

The Societalization of Social Problems: Financial Crisis, Church Pedophilia, Phone Hacking

Abstract

This lecture develops a theory of “societalization,” briefly illustrating it with reference to three recent, globally significant upheavals – the financial crisis, church pedophilia, and media phone-hacking. Unstable financial practices, sexual abuse by priests, and phone-hacking by journalists had been endemic, regarded as routine within their own social spheres, perhaps unwelcome but not particularly remarkable. Each later became the subject of extraordinary social criticism, the practices seeming to threaten the moral fabric of the broader society. Reactions to social strains are normally handled by intra-institutional elites according to the cultural logics of their particular spheres. The boundaries between spheres can be breached and the “steady state” disrupted only if there is code switching. Rather than institutional logics, strains are interpreted according to the cultural logics of the civil sphere. When intra-institutional strains become interpreted as challenges to civil discourse and interests, there is societalization. Inter-sphere boundaries become tense and there is widespread anguish about social justice and the future of democratic society. New scripts transform strain into trauma, once admired institutional elites become represented as perpetrators and honorable citizens constructed as helpless victims. In such conditions, the civil sphere becomes intrusive; projecting symbolic pollution and promoting legal intervention, the newly energized civil sphere triggers state-sponsored institutional repairs that aim for civil purification. While initially contrite, institutional elites soon engage in backlash efforts to resist reform. A war of the spheres ensues and, eventually, there is movement back to steady state. No matter the extent of civil repair, societalization cannot prevent the future eruption of social strains. In a differentiated and plural society, tensions between spheres remains.