whose collective identity is more “Hindu” than “Indian.” Activating the Hindu identity constructs the problem as one of falling away from Hindu traditions, allowing them to be defiled by irreligious institutions (the secular state) or competing religions (Islam). The solution is an aggressive religious nationalism, and the media amplification helps mobilize public sentiment around this solution. The results of this social movement, in both electoral outcomes and ongoing religious violence, continue to this day.

**SUMMARY**

Most people regard social problems as malfunctions in the social system, and as such, the problems demand solutions. A social problem may be complex; apparent problems may be symptomatic of larger, underlying problems; entrenched economic or political interests may stand in the way. But all problems, we believe, have solutions if only enough resources, ingenuity, and moral courage are brought to bear on them.

Thinking of social problems less as givens and more as cultural objects draws attention to the artificial construction of any one problem and the implied meanings conveyed when a problem gets defined in one way and not another. Very different interests are engaged in constructing a particular problem as “homosexuality,” “sex outside marriage,” or “a highly contagious virus spread by bodily fluids,” and very different lines of action—different solutions—are implied. This is not to suggest that social problems, however defined, have no relation to human suffering. People do sicken and die of AIDS, no matter what cultural object is being constructed as “the problem.” Applying a cultural diamond analysis to a social problem does suggest, however, that such problems, like all cultural objects, have specific creators and recipients. They also have careers; like any cultural object, a social problem can rise in popularity, become institutionalized, or fail to win an audience and disappear. Understanding this allows us to construct other formulations of a problem and imagine solutions.

In this chapter, we have seen how social problems involving economic inequality, ethnicity, and modernity itself are cultural constructions rather than natural events or random happenings. One may apply a cultural diamond analysis to virtually any social problem. If we set up the cultural object to be, for example, (1) “illegal drugs entering America and threatening its citizens,” we are appealing to an audience of Americans fearful of attacks on their way of life. We are invoking images of contamination from foreign sources. We are implying solutions: declaring a national “war” on drugs, strengthening the national defense against penetration by drugs, and taking military action against the foreign producers. It is not surprising that the creators of this cultural object are the federal government. Cultural creators create problems for which they have solutions, and governments know how to wage war. If the drug problem were defined differently so that the cultural object was (2) “poverty and despair that prompt a narcoticinduced withdrawal from reality,” the solution would not be war but relieving poverty and despair, something that governments are less successful at doing. It is not surprising that academics and armchair social critics construct this second cultural object more often than politicians and government administrators do, for professors and critics are not responsible for providing the solutions. There are many other ways to construct the cultural object of drugs as a social problem. We could call the problem “sin,” “laws attempting to regulate private behavior,” “poor individual decision making,” or “wicked drug dealers.” Different cultural creators, a different intended audience, and different meanings and solutions exist for each such cultural object.

All cultural objects are not equal, however, for different ones will be able to mobilize different resources. Calling a “war on” anything enables the government to take action, whereas constructing the same thing as “sin” precludes government action. As a practical matter, the best cultural object for embodying a social problem is one that (1) unambiguously isolates happenings and turns them into events relevant to the cultural object, (2) captures the attention of a larger or powerful set of recipients, and (3) suggests solutions that are within the capacity of the relevant institutions. Thus, “segregation” is a well-formed social problem for the government to construct as a cultural object because it meets all three criteria, whereas “racial hatred” is not, for it is diffused among various happenings and its solutions are beyond government capacities. On the other hand, the parents of a family can tackle the problem of racial hatred among its members but can do little about segregation.

A cultural object, as we have seen, is an interpretation, a set of meanings that fit a context of ideas and institutions, that translate random happenings into events, and that suggest attitudes and actions. Social problems are cultural objects in exactly this sense. Tracing the links among the problems, their creators, their receivers, and their social worlds will help illuminate those solutions that might work, those that probably will not, and those that have not yet been imagined because of how the problem has been constructed.

**QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

1. Select an ethnic collective identity like Inuit, West Indian, or North African. How would it be described (1) as an objective reality and (2) as a cultural construction? What would be involved in perpetuating such a construction? Suppose members of the group migrated—Inuit in Toronto, West Indians in London, North Africans in Marseilles. What would happen to their collective identity and that of their children? Consider this question from both the objectivist and the constructionist point of view.
2. Bring in the editorial page of your local newspaper and use it to identify a social problem that is currently capturing public attention. Discuss how this social problem came to be identified and how it is being posed. What are some other ways in which this problem could have been constructed? Why does it take the form that it does and not one of the alternatives?
3. Compare the careers of two potential social problems, one successful (e.g., capturing public attention and resources) and one not. Use actual examples. Describe the social problem arena, the claims makers or operatives, the framing that goes on, and the principles of selection that determine the outcomes.
4. Much of the social movement literature talks about specific organizations pursuing specific goals. What if the object of analysis is an unorganized collectivity without any specific goal or direction, perhaps without a sense of collective identity? Think of a social category like “teenage females” or “managers working for large corporations.” How, according to the constructionist and framing models, could these groups come together as a social movement?

**RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING**

Armstrong, Elizabeth. 2002. *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950–1994.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Armstrong shows how a collective identity like gays or lesbians is not static but changes according to the social and ideological context. In her study of gay and lesbian organizations over three decades, she shows how the collective identity changed from a narrow focus on homophile issues to a radical political agenda associated with the New Left and then to a consumer lifestyle.

Lichterman, Paul. 2005. *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America’s Divisions.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. In his study how nine Protestant churches address community problems, Lichterman finds that successful mobilization involves a fit between a congregation’s internal culture and its definition of the external problem.

Polletta, Fancesca. 2006. *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Polletta shows how storytelling creates internal solidarity while dramatizing the movement’s cause to external audiences.

Saguy, Abigail C. 2003. *What Is Sexual Harassment?* Berkeley: University of California Press. Saguy compares how the problem of sexual harassment is constructed in France and the United States and the legal and policy differences that result from the different framings.