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Public sociology: Mills vs. Gramsci

Introduction to the Italian Translation of “For Public Sociology”

by Michael Burawoy

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In 1990 I visited South Africa to address the South African Sociological Association on the strange fate of socialism in Eastern Europe. It was the first time I had been there since 1968. How it had changed! These were exciting times in South Africa, the culmination of a century of struggles against white rule. The excitement was reflected in the sociology that was on display – a sociology engaged with the burgeoning labor and civic struggles that would topple the apartheid regime. And the engagement with those struggles, whether directly or at a distance, generated new vistas for sociology. I think here of the new understandings of race and class, gender and militarism, labor and social movements. How different was this gathering of several hundred from the meetings of the four or five thousand sociologists at the American Sociological Association – the one a public sociology, devoted to immediate public issues, the other hyper-professionalized, framed by preexisting paradigms and accountable only to peers. My visit there put US sociology into perspective! It inspired what I call “public sociology.”

In subsequent visits to South Africa I presented my theses on public sociology. Even though South Africa was its inspiration, my audience looked at me whimsically: What is this public sociology – Isn't all sociology public? Why do we need the qualifier “public”? Indeed, perhaps, only in the context of a strong professional sociology do we need to develop the idea of a “public sociology.” Professional sociology generates its own counter-movement, its own counter-utopia, a sociology that involves dialogue with publics rather than peers, whose truth is measured by consensus rather than correspondence to the world, whose legitimacy is measured by relevance rather than scientific norms, whose politics involves public debate rather

than the pursuit of professional self-interest, whose pathologies are populism and vanguardism rather than professional self-referentiality. A powerful professional sociology, therefore, compels us to think through and map out the meaning and possibilities of its other – public sociology.

Even in the United States, public sociology is not an abstract but a real utopia. Here I take some license with the Gramscian distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. Thus, speaks to publics from on high as in such classic works as David Riesman's , and Gunnar Myrdal's or more recently Robert Bellah 's , William Julius Wilson's and Arlie Hochschild's These books public debate, and raised public consciousness about public issues. They work through various media – radio, print, film, electronic – that easily distort the original message. , on the other hand, involves an unmediated dialogue between sociologists and their publics, taking place in the trenches of civil society. He we find publics that are more local, thicker, more active, and oppositional, a direct engagement with labor movements, oppressed minorities, prisoners, lawyers, or even global NGOs, etc.

We can trace public sociology back to C. Wright Mills, who famously defined the sociological imagination as linking personal troubles to public issues, the foundation of a sociology for publics. Mills cast the sociological imagination in opposition to the professionalization of the time – grand theory (structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons) and abstracted empiricism (market and opinion research of Paul Lazarsfeld). Harking back to the classics Mills propounded the craftworker as the ideal sociologist – an isolated monad bringing together theory and empirical research, and tying social milieu to social structure, micro to macro. From a Gramscian perspective Mills's isolationism is an absurd self-deception, a symbolic last stand against the advancing (di)vision of sociological labor – a division of labor composed of .

This division of sociological labor is inescapable but it also holds potentialities of its own, potentialities of collective engagement that the individualistic Mills did not recognize. Let us explore the synergy among the four elements that compose the division of sociological labor. While it emerged world-historically, the division of sociological labor has a universal character in that it rests on two fundamental questions: Sociology for Whom? (for ourselves or for others), and Sociology for What? (concerned with orienting means to given ends or concerned with the discussion of ends or values themselves). Professional and policy sociologies are instrumental knowledges, linking means to given ends – the one, puzzle solving oriented to fellow sociologists and the other, problem solving, oriented to clients. Critical and public sociologies are reflexive knowledges – the one oriented to dialogue about value foundations of sociology and the other to the value foundations of society.

As with any division of labor we find a relation of domination in which, for example, in the United States, professional and policy sociology dominates critical and public sociologies. At other times and in other places the configuration is very different. There is nothing normal or normative about the American division of sociological labor. Indeed, even within in the United States at different places within our discipline the configuration looks different. Historically, too, we might say that US sociology began as a public sociology, and only with a growing professionalization did it spawn a policy sociology, which, in turn, generated a critical sociology, laying the foundation for today's return to public sociology. Like it or not, we cannot escape the existence of a division of labor by returning to a past that has been superceded. Romanticizing the craftworker and pathologizing everything else is a . Those who seek to valorize critical and public sociology, as Mills did, must work on the terrain of the existing division of labor and, in the case of the US, the hegemony of professional and policy sociology. In other countries, such as France, public sociology is more hegemonic and professional sociology has to be valorized.

Underlying the postulate of the division of sociological labor is the belief that a vibrant discipline depends on the synergy of all four sociologies. To the extent that any one type of sociological knowledge cuts itself off from the others, it takes on a pathological form to the disadvantage of all. Thus, while public and professional sociology are antagonistic they are also interdependent – there can be no public sociology without a professional sociology just as the development of professional sociology depends on public sociology.

In broad outline this was the message I took from one end of the United States to the other when I was President of the American Sociological Association, from elite universities to community colleges, from regional to state associations, culminating in the 2004 annual meeting of the ASA in San Francisco, with a record attendance of nearly 5,500 registrants. We brought to San Francisco all sorts of public intellectuals and public sociologists from all over the world. The meetings opened with an electrifying panel on W.E.B. DuBois, perhaps the greatest American public sociologist of the Twentieth century, then we had an evening address from Mary Robinson (former President of Ireland, Former High-Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations) on pressing problems of human rights, from Arundhati Roy (world renown Indian intellectual and activist) who spoke on “Public Power in the Age of Globalization.” We closed with a debate between Fernando Henrique Cardoso (two-time President of Brazil) and Paul Krugman (Princeton economist and acerbic columnist for) on the future of neoliberalism. We were bringing public debate into the venue of our meetings. This was but the tip of the iceberg. Two further plenaries and sixty thematic sessions considered how sociology could be taken out to publics.

The meetings exuded an unprecedented excitement about the public possibilities of sociology, impelled by a sense of foreboding about the direction of US society and role of the US state in the world. After all, this was a year into the US occupation of Iraq, and the American Sociological Association had been one of the very few organizations to openly declare its opposition to the war. Alain Touraine, attending the 2004 meetings, exclaimed: “Bush is good for Public Sociology!”

Inevitably, the excitement around public sociology has led to a reaction. There have been debates in many journals: *Social Problems*, *Social Forces*, *The American Sociologist*, *Socio-Economic Review*, *Critical Sociology*, *The British Journal of Sociology*, *Soziale Welt* (Germany), *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* (Hong Kong), *Replika* (Hungary), and *Society in Transition* (South Africa). Three books have already appeared: *The Public Sociologies Reader* edited by Judith Blau and Keri Iyall Smith, *Public Sociology: The Contemporary Debate* edited by Larry Nichols, and *Public Sociology: Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-First Century* edited by Dan Clawson et al.

The idea of a synergistic relation among the four types of sociological knowledge has brought criticism from all quarters. Professional sociologists claim that sociology is not ready for a public role, or its objectivity will be compromised by public engagement, or, being a true science, sociology is simply inimical to public engagement. Policy sociologists are perturbed by what they see as the politicization of sociology undermining their legitimacy with their clients. Critical sociologists maintain that professional sociology is far too narrow and conservative to provide the basis of a public sociology, while many public sociologists consider professional sociology a dangerous contamination of and debilitating constraint on public engagement. Predictably each type of sociologist valorizes their own type of knowledge-practice, and they do so by pathologizing the others. If it cannot destroy the calumniated other, then each knowledge-practice seeks to bring others under its own hegemony. Professional sociologists want to control public engagement, denying it autonomy; public sociologists want professional sociology to serve their ends. In the that ensued, with everyone weighing in with their interests, the unintended consequence is to affirm contours of the division of sociological labor. The struggle for sociology becomes, as Bourdieu would say, a classification struggle over its vision and division, the balance among its four elements.

So much for the context of the production of public sociology and the debate it aroused but what about the context of reception? Let us return to C. Wright Mills, who distinguishes the public sociologist, on the one side, from the “philosopher king,” or what we might call the total intellectual who pronounces on everything under the sun, and, on the other side, from the “advisor to the prince,” the servants

of power and the experts that he so reviled. For him, therefore, the public sociologist was an “independent intellectual” (corresponding to the scientist as craftworker) who spoke “to publics and at kings.” In this endeavor he was most effective with a succession of widely read books, aimed at bringing sociological insight into public debate, (1948) on labor leaders, (1951) on the new middle class, (1956) on the highest ruling circles, (1958) on the dangers of the military industrial complex, and (1960) on the Cuban Revolution. If Mills was successful in bringing sociology into the public arena, we must acknowledge how difficult such an enterprise was and is, competing with the messages of other disciplines (such as economics and political science), competing with journalists with more immediate access to the media, competing for the attention of audiences that are not only not accustomed but instinctively opposed to our messages. We only bring the bad news that few want to hear.

Mills’s vision, therefore, was of the traditional public sociologist, standing outside and above society refusing to have any direct connection to it. Only Cuban society, in a state of revolutionary euphoria, warranted an organic connection. By contrast US society was a mass society, composed of manipulated and isolated individuals, cheerful robots, as he would say. It was better to engage such a society at a distance for fear of being contaminated by it. Thus, his alienation from professional sociology finds its parallel in his distance from mass society and his embrace of the ideal of the independent intellectual. How different from Gramsci, who never lost faith in the possibility of retrieving the good sense buried within common sense, a good sense that intellectuals could elaborate through their connection with the popular classes.

Despairing of any possible change he looked backwards for his ideal. Thus, against mass society he promoted the idea of a democratic republic – an autonomous debating society with a responsive government, a glorification of the Jeffersonian past. Holding himself aloof from the mass society of his imagination, his project was the antithesis of Gramsci’s engagement with the contours of civil society. Mills missed the volcano that was bubbling up on campuses, in ghettos, and even in the suburbs of the US. He missed the embryonic civil rights and student movements, which his writings helped to nurture. He was blind to the questions of race and gender that became the basis of the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and thus of the impending organic public sociology that would revitalize and indeed transform US professional sociology in the 1970s.

Until the last two or three years of his life (he died in 1962 at the age of 45), he showed little interest in the world beyond the United States. His books were riveted to the United States. His discovery of Latin America, and especially Cuba, gave him hope for a path to the future that was neither communist nor capitalist. Had he lived he would have had to fundamentally revise his perspectives of mass society.

Be that as it may, today we cannot ignore the phenomenon of globalization. Indeed, if my first project in 2004 was to focus on public sociology, my second project was to “provincialize” US sociology, that is compel recognition of its place in a global division of labor. By bringing to San Francisco sociologists from all over the world US sociology’s claimed universality would be seen for what it is – a projection of a very specific and peculiar society. Since then I have tried to stimulate a global debate about the different forms of the division of labor. The debate has spread, therefore, across the globe to China, Hong Kong, Portugal, South Africa, Australia, Ireland, India, France, Germany, England, Finland, Hungary, Russia, Brazil, and Spain, and now hopefully to Italy. With its own classic traditions of sociology, from Mosca to Pareto to Gramsci himself, Italy has important contributions to make to the global debate.

If each country has its own history and configuration of the division of sociological labor, we have also to take into account the emergent global division of sociological labor. We cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend there is no sociology beyond our own borders, if only because globalization is happening whether we like it or not. To ignore it is to submit to the bench marking of sociology to “international” i.e. Northern standards, to submit to the hegemony of US sociology with its enormous resources and seductions. Such an orientation to international standards is fraught with perils, especially for a sociology that is directed at local publics in local languages. We need to think of public sociology as the heart of a counter-hegemonic thrust that challenges the hegemony of US professional sociology, but without ever eliminating it, that is rearticulating it within the global division of labor.

Just as the national division of labor is a terrain of struggle, so the global division of labor should also be an arena of contestation. While it is far more complicated than a simple North-South struggle, promoting a South-South dialogue unmediated by, yet engaged with the North is a necessary condition for a vibrant global sociology. Nor is the North homogeneous – European sociology is not the US, and nor is European sociology of a piece. We have to find arenas, including entities as disparate as the World Social Forum and the International Sociological Association, where we can struggle with processes of globalization not just as they play themselves out within sociology but also on the terrain of civil society that roots our discipline.

Today, when economics is increasingly obsessed with the expansion of the market and when political science sees the state as the handmaiden of the market, so sociology has the specifically Gramscian and Herculean task of defending and transforming civil society – in its local, national and global scales. The defense of human society from market tyranny and state despotism coincides, therefore, with the project of sociology itself.

April 25, 2007

Abstract: In this new introduction to the italian translation of his “For public sociology”, Michael Burawoy compares Mills’s conception of public sociology with Gramsci’s idea of intellectual labor.
