The social sciences underwent rapid development in postwar America. Problems once framed in social terms gradually became redefined as individual with regards to scope and remedy, with economics and psychology winning influence over the other social sciences. By the 1970s, both economics and psychology had spread their intellectual remits wide: psychology’s concepts suffused everyday language, while economists entered a myriad of policy debates. Psychology and economics contributed to, and benefited from, a conception of society that was increasingly skeptical of social explanations and interventions. Sociology, in particular, lost intellectual and policy ground to its peers, even regarding “social problems” that the discipline long considered its settled domain. The book’s ten chapters explore this shift, each refracted through a single “problem”: the family, crime, urban concerns, education, discrimination, poverty, addiction, war, and mental health, examining the effects of an increasingly individualized lens has had on the way we see these problems.

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Society on the Edge

Social Science and Public Policy in the Postwar United States

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Preface

When we conceived this volume – a comparative history of the study of social problems in postwar America – we invited authors to draft accounts of scholarship on troubles that social scientists and the public had long recognized as persistent yet tractable. The authors’ remit was to chart the changing division of labor, jurisdictional disputes, and moments of cooperation between the mainline social science disciplines in the decades after World War II. The problems of society tableau was, by intent, a means to an historiographical end. Here was a set of linked topics that, in its thematic breadth, demanded a multidisciplinary approach.

Contributors were invited to a pair of workshops at the École normale supérieure Paris–Saclay to present on their designated social problem, in papers that evolved into the book’s nine chapters. As we held our second workshop in December 2018, “yellow vest” protestors were venting their wrath in the streets of Paris, ten kilometers away. Before the workshop, our North American visitors, alarmed by the accounts in the press and the disturbing images of demonstrators shouting their frustrations, had wondered whether Paris was worth a second visit. As the workshop got underway, it was clear that participants were struggling to understand the meaning behind the protests. Aware that social unrest is not necessarily correlated with hardship, they found it a challenge, nonetheless, to imagine such smoke without fire.

There was something paradoxical about holding a workshop on the problems of society in the postwar United States at a time when problems in French society seemed to demand attention. The professed problems of the yellow vest movements were, in space and time, far removed from the workshop’s collection of US troubles. Yet they have something in common: They are both marked by the divergence between the social scientist’s and the public’s outlook, a gap widened by the disciplines’ twentieth-century
professionalization. France or the United States, the postwar era or the present: there is a constitutive tension in the construction of knowledge about society, a tension exacerbated when knowledge centers on society’s problems. The cases collected in this volume, and the yellow vest movements too, reveal that public recognition need not correspond with the scholar’s documentation of a problem’s scope. There is, in other words, no necessary link between the apparent significance of a problem and whatever public clamor surrounds it. Pierre Bourdieu has quoted Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* in this spirit (quoted in Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 42):

It is necessary to reverse the common opinion and acknowledge that it is not the harshness of a situation or the sufferings it imposes that lead people to conceive of another state of affairs in which things would be better for everybody. It is on the day that we are able to conceive of another state of affairs, that a new light is cast on our trouble and our suffering and we decide that they are unbearable.

One lesson of the volume’s chapters is that the salience of problems of society in the postwar United States has hinged on public recognition – that problem status is a definitional act, a social baptism that, moreover, needs regular renewal to maintain political standing. That conclusion offers lessons that go beyond the US situation.

The volume is meant to be useful not only to historians of social science but also to practicing social scientists interested in the complex interactions between public policy and their disciplines. A related aim is to improve our understanding of the way that problems of society emerge, prosper, and disappear. As such the volume is intended as a modest contribution to our collective ability to transform the social world.
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