

Descriptif d'enseignement / *Course descriptions*

Etudiants internationaux / International undergraduate program

2022-2023

Titre du cours - *The sociology of social problems*

Titre en français La sociologie des problèmes publics

Titre en anglais *The sociology of social problems*

Type de cours : électif internationaux

Langue du cours/Language of instruction : Anglais

Enseignant(s) – Professor(s)

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Titre ou profession MCF HDR

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Résumé du cours – Objectifs - Course description – Targets

Course description

How come that certain situations or phenomena widely perceived as harmful to large segments of societies – such as opioid addiction, increasing rates of suicides among farmers, school bullying, student debt, etc. – seem to elicit comparatively little public interest and/or require years or decades to be addressed at all (not to speak about those problems that affect us all like climate change) ? How come that practices or behaviors that might be defined as « problems » by decision-makers in a given time and place (such as the wearing of headscarfs at public schools in late-20th century France) are not perceived as such in other contexts ? Why and how do certain persons or groups of persons come to be defined as « problems » ?

A social problem can be defined as a situation, process or behavior commonly perceived as undesirable, even as a threat to certain values and aims (such as, for instance, social cohesion or a certain « way of life ») – and, as such, as requiring public action of some sort. However, not all situations commonly experienced as harmful command sufficient public interest in order to appear on the agenda of public authorities, be they local, national or global. This brings us to the two-dimensional aspects of social problems, their objective and subjective dimensions : while many « social problems » (such as social exclusion, discrimination, addiction, etc.) are universally experienced by those who suffer from it as objectively harmful, whether something is defined as a social problem depends on how a number of actors (public opinion leaders, mass media, activists, interest groups, etc.) see it and frame it as such. The same issue (eg abortion) can be considered by someone as a purely private matter and by others as a « crime » requiring society as whole to « step in » (possibly via some

kind of legal punishment). Understanding processes of social problems' definition, selection and framing is therefore key to understanding conflict – and public (in-)action - in contemporary societies

Departing from a functionalist perspective understanding public policy as a merely rational, neutral response to solve objective « problems », the course will also analyze how « problems », once on the agenda of public authorities, are redesigned and reframed by those who are in charge of addressing them, be it via the choice of specific policy instruments or via decisions taken at the micro-level by bureaucrats in charge of the different « publics » involved. Drawing on a variety of examples taken from different eras, countries and policy areas, as well as on classical academic references, the course is meant as an introduction to the sociology of social problems and to the study of public policy-making more generally.

Learning objectives

1. Use the tools and questions of sociology in order to critically examine how certain situations, processes, behaviors or persons are labelled as problems (while others are not)
2. Evaluate « social problems » from different viewpoints and perspectives ; develop a comparative understanding of how social problems are constructed in different cultural and historical contexts
3. Critically assess, with the help of sociology, policy responses to issues defined as social problems (eg by analyzing how a specific definition or framing of a problem influences policy responses and vice versa)

Evaluation - *Assessment*

An oral presentation of maximum 20 minutes, with a list of references and a ppt presentation. In group of 3 (tbc).

Plan – Séances - *Course outline*

- Class 1. Analytical models and theories
- Class 2. Agenda-setting and agenda-exclusion
- Class 3. Framing : from social movements to social problems
- Class 4. Moral crusades, moral panics and urban legends
- Class 5. Science and expertise in the definition of social problems
- Class 6. “Solving” social problems: the impact of policy instruments
- Class 7. Street-level bureaucrats : neutral agents or policy entrepreneurs ?
- Class 8. Assessing public policies : from public administration to « new public management »
- Class 9. Towards the end of social problems ?

Bibliographie - Bibliography Selected readings

Becker, Howard (1966), *Social Problems. A modern approach*, New York, Wiley.

Benford, Robert D. and David A Snow (2000), "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–639.

Best, J. (eds) (2008), *Social problems*, New York, Norton.

Gusfield (J.) (1996), *Contested meanings. The construction of alcohol problems*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press...

Hilgartner, S and C Bosk (1988), « The rise and fall of public problems », *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(1), p.53-78.

Kitsuse, John and Malcolm Spector (1973), « Toward a Sociology of Social Problems: Social Conditions, Value-Judgments, and Social Problems », *Social Problems*, 20(4), p. 407-419.

Issacs, S (2017), *European Social Problems*, London, Routledge.

Emmanuel Henry (2021), *La fabrique des non-problèmes*, Presses de Sciences Po.

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Neveu, Erik (2015), *Sociologie politique des problèmes publics*, Paris, Armand Colin.

Spector, M and Kitsuse, J (1977), *Constructing social problems*, New York, De Gruyter.

Ritzer, G. (2009), *Handbook of social problems*, London, Sage.

Trevino, J (2018), *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems*, Cambridge University Press.