

# Problems, Crises, Events and Social Change: Theory and Illustrations

Constance A. Nathanson  
Department of Sociomedical Sciences  
Mailman School of Public Health  
Columbia University

## **Abstract**

This paper proposes a theory-based approach to the understanding of social change and illustrates that theory with examples from the history and politics of public health. Based in large part on the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (see in particular his *Islands of History* published in 1985) William Sewell Jr. has proposed an “eventful sociology.” In this work “event” is a term of art meaning occurrences in human affairs that result in social change. In this paper I further elaborate Sahlins’ and Sewell’s ideas, first by showing their connection with concepts that may be more familiar to sociologists and, second, by examining the contingent character of social change. Drawing on my own research on the history of public health, I argue that the transformation of “happenings” into events and of events into meaningful social change are highly contingent on the social and political context within which these events occur. More generally, I hope to show that “eventful” sociology is an exciting and productive approach to sociological analysis.