



## **The promise of public sociology**

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Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address to the 2005 ASA meeting was an extraordinary event. There was a buzz of excitement, the culmination of a week of high energy discussions of 'public sociology', and the product also of a year in which Burawoy had criss-crossed the USA speaking to dozens of groups and urging those who often give the ASA a pass in favour of local or activist meetings to come to San Francisco. The excitement was fueled also by a sense of renewed engagement with the reasons many – especially of the baby boom and 1960s generations – had chosen to become sociologists in the first place. A ballroom with seating for several thousand was filled to overflowing (I arrived early yet had to stand in the back). The talk ran to nearly twice the allotted time but few left. And at the end, teams of Berkeley students wearing black T-shirts proclaiming Marx 'the first public sociologist' roamed the aisles to collect questions.

The excitement was not a fluke, but reflected a coincidence of good timing with shrewd recognition of the enduring commitments and desires of many sociologists. Sociologists found not only found their activism encouraged but their self-respect buoyed. And indeed, there was more than a little self-affirmation in the air. To be sure, there were also grumblings from some, especially older white male and highly professional sociologists. But most even of these found much to enjoy in the exuberance of the moment – and the sheer organizational and mobilizing success of the record-setting annual meeting. 'Public sociology' was a hit. But what is public sociology as an enduring project?

The stakes of the question are large, not just because there is a current fad for the phrase, but because how sociology matters in the public sphere is vital to the future of the field. Michael Burawoy has done a considerable service by putting public sociology on the disciplinary agenda more forcefully than anyone else since C. Wright Mills, joining Herb Gans, who helped to popularize the phrase and enlarging the project (Gans 2002). I support the project. But I would raise some questions about the formulation.

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To start with, is public sociology a ‘quadrant’? Burawoy employs Bourdieusian language to describe sociology as a ‘field of force’ but he doesn’t really offer a systematic or satisfying field analysis and I fear his two by two table is much more Parsonian. I mean (a) that it compartmentalizes and to some extent essentializes four alleged ‘types’ of sociology (although Burawoy does then assert that they overlap and inform each other), and (b) it is not clear about the dimensions or axes of variation and contention that organize the field.

Following Bourdieu, for example, one might have thought that some sort of distinction of economic from cultural capital might be at work in organizing the field of sociology. Critical theory and mathematical modeling would both probably appear on the cultural side of such a continuum of forms of capital, while large scale surveys and business consulting might both appear on the economic side. But trying simply to place styles of work in such broad terms would have limited purchase. It might be more interesting to compare the placement of an ‘established big ESRC Centre’, ‘published widely cited book’, ‘elected fellow of British Academy’, and ‘consulted for local arts council’ as items from CVs. Likewise, one might have thought that having much or little capital would matter, not just the kind of sociology one professed.

Part of the feel-good populism of Burawoy’s message is expressed in its affirmation of the superior virtue of non-elite public sociologists, compared to elites who are overly professional. He’s not all wrong about the limits of professionalism and the exciting work being done by non-elites, but I think he is misleading in so far as he does not recognize more fully their interdependence (or more reflexively that however much he speaks as the voice of the masses he speaks also as a professor at America’s top sociology department, one very professionally determined to place his students in other top departments, emphatic that they should publish in the most professionally prestigious journals, etc.). In other words, the distribution of capital within the field is very important, and a ‘professional’ attitude towards accumulating and deploying it need not coincide with a ‘professional’ stance against critique or public engagement.

I raise these points not just in pursuit of a better analysis of the field of sociology, which was after all only incidental to Burawoy’s purpose, but to question the value of dividing up the field the way he does. I too want sociology to engage and be informed by the concerns of many publics, shape debates in the public sphere, and demonstrate its public worth. But I think these are tasks for sociology in general, not for a specialized subfield or quadrant.

There’s more. I worry that assigning concerns over autonomy to ‘professional’ and ‘critical’ sociology implies that they don’t arise for all sociologists and aren’t basic to the very existence of a field. To be sure autonomy can be pursued at the expense of relevance, interest, and exciting engagements with other perspectives. But it is not only pursued for bad reasons. Partial

autonomy is the condition for transcending the mere play of opinions and clash of powers. A scientific field that did not achieve some capacity for autonomous judgment, that was merely heteronomously controlled by others would not merely lack authority, but lack credibility. To have a sociologist working for the trade union movement say one thing and a sociologist working for employers say another might be helpful, but it would not be the same thing as being able to say that the evidence and arguments reviewed and debated in the field at large make for credible knowledge, not merely sociologically informed opinion.

Something like this is at stake in Bourdieu's invocation of the notion that sociologists might be the 'organic intellectuals of humanity at large'. Burawoy cites this, but seems to miss the sense in which Bourdieu, as he liked to say, quoting Mao, 'twisted the stick in the other direction'. The organic intellectuals of humanity at large are precisely not the representatives of one sectional interest within humanity, not even a vanguard class or civil society vs. market and state. Bourdieu's reference points to the importance of a sociology that does not simply take the standpoint of particular groups but rather provides an arena in which sense can be made of the competition and collaboration among them all. It is part of Bourdieu's affirmation of science as a field socially organized to give participants an interest in the universal.

To be sure, Burawoy does not want to do away with 'professional sociology' nor even 'policy sociology'. He warns us that 'from within each category we tend to essentialize, homogenize, and stereotype the others'. But he doesn't escape the tendency, and his model of a division of labour exaggerates the discreteness of the four. For example, he suggests that 'without a professional sociology, there can be no . . . critical sociology – for there would nothing to criticize'. This presumes, however, that critical sociology exists only to criticize other forms of sociology – rather than, as Horkheimer suggested, to take a critical instead of an affirmative stance towards the existing arrangements of social life. Surely we don't want to have a professional sociology that uses the most sophisticated research techniques, publishes in the most selective journals, is taught in the most prestigious departments but is marred by an uncritically affirmative stance towards actually existing social institutions, treating them as necessary rather than the contingent products of power, history and human action? Surely we want sociology in general to be critical, not simply of itself but also of the limits of various intellectual traditions and institutional formations. I don't mean to deny that division of labour is likely, that critically probing the implications of specific analytic categories is not likely to engage all researchers as much as some theorists. But I do mean to suggest some distinctions among sociologists are not signs of a healthy division of labour so much as of problems we should overcome.

Burawoy's treatment of critical sociology is generally odd. This may be because behind his public sociology agenda is an effort to reposition Marxist

sociology. He is rightly worried by a version of academic Marxism that atrophied as it lost connections with social movements after the 1970s. But how many critical sociologists today would recognize themselves as the upholders of 'foundational knowledge' against the research programmes of professional sociology, the concrete knowledge policy sociologists deliver to clients, and the communicative knowledge public sociologists exchange with their publics? Surely, indeed, part of what sociology brings to public discourse is greater capacity for critical analysis: of the possibilities open beyond existing circumstances, of the social conditions for realizing those possibilities, of the interests served by existing institutions, and of the reasons for the blindspots in many intellectual arguments.

While I think Burawoy's distinction of sociology written for other sociologists (either professional or critical) and sociology produced (not always in writing) for non-sociologists (publics or policy-making clients) is useful, I would add three qualifications – or maybe they are just elaborations. First, it is important to remember that there is much work that defies the distinctions pure and applied. This is true of the natural sciences as well (and Burawoy's characterization of them as essentially 'instrumental' strikes me as tendentious).<sup>1</sup> As Stokes (1997) has reminded us, using the example of Pasteur, much great science has been at once an effort to solve practical problems and the source of basic new knowledge. Second, there is in much 'professional' sociology a fetishism of the original, based on a crude empiricist notion of the progress of science. This often values a trivial new finding over a significant reframing or synthesis of knowledge. It is thus a problem inside professional sociology as well as an impediment to valuing communication with broader publics (or students) as we should. Third, one of the most basic conditions of a publicly valuable sociology is taking public significance into account in problem choice. That is, we need to worry not just about how well or poorly our scientific findings are communicated, but about what we should study. It is shocking that there is not more sociology centrally focused on global inequality, on HIV/AIDS, on humanitarian emergencies, on the growing integration and other transformations of Asia, etc.

Burawoy sees sociology moving leftward while the world it studies has moved rightward over the last half century. The pattern seems to me a bit more complex. First, a half century ago the USA was just coming out of the McCarthy era, French colonialism was just being defeated in Vietnam and had not yet suffered the debacle of Algeria, Anthony Eden was Britain's Prime Minister and the Suez crisis loomed. The reigning sociologists of the era were for the most part liberal by comparison to more conservative political leaders – even if some of them would be later be seen as 'mere liberals' in the eyes of 1960s radicals. Even those behind the rise of ever more sophisticated quantitative methods in American sociology were mostly more liberal than the US electorate. The politics of the 1960s and early 1970s did not simply mark

a 'leftward drift', they rearranged the dominant political oppositions. Perhaps most importantly, they challenged the notion of protecting the academy from politics, asserting that this masked a tacit affirmation of the existing order, and made universities the locus of a new politics. How much this aligned with or supported progressive (or any other) politics beyond universities is an open question. With generational succession and as sociology became more inclusive, I think it did very likely become more critical of established institutions – on average – but the criticism was also largely 'domesticated' within academe, and focused on questions of inclusion within established institutions rather than the nature and potential transformation of institutions and structures of power.

At the same time, from the late 1970s, there was arguably a turn away from critical perspectives and progressive politics in the rich societies more generally. As sociology and the Left faltered, business schools, mathematical economics and the Right grew. This pattern was especially prominent in the USA. Though sociology and higher education generally saw hard times in the late 1970s and 1980s, the difficulties were nowhere near as severe as those occasioned by Margaret Thatcher's attacks in Britain. That there actually *was* a job market meant that it could exercise more discipline on the intellectual choices of aspirants. This period marked the most decisive ascendancy of quantitative empiricism, and with it a reassertion of 'professional' rather than 'political' values.<sup>2</sup> It also brought a clearer division between those with aspirations to scientific status and relatively formalistic notions of how science worked, on the one hand, and those promoting more critical perspectives.

More generally, both external economic pressures and changes in the organization of academic work have an enormous effect on sociology. Undergraduates – and indeed postgraduates – seeking courses of study that translate readily into good employment prospects challenge traditions of more open-ended inquiry, critical scholarship, and indeed public sociology. Professionalism is not simply a stylistic choice, in other words, but the product of pressures that work on the field as a whole. Shifts in funding streams are also powerful. Burawoy rightly notes how economic pressures and intensified competition among universities have been met with marketization and that this poses real challenges to the idea of the university as a public good. The picture is somewhat different in Britain, where the RAE looms large, though markets are not insignificant and may well become much more so. Even in the USA, though, marketization is only part of the story. Yes, fee-paying students matter a lot, but the academic hierarchy is structured at least as much by tax-exempt transfers of private wealth – gifts that go mostly to already rich institutions. Harvard's endowment of well over \$20 billion is a source of enormous power in the academic marketplace. This isn't the place to explore it, but a theme that ought to loom larger in the work of all sociologists (critical, professional, policy, and public) is the transformation in the social bases for science and

knowledge and especially the implications of the transformation of the university for the very existence and character of sociology.

Sociology will, I think, be very different if the ideal of the university as a public institution is not sustained. This is not only a matter of state vs. private funding, of course, but also of academic norms, of state regulation as distinct from funding, or the institutional forms private philanthropy takes on. We need to ask a whole complex of questions about what it means to serve the public good, how vital public communication is to this, and how different kinds of institutional supports shape both public communication within the community of scientists and communication between scientists and broader publics. The need for a stronger sociology of publics which Burawoy mentions (and which I endorse and even hope I help along) is vital not only for the project of understanding the other arenas into which sociology may be introduced, but the contexts of our own work. Good 'professional' sociology is sustained not simply by formalized peer review at journals or funding agencies, but by a vital public communication among sociologists in which theories, methods, findings, and arguments can be debated. Indeed, peer review often limits debate, not least when it focuses more on the avoidance of errors than on the interest of arguments, but also when it encourages substituting an apparently neutral abstract scale of 'quality' for a more multifaceted and open engagement with different ideas.

Peirce's famous dictum that truth is what the community of scientists believes based on research, communication, and criticism depends on the existence of both scientific communities and strong norms of publicity among scientists. Merton's notion of the normative ethos and reward system of science (codified as CUDOS) and Bourdieu's notion of fields that instill in their participants an interest in the universal both elaborate related ideas.<sup>3</sup> And so, the fate of sociology in general and publicness as one of its desiderata, depend on the fate of universities, of publishing, of the Internet, and of funding. And while like Burawoy I am encouraged by much in sociology today, I am also worried that some of these institutional supports are endangered and sociologists are doing less than we could to understand the challenges.

In this context, Burawoy makes a good point about the importance of what he calls 'organic' public sociology. It is a reflection of our scholastic bias that we tend to recognize writing for wide readerships – even if we do not always value it as much as writing for refereed journals – more than we recognize connections not mediated mainly by publication. But it is worth asking not only about sociologists' connections to social movements, but about how much or how little such movements sustain extra-academic or at least extra-disciplinary intellectual publics. When I lived in Britain in the 1970s, Marxism anchored such a public; does it to the same extent today? So too some interdisciplinary communities much shaped by Marxism – like the new social history and cultural studies – sustained journals and conferences and markets

for books. Feminism flourished both as an interdisciplinary academic field and in non-academic intellectual discourse – as well as in practical movement politics. And such fields actually recall early sociology, in which the development of research and theory bearing on social problems proceeded at once inside and outside the academy. Influencing policy-makers, organizing actual institutional administration, animating public debate, and simply trying to understand what was going on were all intertwined – in Fabian socialism, in the labour movement, in Christian reform, in the struggles to develop decent social welfare institutions. With luck Burawoy will help us reclaim more of this heritage. But to understand what changed, we need to analyse not only phases in sociologists' tastes for different kinds of work, but changes in the institutional landscape: the growth of universities and mass higher education generally; the rise of foundations (especially in the USA) and government funders,<sup>4</sup> the flourishing and now serious problems of university presses, etc.

In his final 'thesis', Burawoy urges sociologists to take the 'standpoint' of civil society. I have previously voiced some concern over standpoint epistemologies (Calhoun 1995: ch. 6). Sociology (like other knowledge) is certainly socially situated, perspectives are shaped by social locations, and the production of knowledge depends on social conditions. But taking the idea of field seriously, one should question whether any one substantive location or commitment gives epistemological privilege. Beyond this, I worry about a fetishization of 'civil society'. The term came into vogue in the 1980s, as the heritage of the Scottish moralists was claimed for specific purposes first by East European activists and then by American foundations. The phrase 'civil society' was quickly deployed as a mongoose to kill all manner of theoretical snakes. It was also articulated in ways that exaggerate the meaningful distinctions among state, market, and the 'rest' of society. Burawoy's usage replicates this. I don't mean that there is nothing meaningfully called 'civil' society, or that we shouldn't wish to defend the 'social'. But I do mean that we should be arguing that state and market *are* social. Burawoy, for example, describes political parties and trade unions as 'outside both state and economy'. I think it is more than quibbling over phraseology to suggest critically that we should be working hard to overcome the ideological division of state, economy, and civil society that is mirrored in (and helped give rise to) the academic division of political science, economics, and sociology. These are not three distinct self-regulated, self-reproducing systems. There may be some varying level of partial autonomy, but this is a matter for empirical study not definitional presumption.

Should we fight back against market and state unilateralism on behalf of voluntary associations? No doubt. But surely if we are interested in institutions like the public university; we would not want to say that universities created in some separate sort of civil society by means of philanthropy and contract are intrinsically better or more proper to sociology than those

financed by the state. And surely we are interested in the enormous amount of people's lives spent at work, often in corporations, associating with each other in ways both voluntary and mandated but not in a separate realm of associational life. If part of what we want to defend is the possibility of a vibrant public sphere in which ordinary people are able to make informed and considered decisions about the social conditions under which they live, then we need a public sociology that articulates the possibilities of a better state, a better market, and better civil society.

But let me end without picking more quarrels with Burawoy. Most of these are over conceptual categories and matters of tactics. We are in accord on broad purposes. Burawoy's call for more public sociology is important and timely. I have tried to urge some differences in approach, but like all sociologists seeking at once the ever-greater intellectual vitality for the field and a richer public life informed by sociology, I am in his debt.

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## Notes

1. I don't propose to take up Burawoy's characterizations of other disciplines or of relations among disciplines here. I would note, though, that there seem to me more challenges to disciplinary autonomy than he recognizes, and more legitimacy to critiques of the fetishism of disciplines than he allows. Burawoy introduces a second fourfold table to describe relations among disciplines: cross-disciplinary borrowing, trans-disciplinary infusion, multi-disciplinary collaboration, and joint-disciplinary coordination. These all arguably exist, but seem to me (a) not to exhaust the nature of border-crossings, and (b) to presume that the integrity of disciplines is substantive, real, basic to the work in question, and not transformed by the work.

2. Burawoy's classification of 'neo-institutionalists' as a counter-movement against the generally critical drift of sociology needs to be seen in this context, I think, and perhaps taken with a grain of salt. It does reflect the neo-institutionalists' professional project (although they were and are not all quantitative), the frequency of their movement from sociology departments to business schools, and their specific avoid-

ance of Marxism and political economy. This was in fact probably the 'hottest' intellectual current in elite American sociology during the time period that Burawoy describes a general drift towards more critical perspectives, and that may itself say something about divisions in the field.

3. CUDOS is the acronym for communist, universalist, disinterested, original, and skeptical, features Merton (1973, reprinting articles from 1942 and 1957) argued were not merely individual attitudes but norms reinforced by the specific reward system of science. Ziman (2000) suggested that these were the norms of academic science in its golden age, perhaps, but that the real science of today is more proprietary. The question I want to raise is not how to characterize science in general, but how to understand the influences of institutional settings on the kinds of sociology we may produce.

4. It's striking that while Burawoy notes the role of philanthropic foundations in producing a 'second phase' of policy sociology he doesn't mention the National Science Foundation and government funding which was crucial to the postwar development of both policy and professional sociology. I



suspect he also overestimates the role of corporate funding. But the importance of funding is the central concern of Turner

and Turner (1990) not, as Burawoy implies, the dominance of political forces over sociology.

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