

Public Sociology and Civil Society

Governance, Politics, and Power

Patricia Mooney Nickel



Public Sociology and Civil Society

Governance, Politics, and Power

Patricia Mooney Nickel



Paradigm Publishers
Boulder • London

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be transmitted or reproduced in any media or form, including electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or informational storage and retrieval systems, without the express written consent of the publisher.

Copyright © 2012 Paradigm Publishers

Published in the United States by Paradigm Publishers, 2845 Wilderness Place, Boulder, CO 80301 USA.

Paradigm Publishers is the trade name of Birkenkamp & Company, LLC, Dean Birkenkamp, President and Publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nickel, Patricia Mooney.

Public sociology and civil society : governance, politics, and power / Patricia Mooney Nickel.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59451-976-5 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Sociology—Philosophy. 2. Applied sociology. 3. Sociology—Methodology. 4. Civil society. I. Title.

HM511.N53 2012

301.01—dc23

2011030057

Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free paper that meets the standards of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.

Designed and Typeset by Straight Creek Bookmakers.

16 15 14 13 12 1 2 3 4 5

Public Sociology and Civil Society

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Ben Agger, Chamsy el-Oljeili, Timothy W. Luke, and Barry Smart for their generous and engaged dialogue as this project evolved. Thanks to Angela M. Eikenberry for her support of my critical views on governance and with whom I have a long-standing dialogue about civil society. I am grateful to the students in my honors seminars held at Victoria University of Wellington 2008–2010 for their humor and unique perspective on the topic. Perhaps more importantly, they demonstrated to me that students of public sociology, civil society, and governance are not only perfectly capable of understanding these topics through the lens of critical theory; they want to do so and often do so better than the authors with whom these concepts originate! My research assistant, Florence Fudakowska, did an excellent job of navigating the ins and outs of bibliographic presentation. Thanks to Ed Nickel for all of the little things that make a huge difference. Dennis Smith was the first editor to give my ideas about public sociology a thorough review, and I am very grateful to him for this. Finally, I want to thank Dean Birkenkamp for his patience and for supporting an interdisciplinary project.

Contents

Acknowledgments

vii

**Chapter 1: Introduction: Public Sociology and Civil Society
in the Context of Governance**

1

The Impetus: Contemporary Calls for Public Sociology 2

The Problem 9

The Argument So Far 20

Part I: The Politics of Knowledge

Chapter 2: Public Sociology: Locating the Argument

23

The Campaign for Public Sociology 24

Public Sociology, the Public Interest, and the Secular Spirit 30

The Institutionalization of Public Sociology 34

**Chapter 3: Public Sociology as Knowledge, Politics,
and Portrayal**

40

Burawoy's Ontological Fiction 41

From Fiction to Function 49

Pro-Professional Public Sociology's Contribution
to Neoliberalism 50

Part II: The Expansion of Governing

**Chapter 4: Civil Society and the Origins of the Expansion
of Governing**

57

"The Answer Is Civil Society" 58

"The Answer Is NGOs" 66

Knowledge Production and Governing:	
From Civic Culture to Global Civil Society	68
The Institutionalization of Civil Society	
as Third Sector Research	76
Public Sociology and Civil Society?	
Public Sociology and NGOs?	78

Chapter 5: The Transformation of the State Thesis	81
A Note on Liberalism-Post-Liberalism	81
The Transformation of the State Thesis	83
A Note on Post-Marxism	89
The Institutionalization of Post-Marxism as Radical	
Democratic Governance	94

Part III: Power and Practice

Chapter 6: Governing Texts	105
Text, Portrayal, and Power	106
The Articulation of Power Through Practiced Portrayal	109

Chapter 7: NGOs, the State, and Governance as Rites of Rule	118
"Public Sociology for Human Rights"	
as Cosmopolitan Global Governance	119
From Governmentality to Consolidated	
Contragovernmentality	122
Consolidated Contragovernmental Rites of Passage:	
The Conflation of Right(s) and Development	126
The Practice of Human Rights as Rites of Rule	129

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Beyond Knowledge Production	
as the Reproduction of the Present	137

<i>References</i>	<i>143</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>161</i>
<i>Credits</i>	<i>170</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>171</i>

Chapter 1

Introduction

Public Sociology and Civil Society in the Context of Governance

This is a book about public sociology only by way of an access point; through the lens of public sociology, it is a book about the contemporary practices of governing. Public sociology responds to significantly more than sociology's relationship with the public. Over the past ten years the phrase *public sociology* has been used to refer to efforts to build civil society (Burawoy 2005a), the management of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (American University 2007, 2010), program evaluation (Humboldt State University 2010), cosmopolitan state management (Beck 2005b; Delanty 2006), social gerontology (Putney, et al. 2007), and government policy consultancy (Perrucci, et al. 2008). Whether they involve the governing vocabulary of democratic ideals or the practice of knowledge, the circulation of these multiple meanings is a technique of governing.

In considering public sociology, civil society, and governance together, I want to understand the “kinship between the lines of inquiry and the proximity of those who undertook them” (Foucault 1998, 439). My aim is therefore to explore the politics of academic disciplines, knowledge, and discourse as they have emerged within the recent debate over public sociology, while also highlighting how this debate has become intertwined with civil society and what has been hailed as an age of “radically democratic governance” (Sørensen and Torfing 2005a). What does it mean to practice knowledge publically and to govern democratically? How are these two activities—the production of knowledge and governing—related?

I understand *public sociology*, *civil society*, and *governance* to be interrelated terms that have as much potential to become sites of disciplinary discourse as they do to become sites of radical politics. In advancing this argument I assume that knowledge and its organization are political. Knowledge production by intellectuals is political in the sense that it can be viewed as a powerful means of either stabilizing or challenging the patterns according to which people live their lives, be they patterns of ideas, expectations, governments, economies, or so-called laws of society. The organization of knowledge is political in the sense that it is situated within universities, which are not distinct from the state or the economy and associated demands for the production of instrumental knowledge (Apple 1993, 2003; Aronowitz 2000; Barrow 1990; Luke 2005). This is to say, first, that the pursuit and organization of knowledge involve deliberate choices made by individuals with preferences about how the world should be understood, and, second, that these choices are significantly influenced by the requirements of governing and the knowledge economy within which intellectuals are situated.

The Impetus: Contemporary Calls for Public Sociology

A central impetus for this inquiry is my observation of the recent widespread and often intersecting circulation of phrases like *public sociology*, *civil society*, and *democratic governance* within varying academic disciplines, as well as within the varying institutions of practice where public service now takes place. The contemporary call for public sociology, because it explicitly references civil society and governance, provides a starting point for untangling these concepts.

Public sociology in its early conception described a style of intellectuality involving dialogue between sociologists and the publics with whom they were concerned. Beyond this broad framing, what type of dialogue, with what purpose, which publics, and the functions of intellectuals and the knowledge they produce in relationship to civil society and the state are now widely contested. The label *public sociologist* as a descriptor of public intellectuals within the discipline of sociology originates as early as Herbert J. Gans's 1988 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association (ASA), titled "Sociology in America: The Discipline and the Public." Drawing on Russell Jacoby's (2000) notion of the public intellectual, Gans (1989) specifies that public sociologists are *not* popularizers of sociology, but rather "they are empirical researchers, analysts, or theorists like the rest of us, although often their work is particularly thoughtful, imaginative, or original in some respect" (7). For Gans, public sociologists share three traits. First, they enjoy the craft of writing

and are therefore particularly adept at conveying complex ideas. Second, they have broad sociological interests; they understand the world outside of narrow disciplinary boundaries. Third, they avoid “undue professionalism” (Gans 1989, 7). Echoing Gans’s concern about the impact of the professionalization of knowledge on public life, in his 2000 Presidential Address to the ASA, titled “Social Justice for Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty-First Century,” Joe Feagin (2001) argued for a sociology that addressed major public problems: “creating and ensuring the processes of a truly democratic participation in decision-making” (5).

Contemporary statements of the need for public sociology echo the tone used by Robert S. Lynd (1967), writing about the urgent need for the social sciences to address social problems in the wake of the Great Depression: “a prevalent mood among sophisticated persons today is a sense of hopelessness in the face of the too-bigness of the issues we confront . . . we are today attempting to live in the most disparate and confusing cultural environment faced by any generation of Americans since the beginning of our national life” (11). Twenty years and a world war later, in 1959, C. Wright Mills (2000) observed among people a feeling “that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles . . .” (3). The same could be said of individuals today. Lynd and Mills were writing in the wake of an industrial revolution accompanied by urbanization and an associated rise in bureaucracy, two world wars and an associated instrumentalization of knowledge as a means to govern through technological advance, and a transformation to mass consumerism. Intellectuals today write in the wake of another technological revolution (information), another transformation of space (Internet, globalization), another bureaucratic transformation in a shift from government to governance, and another transformation of consumerism (e.g., green consumerism, philanthrocapitalism). These rapid changes and the sense of what Mills called “private troubles” being divorced from “public problems” inspired Mills to write famously of the “sociological imagination,” which often is discussed in calls for public sociology. “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society” (Mills 2000, 6). This involves understanding how one’s private troubles are part of bigger public problems—public problems that we realize, *in contrast to professional and disciplinary knowledge*, that we have the ability to publicly debate and change in order to improve our lives.

Over the past ten years there have been two substantial appeals for a renewed emphasis on public sociology. The first is Ben Agger’s (2000) *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts*, now in its second (2007) edition. For Agger (2007), like Mills, Gans, and Feagin, public sociology is a mode of

writing that reveals that it is a subjective authoring rather than an objective observation, engages in self-translation with a public in mind, and addresses major public issues.

A sociology is public if it embraces Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, which merges theory and practice, and if it recognizes that method doesn't solve all intellectual problems but is merely one form of rhetoric (discourse) among many. A public sociology must want to change the world, and it must recognize that it is already changing the world by intervening in it. Finally, a public sociology addresses itself to various publics, to which it doesn't condescend but that it seeks to mobilize. (270)

Agger's emphasis here is not on preserving the discipline of sociology, per se, but on the transformation of sociological discourse.

In many ways, Agger's call for public sociology is an extension of his earlier work on the sociology of public life, including *The Decline of Discourse* (1990) and *A Critical Theory of Public Life* (1991b). The key point to take from Agger is that, although public intellectuality is important, public discourse depends on more than intellectuals speaking authoritatively in public; the conditions for public discourse must be cultivated through public writing that challenges the value-neutrality of knowledge, which is to say that it recognizes that it is one portrayal among many. This mode of intellectuality requires that sociologists reveal in dialogue with the public that the production of knowledge involves individual passions about its reception; we cannot help but infuse the knowledge that we produce with our own purpose. For example, I am a critical intellectual, and this significantly influences my framing of public sociology; although I attempt to present a wide spectrum of ideas, I cannot help but make deliberate choices about what matters when we think about public sociology. Although my account might be empirically accurate, it remains the outcome of my value-laden choice of what to portray as important. Revealing this fact leaves open a space for my readers to contest my framing and thus instigates dialogue.

The second, and perhaps best known, recent conceptualization of public sociology was first articulated by Michael Burawoy at Boston College in 2004 and further elaborated in his 2004 Presidential Address to the ASA, titled "For Public Sociology." Burawoy (2007a) defines public sociology as "a sociology that seeks to bring sociology to publics beyond the academy, promoting dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope" (104). This definition is constructed through his (2005a, 11) portrayal of sociology as a division of labor, which is shown in Table 1-1.

The functions of the sociological laborers in Table 1-1 are portrayed by Burawoy (2005a) as:

Table 1-1 Burawoy's Division of Labor

	<i>Academic Audience</i>	<i>Extra-Academic Audience</i>
Instrumental Knowledge	PROFESSIONAL	POLICY
Reflexive Knowledge	CRITICAL	PUBLIC

- **Professional/Instrumental/Academic:** "Research conducted within research programs that define assumptions, theories, concepts, questions, and puzzles" (12).
- **Policy/Instrumental/Extra-Academic:** "Defense of sociological research, human subjects, funding, congressional briefings" (12).
- **Critical/Reflexive/Academic:** "Critical debates of the discipline within and between research programs" (12).
- **Public/Reflexive/Extra-Academic:** "Concern for the public image of sociology, presenting findings in an accessible manner, teaching basics of sociology and writing textbooks" (12).

In addition to four functional categories of labor, Burawoy identifies two types of knowledge and two types of audience, which break down as follows:

- **Instrumental/Professional/Academic:** theoretical/empirical knowledge, correspondent truth, legitimacy by scientific norms, accountability to peers
- **Instrumental/Policy/Extra-Academic:** concrete knowledge, pragmatic truth, legitimacy by effectiveness, accountability to clients
- **Reflexive/Critical/Academic:** foundational knowledge, normative truth, legitimacy by moral vision, accountability to critical intellectuals
- **Reflexive/Public/Extra-Academic:** communicative knowledge, consensus for truth, legitimacy by relevance, accountability to designated publics (16)

I will argue in Chapter Three that, through this organization of knowledge, Burawoy excludes from discourse a "nonprofessional" or "nonpublic" audience that *ought to be equally involved in criticizing the impact of professional sociology on their lives*. Unlike Agger, who emphasizes the sociology of discourse over the discipline of sociology, Burawoy is focused on stabilizing and popularizing professional sociology. Whereas Gans (1989) was careful to distinguish the public sociologist from the "visible scientist," who is a popularizer (7), for Burawoy (2005a) public sociologists have "concern for the public image of sociology, presenting findings in an accessible manner, teaching basics of sociology and writing textbooks" (12).

Burawoy's 2004 Presidential Address and the renewed ideal of public sociology has inspired many professional journal symposia, conference proceedings, newsletters, and curriculum developments over the past ten years and instigated a valuable debate about public sociology, as well as a wide range of social problems, including the academic career of the sociologist. Some of these debates are constructively critical and have included Burawoy in dialogue with other advocates of public sociology. Others have rejected the ideal of public sociology altogether and have attempted to "defend" sociology against politics, even publishing a Web site titled "Save Sociology," which "was developed in response to the various forms of attack on sociology as an academic discipline that have taken place in recent years, especially since the advent of so-called 'public' sociology. This [is] an attempt to safeguard the academic status and integrity of sociology" (Deflem 2010). (For a response see McLaughlin, et al. 2007.) Burawoy (2009a) characterizes this debate as "The Public Sociology Wars," which is telling of the impact of the suggestion that there is a legitimate intellectuality to be found *outside* the heavily guarded boundaries of fixed intellectual and disciplinary authority.

Intellectual authority and the legitimacy of knowledge are important considerations beyond the public sociology debate; they will also inform my consideration of the ideals of civil society and governance. From Agger's (1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1990, 1991b, 2000) perspective, claims to objective intellectual authority potentially *inhibit* public discourse to the extent that the public fails to realize that the ideas produced by intellectuals are contestable. For Agger, the realization that knowledge is contestable is the foundation of public discourse. From Burawoy's (2005a) perspective, disciplinary/professional sociology is *foundational* to public sociology: "there can be neither policy nor public sociology without a *professional sociology* that supplies true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks" (10). In contrast, for Agger (1989b, 1990), professional sociology and its expert discourse *results* in a decline in discourse about public issues; the public patterns its everyday life after expert discourse rather than debating the contestable issues raised by public intellectuals who respect the public's own lifeworld-grounded knowledge of the world (Agger 1992a). In response to Burawoy's division of labor, Feagin, et al. (2009) were, like Agger, critical of the idea that public sociology will emerge from Burawoy's division of labor, arguing that professional sociology creates a discourse that is often "anti-public" (79).

As I will demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, these two opposing views on the public impact of professional sociology and instrumental knowledge—for Agger professional sociology and instrumental knowledge result in a *decline* in public discourse; for Burawoy it is essential to the *legitimacy* of public sociology—point to the very possibility of a public that is receptive to public sociology, as well as to the possibility of a robust civil society and

radically democratic governance. For Burawoy, the relationship between knowledge and public life is dependent on professional sociology and its associated norms of knowledge production. For Agger (1990), the relationship between knowledge and public life depends on the transformation of professional sociology, which is embedded in what he calls literary political economy: "We cannot comprehend, and thus remedy, the decline of discourse without considering the dominance of the university over intellectual life. *I am pointing to an absence [of the public] that is effectively a product of particular social and economic arrangements of knowledge*" (33–34).

The contemporary call for public sociology is therefore not as simple as it might first seem; there is widespread debate within sociology about the politics of knowledge. This has involved opposition to the suggestion that there is something political involved in doing sociology, as well as debate among advocates of public sociology in the tradition of Mills, Gans, Feagin, and Agger, who take issue with how Burawoy has framed the discipline and his division of labor. This is further complicated by the fact that the debates over public sociology involve words, concepts, institutions, and problems that transcend the disciplinary boundaries of sociology.

In particular, the word *public* now seems ubiquitous as a disciplinary modifier in the social sciences. As Jürgen Habermas (1991) observed in the opening of his seminal text, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, the "usage of the words 'public' and 'public sphere' betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings" (1). The adjective *public* is problematic because it simultaneously refers to legal sectors (public and private), spheres of discourse and action (public sphere and private sphere), territories (public property and private property), and, as a disciplinary modifier, intellectuality (public and professional). These public-private-professional distinctions are further complicated by the fact that the boundaries themselves are porous: Private companies make donations to public entities, discourse and action in the public sphere influences private lives, private property is publicly subsidized, professional discourse has public impact, and public discourse has an impact on the profession.

At present there are at least ten academic foci modified by the adjective *public*. In addition to the traditional "applied fields" of public administration, public policy (which might also be policy sociology), public finance, and public law, the recent public turn in the social sciences includes calls for public anthropology (Borofsky 2000; Purcell 2000), public criminology (Chancer and McLaughlin 2007; Currie 2007), public geography (Murphy, et al. 2005; Murphy 2006), and public intellectual political scientists (Hauck 2010). Once preoccupied with establishing a legitimate claim to *scientific* knowledge, as David Paul Haney (2008) demonstrates in his study *The Americanization of Social Science*, the social sciences are now preoccupied not only with their scientific legitimacy, but also with their *public* scientific legitimacy as their

surveys compete with brain scans over no less than “public neuroscience,” “neuroeconomics,” and the emerging field of “brain policy” (Blank 1999). It is no longer enough for the social sciences to be rigorous; now they must be rigorously popular at congressional hearings, on CNN, and in front of grant-making bodies that reinforce with grant dollars the legitimacy of their research questions, which were developed in the pursuit of grant dollars.

Whether because of mounting budgetary constraints and competition over grant funding or general insecurity at a time when so many “sciences” seem to be resulting in so many disasters, more and more academic disciplines are placing emphasis on their legitimate publicness, while also highlighting their contribution of “job skills” for the new economy. “Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard and the author of several books on higher education, argues, ‘The humanities has a lot to contribute to the preparation of students for their vocational lives’” (Cohen 2009, C1). This is an unsurprising statement when *The New York Times* reported in 2009 that “in tough times, the humanities must justify their worth.... ‘Although people in humanities have always lamented the state of the field, they have never felt quite as much of a panic that their field is becoming irrelevant,’ said Andrew Delbanco, the director of American studies at Columbia University” (Cohen 2009, C1).

The subjection of the liberal arts, as well as the social sciences, to vocational concerns is not a new problem, but its labeling as public sociology, civil society, and governance is. In 1943 twelve men convened as The Committee on the Objectives of a General Education in a Free Society and subsequently published *General Education in a Free Society*, otherwise known as the *Harvard Red Book*. In his letter to the Board of Overseers of Harvard University, James Bryant Conant wrote:

The heart of the problem of general education is the continuance of the liberal and humane tradition. Neither the mere acquisition of information nor the development of special skills and talents can give the broad basis of understanding which is essential if our civilization is to be preserved.... It includes no history, no art, no literature, no philosophy. Unless the educational process includes at each level of maturity some continuing contact with those fields in which value judgments are of prime importance, it must fall far short of the ideal.... (viii)

A committee of twelve men at an elite university in 1943 wanting to preserve what was a sexist and racist civilization poses its own problems, but their message about the instrumentalization of education at the cost of value judgments resonates today. The concern throughout the *Harvard Red Book* was that the push for job skills would dominate higher education at the expense of the liberal arts. “It has been said that our businessmen, prospecting among school or college graduates for future employees, are chiefly interested in

the student's proficiency in activities and not in courses.... The great danger is that there should be two sets of values in the school—intellectual and practical—moving as it were on parallel tracks and never meeting” (Harvard Committee 1943, 172–173). This conviction seems nearly lost. Today, even the liberal arts are conceived of as vocational education. Problematically, so are public sociology and civil society practiced as governance.

The Problem

Public sociology emerged in concert with a renewed emphasis on civil society, which I discuss in Chapter Four, and with observations of a democratic shift toward governance, which I discuss in Chapter Five. All three of these phrases emerged in sync with neoliberalism and its associated governing practices, which I address in Chapters Six and Seven. As Table 1-2 indicates, the circulation of these phrases, which claim to represent transformation, seems to be outpacing transformation of the institutions and practices to which they refer; they seem to be functioning to “discipline imagination” (Agger 1989a, 86) in the absence of public debate by those most impacted by their associated practices.

This spatial representation is not meant to simplify or solidify the contemporary use of the concepts explored in this book, but instead to demonstrate the importance of discerning from multiple uses and meanings the ideals to which their advocates would have us ascribe and to reveal the artificiality of the boundaries that separate them. For example, if we advocate democratic action in civil society, does our use of the phrase *civil society* describe a space distinct from the state where the public engages in critical debate about the actions taken by the state? Or, does *civil society* describe a space within which non-state organizations partner with the state to deliver public services? Would such a partnership, described as governance, eliminate “non-state” space? What would be the implications of such an elimination for governing democratically? Such questions are only a small representation of the challenges posed by the recent emphasis on public sociology and civil society as a means to achieve democratic governance.

I attempt to understand how these phrases, which convey a *sense* of democratic social action, might inhibit our recognition of unnecessarily oppressive power relations embedded in practice as they disguise these practices in the *language* of transformation divorced from the transformation of *practice*. I critically engage the ideals of public sociology, civil society, and governance with the aim of revealing the possibility of a more democratic distribution of power relations, especially those power relations that are structured by knowledge (Foucault 1980; Horkheimer and Adorno 1989). This requires that I acknowledge up front that my argument stems from my preferred

Table 1-2 The Problem

<i>Ontological Claims</i>	<i>Disciplinary References</i>	<i>Institutionalizations</i>	<i>Epistemological Power/Practices</i>
<i>Public Sociology within an Organic Division of Labor</i>	Professional Sociology; Policy Sociology	Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); Professional academic networks; Publishing norms; The state; Universities	Accountability; Efficiency; Legitimacy by effectiveness; Performance measurement; Positivism
<i>Civil Society</i>	Development Studies; Nonprofit Studies; Political Science; Public Administration and Policy; Sociology	Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); Professional academic networks; Publishing norms; Foundations; Philanthropy; The state; University centers	Accountability; Efficiency; Legitimacy by effectiveness; Performance measurement
<i>Governance</i>	Development Studies; Management; Nonprofit Studies; Political Science; Public Administration and Policy; Sociology	Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); Foundations; Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs); Publishing norms; Professional academic networks; The market; The state	Accountability; Efficiency; Legitimacy by effectiveness; Performance measurement