

# Social Justice and Activism

Martin Donohoe

# Am I Stoned?

A 1999 Utah anti-drug pamphlet warns:

“Danger signs that your child may be smoking marijuana include excessive preoccupation with social causes, race relations, and environmental issues”

# Rudolph Virchow

“Doctors are natural attorneys for the poor ... If medicine is to really accomplish its great task, it must intervene in political and social life...”

# Harvey Cushing

“A physician is obligated to consider more than a diseased organ, more even than the whole man. He must view the man in his world.”

# Important Contributions of Public Health

- Water and food safety
- Sanitation
- Vaccination
- Fluoridation
- Iodine supplementation of table salt
- Seat belts, air bags
- Bed nets for malaria prevention
- Barriers to decrease bridge suicides

# Poverty Worldwide

- 1.1 billion people lack access to safe, clean drinking water
  - 1.8 million child deaths/year
- 2 billion have no electricity
- 2.6 billion do not have adequate sanitation services
- Hunger kills 18,000 people per day, most under age 5





# U.S. Health Care

- Per capita expenditure on health care:
  - U.S. = \$4,000
  - Typical poor African/Asian country = \$5-50
- U.S.:
  - 46 million uninsured
  - 24<sup>th</sup> worldwide in overall population health as judged by disability-adjusted life expectancy
  - Boutique medicine, brain drain

Headline from The Onion

**Uninsured Man Hopes His  
Symptoms Diagnosed This  
Week On *House***

# Racial Disparities in Health Care: African-Americans

- Higher maternal and infant mortality
- Higher death rates for most diseases
- Shorter life expectancies
- Less health insurance
- Undergo fewer diagnostic tests /  
therapeutic procedures

# Racial Disparities in Health Care: African-Americans

- Equalizing the mortality rates of whites and African-Americans would have averted 686,202 deaths between 1991 and 2000
  - Whereas medical advances averted 176,633 deaths
    - AJPB 2004;94:2078-2081

# Women's Health

- Violence against women
- Access to reproductive health care
- Female genital cutting
- Political, legal, and educational marginalization

# Status of Women

- Economic discrimination
  - Women do 67% of the world's work
  - Receive 10% of global income
  - Own 1% of all property
- A woman in a developing country walks an average of 6 km/day to obtain water
- Heavy exposure to indoor biomass cooking stoves

# Environmental Degradation: Pollution

- Air pollution causes approximately 60,000 - 75,000 premature deaths/yr. in U.S., 1.8 million worldwide
- NAS: Pesticides in food could cause up to 1 million cancers in the current generation of Americans

# Air Pollution



# Air Pollution



# Environmental Degradation: Toxic Exposures

- 13,000-15,000 deaths per day worldwide from water-related diseases
- In developing countries, 90-95% of sewage and 70% of industrial wastes are dumped untreated into the local water supply
- 1 in 4 U.S. citizens lives within 4 miles of a Superfund site
- Lead and mercury exposure multi-billion dollar problems

# Water Pollution: Bathtub=Toilet=Source of Drinking Water



# Toxins: Minimata Disease - W Eugene Smith



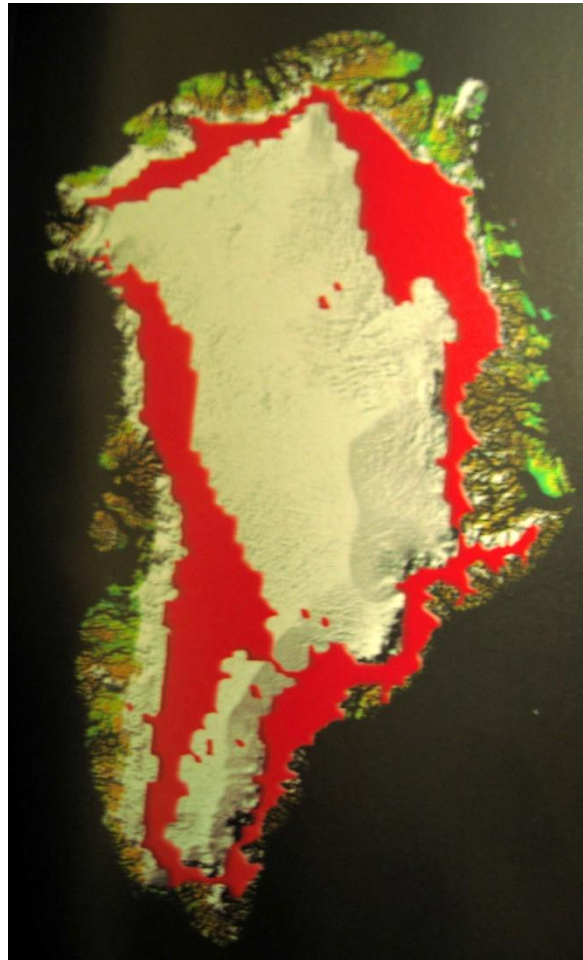
# Environmental Degradation: Deforestation



# Greenland's Ice Cap Melting: 1992



# Greenland's Ice Cap Melting: 2002



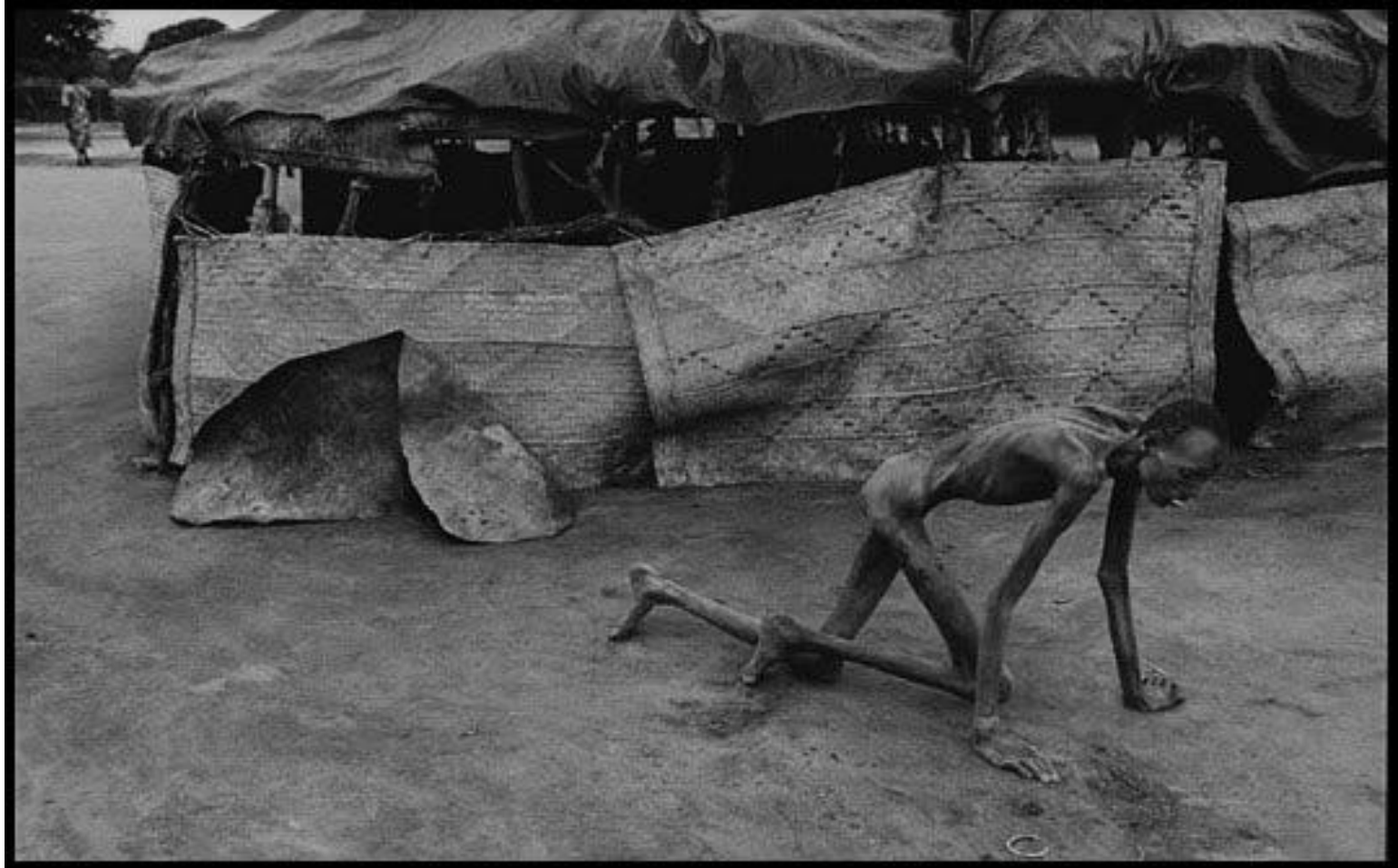
# Greenland's Ice Cap Melting: 2005



# Climate Change: Drought



# Famine



# Agriculture

- Commodification of world's food and water supply by corporations
- Spread of GMOs and Biopharming
- Factory farms
  - # 1 polluters of American waterways
- Agriculture accounts for 70% of U.S. antibiotic use
  - #1 contributor to food-borne, antibiotic-resistant infections (CDC)

# Factory Farming



# Overfishing: Factory Trawlers



# Dynamite Reef Fishing



# Environmental Degradation: Species Loss

- Lost Pharmacopoeia
  - More than 1/2 of the top 150 prescription drugs contain an active compound derived from or patterned after natural products
    - e.g. digoxin, vincristine, paralytic agents, etc.
- Of the more than 250,000 known flowering species, <0.5% have been surveyed for medicinal value

# A Cure for Cancer?



# Social Justice Issues

- Maldistribution of wealth
- Overconsumption (“affluenza”)
- Rise of the corporation
  - 53 of the world’s 100 largest economies are private corporations; 47 are countries
- Minimum wage  $\neq$  Living wage
- Third World debt crisis
- Human rights abuses

# Maldistribution of Wealth

- U.S: Richest 1% of the population owns 50% of the country's wealth; poorest 90% own 30%
  - Widest gap of any industrialized nation

# Maldistribution of Wealth

- Less than 4% of the combined wealth of the 225 richest individuals in the world would pay for ongoing access to basic education, health care, adequate food, safe water, and adequate sanitation for all humans (UNDP)

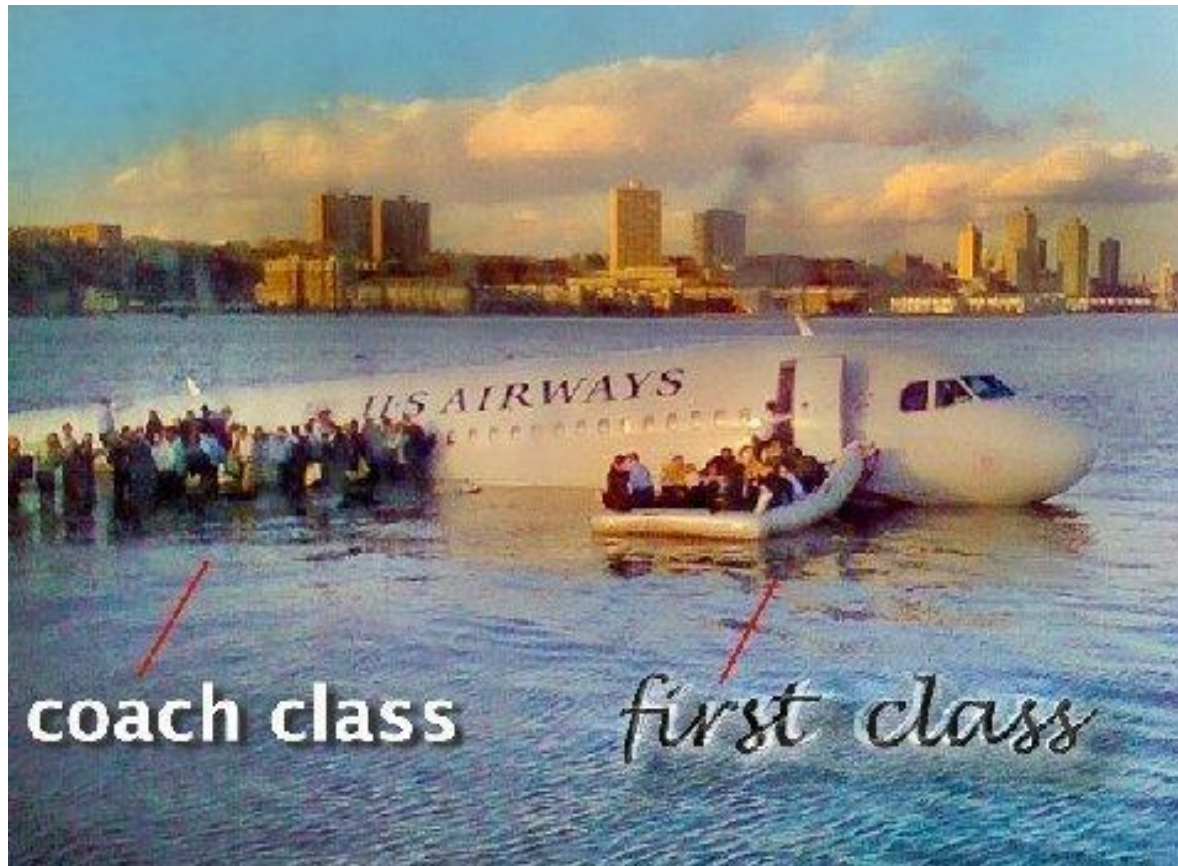
# Overconsumption (“Affluenza”)

- U.S. = 6.3% of world’s population
  - Owns 50% of the world’s wealth
- U.S. responsible for:
  - 25% of world’s energy consumption
  - 33% of paper use
  - 72% of hazardous waste production

George Orwell

“Some people are more equal  
than others”

# Hudson River, 2009



# Voltaire

“The comfort of the rich rests  
upon an abundance of the  
poor”

# New Remote Control Can Be Operated By Remote

No more leaning forward to get remote from coffee table means greater convenience for TV viewers





# Primo Levi

“A country is considered the more civilized the more the wisdom and efficiency of its laws hinder a weak man from becoming too weak or a powerful one too powerful.”

# War and Militarism

- Diversion of economic resources and intellectual capital
- Military = world's largest polluter
- Prejudice/hate crimes
- Erosion of civil liberties
- Weapons of mass destruction

# The Military: Diversion of Resources Away from Health Care

- 3 hours world arms spending = annual WHO budget
- 3 weeks of world arms spending/yr. = primary health care for all in poor countries, incl. safe water and full immunizations

# War and Peace

- World military budget = \$1,232 billion in 2006
  - 228X what the UN spent on peacekeeping
- US:
  - Largest military budget, largest arms supplier
  - Greatest debtor to UN peacekeeping fund

“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.”

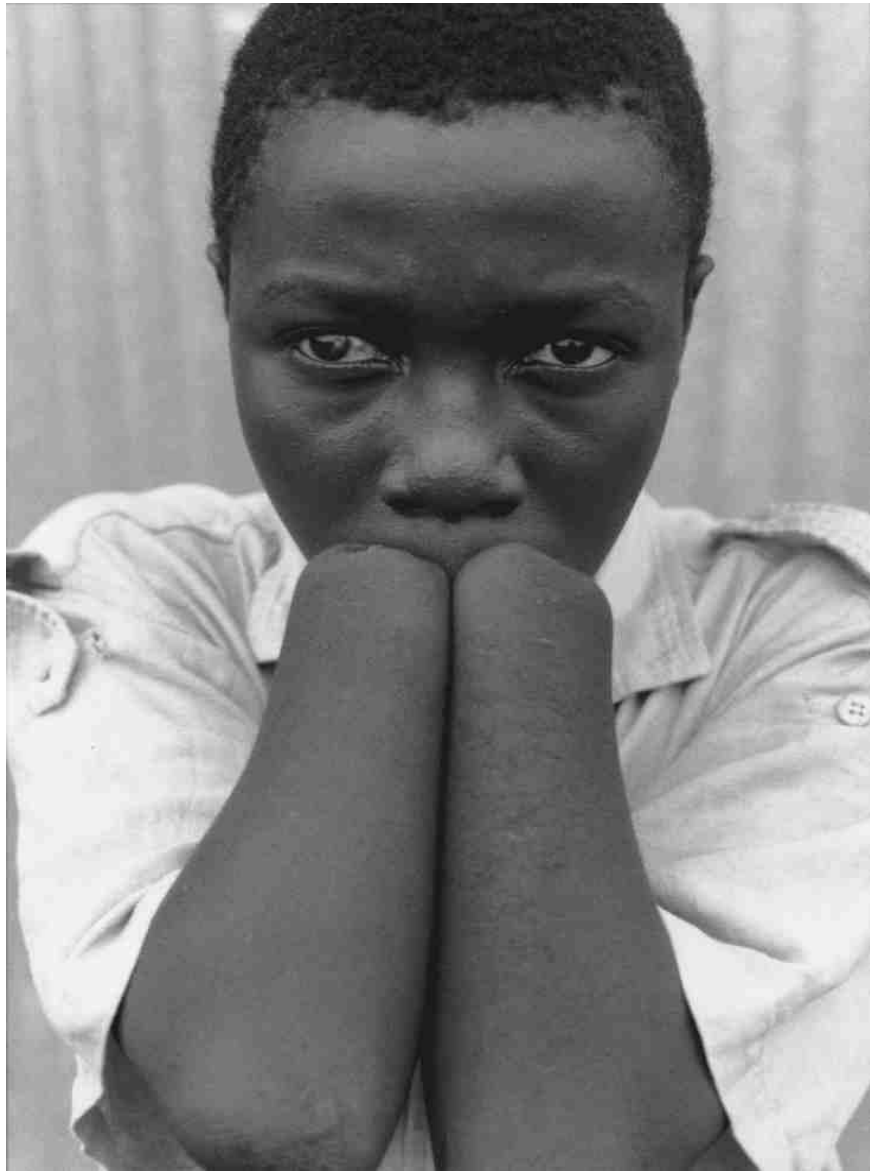
~ Dwight D. Eisenhower













# Kuwaiti Oil Fires – Gulf War I







# Impediments to Public Health and Social Justice

- Political climate
- Scientific Ignorance
- Pseudoscience
- Damaged educational system
- The corporate media
  
- All lead to the decline of democracy

# Bush Administration

- Key administrators/committee members/regulators former industry representatives and/or lobbyists
- Privatization of public services
  - Corporate profit before public good
- Unsound/distorted/suppressed science

# Bush Administration

- Rollbacks of key environmental laws
- Lax enforcement of existing laws
- Huge tax cuts primarily benefit wealthy
- Federal and state government deficits astronomical
  - Program and funding cuts
- Trade deficit increasing
- Obama Administration – Significant changes(?)

# Bush Vows To Remove Toxic Petroleum From National Parks



# Would You Sign a Petition to Ban Dihydrogen Monoxide?

1. It can cause excessive sweating and vomiting
2. It is a major component in acid rain
3. It can cause severe burns in its gaseous state
4. It can kill you if accidentally inhaled
5. It contributes to erosion
6. It decreases effectiveness of automobile brakes
7. It has been found in tumors of terminal cancer patients

# Environmental and Geographic Ignorance

- A majority of Americans believe that electricity in the U.S. is produced in nonpolluting ways
  - 25% knew that majority (70%) comes from oil, coal and wood
- Percent of US teens unable to locate the following on a map:
  - United States – 11%
  - Pacific Ocean – 29%
  - Japan – 58%

# Contributors to Poor Education

- U.S. public education system in disarray
- Mass media consolidation, corporate influence

# Global Warming: Controversial?

- Of 928 articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals, 0% were in doubt as to the existence or cause of global warming
- Of 636 articles in the popular press (NY Times, Washington Post, LA Times, WSJ), 53% expressed doubt as to the existence (and primary cause) of global warming

*Science 2004;306:1686-7  
(Study covers 1993-2003)*

# Global Warming

- Causes estimated 160,000 deaths and 5.5 million disability-adjusted life years lost per year
  - WHO, UN Environment Program

# The Corporate Response: Miseducation

- Greenwash
- Astrofurfing
- Corporate Front Groups
- Selective Publication/Secrecy
- Support of marginal “scientists”

# Lobbying

- 38,000 full-time lobbyists in Washington, DC
- Lobbying groups spent just under 2.5 billion in 2006 (record)
- All single issue ideological groups combined (e.g., pro-choice, anti-abortion, feminist and consumer organizations, senior citizens, etc.) = \$76.2 million

# Corporate-Sponsored Environmental Education Materials

- Exxon's "Energy Cube"
  - "Gasoline is simply solar power hidden in decayed matter"
  - "Offshore drilling creates reefs for fish"
- American Nuclear Society's "Activities with the Atoms Family"
- Dow's "Chemipalooza"

# Advertising

- Record \$570 billion spent on advertising in 2005
  - 11X greater than in 1950
  - Half in US
- The average American can recognize over 1,000 corporate logos, but fewer than 10 plants and animals native to his/her locality

# Television

- The average American youth spends 900 hrs/yr in school, 1,500 hrs/yr watching TV
- By age 65, the average American will have spent 9 yrs watching TV
- Contributor to obesity epidemic

# Ignorance vs. Democracy

“Information is the currency of  
democracy”

–Thomas Jefferson

# The Decline of Democracy

- True democracy demands an informed citizenry (education), freedom of the press (media), and involvement (will, time, money)

# The Good News

- Rebirth of public health
- Political engagement of college freshman at all-time high
- International Treaties
- But problems are urgent....

# The “Benefits” of Sterility-Causing Chemicals in the Workplace?

12 September 1977

Dr. Eula Bingham, Assistant Secretary for Occupational Safety and Health  
[Regarding] worker exposure to DBCP.

While involuntary sterility caused by a manufactured chemical may be bad, it is not necessarily so. After all, there are many people who are now paying to have themselves sterilized to assure they will no longer be able to become parents...

If possible sterility is the main problem, couldn't workers who were old enough that they no longer wanted to have children accept such positions voluntarily? Or...some [workers] might volunteer for such workposts as an alternative to planned surgery for a vasectomy or tubal ligation, or as a means of getting around religious bans on birth control when they want no more children?

Sincerely,

Robert K. Phillips, National Peach Council

# What you can do

- Explore the history of medicine and nursing
  - Respect
  - Question dogma: “The least questioned assumptions are often the most questionable” – Paul Broca
- Read great literature
  - Patients illnesses are stories
  - Take patient’s perspective
- Develop a public health-oriented perspective in care of patients
- Find your passion

# What you can do

- Become active in an organization
- Educate yourself
- Educate your students and your patients
- Use the media
- Volunteer, do pro bono work
  - Satisfies your debt to society
  - Feeds your soul
- Run for office

# Contemporary Activist Organizations

- Physicians for Social Responsibility, Physicians for Human Rights
- Union of Concerned Scientists, Public Citizen's Health Research Group
- Amnesty International, Oxfam
- PNHP
- HCWH, NRDC, ED, Greenpeace, Sierra Club, No Dirty Gold, PANNA
- NARAL, Planned Parenthood
- Others

# “First they came for the Jews” by Pastor Niemoller

“First they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up, for I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the communists, and I did not speak up for I was not a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up, for I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak up for me.”

Anita Roddick

"If you think you are too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito in your tent"

# Contact Information

## Public Health and Social Justice Website

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