THE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY DEBATE

Ethics and Engagement

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Ariane Hanemaayer and
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Foreword by Michael Burawoy

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To our parents, Glenda, John, Kathy, and Jim, for teaching us the value of education

Foreword

MICHAEL BURAWOY

The debate surrounding public sociology will not stop. Unlike other debates, this is one in which all can and have participated – junior and senior, student and educator, teacher and researcher, members of elite and non-elite universities, citizens of the Global South and the Global North. It is a debate that involves not just sociology but, potentially, any academic discipline. Indeed, it can be extended to the very nature of the university. This volume of essays from Canada testifies to the openness of the debate, for it embraces positions that defend, in turn, professional sociology, policy sociology, critical sociology, and public sociology to the varying exclusion of the others. Indeed, as I have argued before, Canada is uniquely placed to push the project of public sociology forward not only because of the healthy balance that exists between public sociology and the three other types of sociology but also because Canada is well situated geopolitically to recognize the challenges of an unequal world, which has meant that, in the past, it has played an important role in global affairs.

One reason the debate continues is that public sociologists interrogate the very foundations of sociology as a discipline. By asking "Knowledge for whom?" and "Knowledge for what?" they question the foundations that have often been sealed or subject to the dictates of the anointed. The debate can be disruptive, especially for professionals who want to get on with their scholarly pursuits and not be bothered with the meaning of our enterprise. But we live in a time when we have to examine what we are up to as our own

existence as autonomous academics is threatened by the very forces we study, not least markets and states.

To be more specific, the democratic ethos of science that Axel van den Berg so rightly and energetically defends is actually under threat not just from within – through the monopoly of academic capital and the hierarchies it spawns or the misuse of science for political ends – but also from without. Indeed, this threat from without is a major impetus behind public sociology, which we can better understand by broadening the scope of the democratic ethos that underpins academic work. A good place to begin is Robert Merton's famous identification of the normative bases of science: universalism, organized skepticism, disinterestedness, and communism. Universalism subjects truth claims to pre-established impersonal criteria. This is van den Berg's principle of value neutrality that minimizes bias in the conduct of science. Organized skepticism gives pride of place to critical thinking, taking nothing for granted. It is threatened by attempts at outside control, especially when science moves into new areas or takes new directions. Disinterestedness is the absence of interests other than the pursuit of knowledge, assured through competition and "rigorous policing."* Finally, communism is the common ownership of knowledge that ensures scientists will be rewarded by recognition or esteem but not with rights of private ownership.

In formulating the normative foundations of science in the late 1930s, Merton was, indeed, concerned to defend the integrity of science against fascist regimes and, to a lesser extent, Stalinism – political regimes that determined who should practise science for whom and for what. But Merton was no less concerned with the threat posed by the rationalizing tendencies of liberal democracies. Here, he was following in the footsteps of Max Weber, who devoted much energy to defending university autonomy against state encroachment. Weber was one of the few academics to actively defend colleagues who were persecuted for their politics (Robert Michels) or their religion (George Simmel). Today, Merton's four foundations are coming under attack from a different source – namely, state-led financialization of the university, in which the production and dissemination of knowledge becomes a commercial proposition, turning the university from a public into a

* See Robert Merton, "The Normative Structure of Science," *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigation, Social Theory and Social Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 276. The article was originally published in 1942.

private good. The speed and form of this financialization varies from country to country, but few are able to escape the pressure. Although Canada is lagging behind England and the United States, the process is nonetheless happening here too.

As soon as the university becomes a self-financing operation, it searches for new sources of revenue (increasing student fees, knowledge in the service of industry, corporate donors) and cost-cutting devices (increase in the number of temporary employees, distance learning, various forms of outsourcing). Disinterestedness and communism are thereby easily discarded, but universalism and organized skepticism are also threatened by a parallel and connected process of rationalization. In competing for limited funds, universities have entered into the game of rankings, which involves elaborate and costly manipulations, subjecting scholarship to short-term calculus of arbitrary criteria that determine what counts as knowledge. The combination of commodification and rationalization has led to the polarization of conditions of higher education at every level: within and between disciplines, within and between universities, within and between countries.

The university as we know it is being gradually (or sometimes rather quickly) thrown into the arms of state and market. Academics face a number of choices: to passively watch the process unfold, to actively participate in its promotion, or, alternatively, to uphold the university's public character and defend its autonomy by building countervailing alliances with publics that are experiencing similar pressures of marketization and rationalization. Public sociology, then, is one conduit for such conversations with publics that involve diagnoses of the broad direction of society. Of course, developing such public conversations is easier said than done, as the essays in the volume point out. Sociological diagnoses have to compete with so many others in the public sphere and are easily crowded out, especially as they are often at odds with common sense. We so often offer messages that few want to hear. The public sphere is so dominated by corporate visions of the world that it sometimes appears as though sociologists seek to impose their views on the world when they are simply trying to get a foot in the door.

To avoid competition in the public sphere and circumvent the concentration of communicative power, sociologists can opt for organic rather than traditional public sociology, unmediated rather than mediated engagement. This is the idea of public ethnography that Phillip Vannini and Laura Milne advance in their essay on different modes of engagement. It does sound attractive but, as Jill Bucklaschuk points out, there are real limitations to public ethnography as many publics are simply inaccessible. Even when

publics are accessible, they often demand that sociologists deliver something tangible, which turns sociologists into policy scientists. No less important, as Anne Mesny shows, the university itself can put up resistance to any such organic public engagement by restricting research relations to a narrow model defined by the biomedical sciences.

But there is one arena in which sociologists, and academics more generally, do have a comparative advantage, and that is in the area of teaching. The educator has a captive audience that can make the relationship undemocratic and hierarchical, a condition that may be necessary to get the sociological point of view across. The sociological perspective is not a natural one; it is not common sense. Its achievement requires sustained and disciplined work. Susan Prentice reflects on her own teaching of public sociology, linking it to feminist methodology and highlighting how its practice varies with the public standing of sociology itself. There is a second approach to the relation between teaching and public sociology – less the *teaching of public sociology,* whether by example or in theory, and more *teaching as public sociology,* in which students are seen to be a public, carrying their own lived experience that teachers can elaborate. Teaching becomes a way of connecting the personal troubles of students to public issues, micro experiences to macro forces – an analysis in which students can actively participate. In this view, teaching becomes a triple dialogue: a dialogue between students and teachers, a dialogue among students, and in its most adventurous forms, a dialogue between students and secondary publics.

But what is this sociology that is being used to elaborate students' lived experience? Or, as Ariane Hanemaayer asks, where is the sociology in public sociology? By this she means not just the sociological understanding of the world, but a reflexive understanding that positions sociology in general and public sociology in particular. I have already suggested that a sociology of the university in crisis points to the commodification of the production and dissemination of knowledge that is threatening not only our own discipline but the university itself. This is but part of a much broader social theory within which knowledge is but the latest factor of production to be commodified.

Indeed, the history of capitalism can be seen as successive waves of commodification and decommodification. We are in the midst of a third wave of commodification, what I call third-wave marketization, that involves the extensive and intensive (re)commodification of labour (the fall of unions and social security, the rise of precarious work, casualization, informalization, etc.), of nature (land expropriations for profit in China, India, Latin

America; carbon trading to justify emissions; privatization of water, etc.), and of money (making profit from loans; derivatives with increasing debt of individuals, organizations, and countries). Whereas states were active in resisting, containing, and redirecting second-wave marketization, they are now in a collusive relationship with markets, and are more likely to promote rather than contain commodification. Or, even worse, they are expelling populations from having access to labour markets, creating dangerous wastelands and new forms of debt in processes I call ex-commodification.

With the commodification and ex-commodification of each of these factors of production, their use value is undermined: knowledge cannot serve the public interest; labour cannot labour effectively; nature cannot sustain human existence; money serves to increase debt, bankruptcy, and financial crisis. Such a theory of capitalism points to the long-term destruction of human society. The interests of humanity are, indeed, at stake. Here, sociology has an important legacy to uphold. If there is one thing that Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel have in common, it is the critique of the overextension of the market, what Karl Polanyi called the disembedding of the market from society. Their solutions may have been different but their diagnoses share this suspicion of market fundamentalism. This tradition continued into the twentieth century. Talcott Parsons launched his magnum opus with an uncompromising critique of utilitarianism, and Jürgen Habermas was equally uncompromising about the dangers of the overextension of system logic that would colonize the lifeworld. Pierre Bourdieu spent the last ten years of his life in a relentless assault on the destructive powers of the unregulated markets, which distinguishes him as a sociologist from Scott Schaffer's other two public intellectuals, Jean Paul Sartre and Václav Havel. Behind Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity lies the market unfettered from its social moorings. In other words, sociology's abiding legacy is the critique of the market. Its standpoint is neither that of the economy nor that of the state but that of civil society – that problematic defence against overreaching markets or states. This is the sociology, or rather a sociology, behind public sociology, and why public sociology continues to be on the agenda and will continue to be as long as we face third-wave marketization.

What might such a vision of public sociology look like? A course I taught in the spring of 2012 at Berkeley with my colleague Laleh Behbehanian attempts to develop such a theoretically rooted conception of public sociology. We called it "Public Sociology, Live!" – an example, perhaps, of what Christopher Schneider calls e-public sociology. The idea was to use cases

of public sociology from all corners of the earth to generate a multi-sided global conversation. Every week, twenty Berkeley undergraduates would read, comment on, and discuss the writings of a chosen public sociologist in preparation for a Skype conversation with that person. The sociologist would open up with a fifteen-minute lecture, followed by forty minutes of discussion with the students, all of which was video recorded, downloaded to the Berkeley YouTube channel, and posted on the International Sociological Association website (http://www.isa-sociology.org/public-sociology-live/). The video was watched by hundreds of people (and subsequently thousands) but in particular by six parallel seminars in Barcelona, Oslo, Sao Paulo, Tehran, Johannesburg, and Kyiv. The participants discussed what they heard and saw, summarized their discussion, and posted the summaries on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/groups/259654060772916/). We did the same in Berkeley, but students also had to post their own individual comments in response to the summaries from the other seminars. Conversations were then supposed to flow.

This sounded like a fine idea! Students would be able to engage with some of the great living public sociologists on our planet, who, in turn, wouldn't have to leave their living rooms to partake in the seminar (although, given the difference in time zones, they might have to host the seminar in the wee hours of the morning). While parallel seminars meet on a more or less regular basis, there was not the intensity of dialogue for which we had hoped, due perhaps to the way the course emerged. Laleh and I determined who the public sociologists would be, the direction of the conversation, how it would take place, and so on. This design only underlined the global inequality we were addressing in that it was the concentration of academic, social, and technological capital at Berkeley that made the course possible in the first place. There was a further asymmetry to which students called our attention – they did not participate in public sociology, which became the prerogative of sociologists from elsewhere.

Now that I have a better sense of what is technically feasible, the course could be redesigned to elevate the level of participation on all sides. But let us consider the cases themselves as they point to the abiding dilemmas of public sociology as presented in the chapters contained in this volume. We can start with land struggles in India and Latin America. Nandani Sundar, having spent a decade researching scheduled tribes in Chhattisgarh, describes the way the indigenous community is not only facing land expropriations but is immersed in a violent war waged between Naxalites (Maoists) and state-sponsored Special Police Agents. It is, indeed, difficult for the

community to speak out about its victimization, and, whenever Sundar enters the area, she puts her own life in danger. Her public sociology is not to engage the local community but to engage India in a public discussion of the atrocities being perpetrated. She writes in newspapers; she gives interviews on the fate of her community. She even partakes in and wins a legal battle in India's Supreme Court against the provincial government for violating the constitution. But all to no avail. César Rodríguez Garavito describes a parallel engagement in Colombia. Here, an indigenous community faces flooding from dams but simultaneously lies at the vortex of a civil war between left-wing guerrillas and the paramilitary. It is a treacherous terrain – he calls it, appropriately enough, a "social minefield" – for everyone, not least the sociologist who in this case works with NGOs through appeals to international law.

Turning from land expropriation and commodification to questions of labour commodification, Pun Ngai and her collaborators in China enter the dangerous terrain of labour relations, drawing attention to the exploitative practices of the giant corporation Foxconn, which makes the parts for Apple Computers and others. In 2011, a spate of suicides spread through Foxconn and drew attention to the deplorable conditions in these anonymous factories, which employ several hundred thousand young workers. Pun Ngai and her colleagues, working with undercover students, have publicized their research findings. Armed with theories of the labour process, local engagement in the hidden abode of production leads to traditional public sociology, but of a rather activist character.

Sari Hanafi conducts a parallel project in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Working with the inmates (a difficult enough project in itself), he courted the wrath of the Lebanese government by exposing the limited rights of employment and education. Demonstrating just how complex such situations can become, he also found himself to be the object of hostility from Palestinians who wanted to protect "the right to return." Contradictory forces present the public sociologist with multiple dilemmas, which is not an indictment of public sociology but of the world.

Engaging finance capital is even more difficult as its machinations are conducted behind closed doors. This can call for extreme measures. Walden Bello broke into the World Bank to uncover documents about its financial support for the Marcos dictatorship – documents that provided the basis of his co-authored book *The Development Debacle,* which became an underground bestseller in the Philippines. When truth and power are locked together, it takes force to extricate one from the other, but this wouldn't get

past any internal review board. On the other side of the fence, Frances Fox Piven, with a long history of engagement with welfare rights movements and right-to-vote laws in the United States, deploys her theory of interdependent power to address questions raised by the Occupy Wall Street movement.

These projects of public sociology involve a complicated relation between local engagement and wider dissemination. Michel Wieviorka explains this well in distinguishing between the production of knowledge (professional sociology) that indeed can involve direct participation in communities and its wider dissemination (public sociology) through various media. Thus, he has tried to educate French publics about the dark side of society – terrorism, anti-Semitism, racism, and violence. For Wieviorka, however, even professional sociology – the methodology of "sociological intervention" developed by Alain Touraine and his collaborators – is accountable to publics in that it defines the relevance and validity of scientific research, moving it closer to organic public sociology. Indeed, sociological intervention seems very similar to Ramon Flecha and Marta Soler's "critical communicative methodology," in which sociologist and public engage in the co-production of knowledge. They show how it is possible to establish close relations with even the most alienated publics, such as the Roma people in Spain, and how the ensuing dialogue can provide the basis for policy change at the level of the European Union.

These intricate cases of public sociology raise many difficult questions, especially concerning the division between public sociology and politics. The distinction can best be understood in terms of intersecting fields. Public sociology may engage with publics; it may serve clients but it does so while still being accountable to the academic field of sociology, the professional findings, and foundations of sociology. Politics, on the other hand, operates according to the logic of the political field – the way interests are pursued and political capital is accumulated. It is possible, as Bourdieu argued, that academic capital can be converted into political capital for more effective participation. The relationship between public sociology and political engagement cannot be understood outside the relationship between fields. Where the fields virtually coincide, as they often do in authoritarian regimes such as the Soviet Union, all sociology is immediately political. In liberal democracies, the space for an autonomous professional and critical sociology is enlarged while the terrain of overlap, where public sociology easily becomes politics, is reduced.

At the same time, as I have been at pains to argue, both academic and political fields are increasingly overdetermined by the economic field. Politics is answerable to financial capital, which sidesteps and, therefore, restricts democratic processes while the university is increasingly having to act as a corporation, strategizing in the market and, therefore, changing its organization from one that nurtured education and research to one that is self-financing. This subversion of the university elicits the support of academics who stand to make short-term material gains but to the long-term detriment of the university's capacity to produce knowledge that will solve the pressing problems of third-wave marketization. This direction of development is justified by orthodox economics and rational-choice political science, which are themselves contested within their disciplines. But we need to develop an alternative sociology that provides the foundation of alliances not with corporate elites and state nobilities but with broader publics whose livelihood is being threatened by third-wave marketization. As Rick Helmes-Hayes has made so clear from his biographies of John Porter and, here, of Coral Topping, Canadian social science, including that of Quebec, has a long history of being concerned with issues of public importance and has not been reluctant to enter political debate without sacrificing the professional and scientific content of its research. Long may it continue!

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Contents