16
Living Theory

It's January 1977. I have won the lottery and landed a job at Berkeley – the job of dreams. Neil Smelser had overseen my appointment and, as chair, decided that I should teach the required undergraduate course in social theory. There was not a lot of enthusiasm for teaching theory, indeed there was not a lot of enthusiasm for teaching in those days, so being a new recruit I was given the assignment. In graduate school my grades for theory were in the B and C range, so it was ironic that I had been chosen for the task. It was not clear who was being punished – the students or myself. But, for me at least, it proved to be a stroke of good fortune. I've been teaching social theory ever since.

With much trepidation and blessed with two wonderful teaching assistants, Anne Lawrence and Bob Fitzgerald, I diligently prepared to teach the "classics." That January, I walked into the lecture hall that could hold many more than the sixty students scattered among the seats. I told them I was new to teaching; I had never even been an undergraduate in the US. I announced that we were going to learn social theory together through the lens of the "division of labor" – a topic consonant with my own interests, a theme that threaded through the classics, and a phenomenon central to their own lives. I then had the presence of mind to ask them what they thought was meant by the "division of labor." As the seconds ticked

away and they found the silence unbearable, someone offered an answer, and then someone else, and soon they were competing for my attention. Although I didn't know it at the time, this was the beginning of a long experiment in teaching as public sociology.

Students after all are our first public. We may be fond of research, we may even be good at research, we may make breakthroughs in research, and the university may reward research above all else, but, in most cases, our lasting impact lies with our students. That impact is all the deeper if we can speak to their lived experience, transforming how they regard themselves and how they see the world around them. These are after all their formative years. The appeal of sociology lies in the way it speaks directly to that lived experience, especially when the students themselves come from more marginalized sectors of society.

As the university drew in more students from underprivileged backgrounds, from racial minorities and first-generation students, it is not surprising that the sociology major expanded. "Under-represented minorities" are now 38 percent of our sociology major, twice the campus average; and more than half our students are transfers from two-year community colleges, as compared to the campus average of less than a third. Sociology has expanded from 150 to 600 majors, and the theory course is now taught twice a year, with some 200 students in each class – non-majors can't even get in. The course itself expanded from a required one quarter to two quarters to two semesters. And for social theory addicts there is even a voluntary third semester.

The department has changed over the last half-century; it has become more professionalized and less grandiose. My tenure-track colleagues are committed to teaching and we have a brilliant group of dedicated lecturers (non-tenure-track faculty). Teachers are more respectful of students, entering into a dialogue about their lives through the lens of immigration, race and ethnicity, gender, family, political economy, poverty, incarceration,

work, policing, schooling, and much else. Courses develop under an overarching reality – the soaring inequality that has been overwhelming society for the last half-century. The students can see themselves – their past, their present, and the future – in the courses we teach.

If teaching substantive topics can easily become public sociology, what about social theory? How can one make the dead white men of the nineteenth century – Marx, Weber, and Durkheim – live in the eyes and imagination of twenty-first century undergraduates? How can the great thinkers of the past speak to the lived experience of today? Social theory is conventionally taught as a survey of canonical thinkers, sometimes based on original texts, sometimes on textbooks, but the idea is to give a flavor of "grand theorists" with big ideas. That's how I began. In one quarter I tried to cover the gamut of theorists from Adam Smith to Jürgen Habermas via Marx and Engels, Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber. It was an impossible task.

The *survey* approach offers a panorama, a mountain range, seen from a distance, but it doesn't give students the chance to climb any of those mountains and witness the vistas they offer. I simply did not have the wherewithal – the knowledge of history and philosophy – to undertake a serious survey course, and even if I did it would be difficult to convey such themes in a quarter-long course. I had to adopt a very different *ethnographic* approach that starts out by bringing student lives into social theory with the aim of bringing social theory into their lives. I call it *living theory* – theory itself lives, it is dynamic and transcendent, just as students live in theory, shaping their imagination of who they are and what the world could be.

We start by thinking of social theory as a cognitive map. Maps simplify the world but from a particular perspective through different projections; different maps have different purposes; you have to learn how to read maps; they have predictive power and guide action; some maps are more accurate, some more comprehensive than others; maps are

redrawn in the light of the knowledge they generate. So the same may be said of social theories: they too are simplifications, have different purposes, guide human action, are more or less accurate, more or less comprehensive, and so on. Like maps, social theories affect the world they represent; they lead us to intervene in the world they represent – that is what we mean by public sociology.

I also liken social theory to a lens without which we cannot see the world we inhabit. As members of society, we share a common lens that we call "common sense." Without that shared lens, that shared theory – of which language is its most basic form – we could not live together. In other words, we are all carriers of social theory. To be a social theorist is to reflect on that common sense, elaborate it, transform it. Sociological theory is a special type of social theory. It sees the world as a problem, a world that is less than perfect, a world that could be different. Sociological theory questions what we take for granted. It challenges common sense, showing the partiality of its truth, how in our daily lives we misrecognize what we are up to. Under the spell of sociological theory, "common sense" is transformed from something natural and inevitable into something socially constructed (and durably so), and thus artificial and arbitrary. Understood in this way, sociological theory is always public sociology, challenging the common sense we take for granted.

That's all very well in principle but what about in practice? How can we bring those nineteenth-century lofty theorists to ground, make them accessible and meaningful to twenty-first-century undergraduates? My first strategy is to read all the theorists through some familiar idea or experience – the notion of the division of labor, say, a concept central to all sociological theory but also to everyone's life. The second strategy is to carefully select limited extracts from each theorist – a few pages for each lecture – with a view to slowly building up their theories from first principles. We start with a theory's basic assumptions about individuals, society, and history, gradually

working our way toward a theory of the division of labor – its origins and its consequences, its reproduction and its future. At every step of the way we are illustrating each concept, each connection, each assumption with reference to the empirical world.

Sticking to texts, we slowly put together the pieces in a jigsaw until we have a picture – literally a pictorial representation of each theory. It might take weeks, but students partake in every move. Through their participation they can see before them the construction of a building from the foundation up. Every lecture is an emergent picture, drawn with chalk on a blackboard. At the end they see that the house of theory can be rather unstable, and we need to pull it apart and rebuild it or add extensions that fit in with the overall architecture. In calling attention to anomalies, false inferences about the world, and the contradictions they may reflect, we are "ransacking" theory; but no ransacking is done without rebuilding. Every great theory has great contradictions, but if the theory is really "great" then it can be redeemed through wrestling with those contradictions. That is the work of theory.

That's what happens in the lecture hall. But the entire enterprise would be very different were it not for the dedication of the five or six teaching assistants, now known as Graduate Student Instructors. They run two discussion sections that meet twice a week for fifty minutes. Each section used to have fifteen students but then it was increased to twenty. That's where students engage with theory. That's where they practice dissecting a sentence, a paragraph; that's where they practice putting theories together and putting them into conversation with one another; that's where they apply theories to the world around them. It is in section that students will have their most memorable experiences, providing a platform for their own spontaneous discussion groups. The participatory ethos is further cultivated by my weekly meetings with the GSIs where we discuss specific

9781509519149_Burawoy_print.indd 199 26/05/2021 11:14

challenges, problem cases, and have exciting debates about ambiguous texts. Every Thursday evening we assemble in my office at 6 p.m., finish at 8 p.m., and then go to dinner. When it comes to theory, they quickly learn there is no better teacher than teaching.[7]

Participation in sections contributes some 20 percent or 25 percent of the student grade, and that's where students prepare themselves for their assignments. There are no exams or quizzes, but a series of short 750-word papers that require students to explicate theories by comparing them along specified dimensions, or by showing how different theories offer different interpretations of a short, descriptively rich article taken from the world of journalism – *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker,* and so on. Once a semester, students write their own short "theory in action paper" – choosing a phenomenon to be illustrated by one or more of the theories they have learned. Sometimes, under the inspiration of a GSI, they collaborate in generating a sequence of theory-in-action papers, engaging the drama of the world around them through the lenses of successive theories. In the fall of 2008, for example, GSIs got students to write brief memos showing the ways social theories illuminated the deep economic crisis and then the election of the first African American President. In these ways it becomes clear how these theories from a century or more ago transcend their times, have relevance today, thereby making their originators canonical figures.

So which theorists do we read? Since the theme is the division of labor, we start with the opening twenty pages of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Here we have an admirable point of departure – a simple and lucid theory of the division of labor in which specialization leads to greater productivity through time-saving, dexterity, and innovation – a potential that is realized with the extension of demand for excess supply – that is, with the expansion of the market. As a result, we get the "wealth of nations" or what Smith also calls "universal opulence" – that is,

9781509519149_Burawoy_print.indd 200 26/05/2021 11:14

everyone is better off as a result of the division of labor, but under certain conditions, namely, "a well-governed society." In bolstering his utopian view, Smith appeals to our intuition by telling a story of its origins in a small-scale society of hunters and gatherers, how if hunters specialize and gatherers specialize they will each produce more and through "truck, barter and exchange" everyone will be better off.

Simple, appealing, but what are its flaws? Today, are people better off as a result of increased productivity? Students are suspicious, even more suspicious when I produce a graph of increasing productivity and declining real wages. So what's the problem? It's Smith's assumption that individuals control the surplus they produce. So what happens to the surplus if it is not owned and controlled by the person who produces it? Enter Marx, whose theory of the division of labor centers not only on the question of specialization, "Who Does What?" but also on who owns the surplus, "Who Gets What?" – out of which will emerge his theory of the rise and fall of capitalism, his theory of class struggle and the transition to communism.

But Smith makes other assumptions, too, in order to get his theory to work: "universal opulence" comes from individuals in pursuit of their material self-interest, all endowed with the same resources, embedded in relations of power equality. These "common sense" assumptions are examined in Durkheim's theory that connects the division of labor to *solidarity* and by Weber's theory that connects division of labor to *authority*. It's not difficult to show how Smith's theory of the division of labor, first published in 1776, the year of American Independence, is still widely believed today, in fact more than ever. It is the foundation of the American ideology – that by striving individuals can make it. By interrogating Smith one is entering the heart of the dominant belief system. A course in social theory is not confined to theories critical of society, but includes the power of theories to legitimate society. We learn much about the dominant ideology when

we ask how Smith handles the gender division of labor, the future of slavery, or relations between nations.[8]

The ethnographic approach to social theory not only brings social theory into the lives of students, but it brings theories into a dialogue with one another. In the first semester, as a response to Smith, we develop the Marxist tradition, starting with six weeks of Marx and Engels, followed by two weeks each of Lenin, Gramsci, and Fanon. We construct Marx and Engels's theory from first principles enunciated in *The German Ideology*, proceeding to their theory of capitalism and its self-transformation advanced in *Wage Labour and Capital*, *Socialism: Scientific and Utopian*, and *The Communist Manifesto* – all to be found in Robert Tucker's (1978) *The Marx–Engels Reader*. Once we have created the architecture, we then ransack the theory, arriving at three fundamental flaws: an undeveloped theory of the state, a false theory of class struggle, and an absent theory of transition from capitalism to communism. From the critique of Marx and Engels we turn to reconstruction, engaging two flaws at a time. Facing the prospects of the Russian Revolution in 1917, Lenin writes *State and Revolution* interrogating the relation between state and transition; facing the absence of the predicted revolution in the West, Gramsci tackles the state and class struggle; and facing the prospects of the postcolonial future, Fanon tackles class struggle and transition. Each of these reconstructions calls forth further questions and anomalies.

Here we confront the "dialectics" of public sociology: how theoretically informed political practice contributes to changes in the world that feed back into sociological theory, requiring further theoretical revision. The life of theory reflects its engagement with the changing world it describes. At the end of the first semester I present students with a series of short articles on some transformative event in world history – anti-apartheid struggles or the Marikana massacre in South Africa, the Russian Revolution, Nicaraguan Revolution, Cuban Revolution, Zapatista movement in Mexico, the civil rights movement in the

9781509519149_Burawoy_print.indd 202 26/05/2021 11:14

US, the struggle of Palestinians against Israeli domination, and so on. They write four short essays showing how the theories of Marx–Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, and Fanon come alive in interpreting these historic moments.

If the first semester is the constitution of a theoretical tradition, the second semester is the clash of theoretical traditions, contestations that are not in any text but are created in the lecture hall, forcing students to evaluate competing theories against the world they know but also worlds they do not know, described in films and journalism. Again we read carefully selected excerpts from the chosen theorists for building their distinctive theory of the division of labor, so that we can then relate them back to the theories of the first semester. Thus, Durkheim faces off against Marx and Engels on the morality and future of the division of labor; Weber faces off against Lenin on the durability and future of bureaucracy; Foucault faces off against Gramsci on the relationship between state and civil society.

During the spring, the world often enters the lecture hall with campus protests. In my early years organizers for small revolutionary parties would invade the lecture hall, push me aside, and take over the class. I'd fight back and students and their GSIs would rise up to defend their benighted professor. Nothing like an invasion to build unity! More usually it's politics outside the classroom that attracts student attention – a strike by GSIs, a rally by Black Lives Matter, support for exploited lecturers. Here's a typical moment. It's 2011, the campus is in turmoil, the Occupy Movement is flexing its muscle. A student wanders into the class fifteen minutes late, interrupts me, and announces that a classmate has chained himself to the top of a building in protest against increases in student tuition. "Let's go and support him," she shouts. I turn to the class. We discuss what to do. Many are enthusiastic, others resentful, I strike a compromise – let's take the class to the picket lines and continue there. We are moving from Weber to Foucault so it's not difficult to bring theory to life

on the picket line – reading from the texts, using the public microphone, hundreds of us ask whether the university is a bureaucracy or a prison. Others join the discussion, curious about what we are up to. Theory in action!

The last part of the course is the development of a feminist tradition – Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 1989), Catharine MacKinnon (1982), and Patricia Hill Collins (1986) – that not only points to gender blindness but also turns the course upside down and inside out, by questioning the so-called objectivity of the theorists whose place in society shapes the way they see the world. Feminist theory claims that social theory is not only about capturing the nature of the world out there; it is also about the location of the theorist who constructs an understanding of the world from a certain vantage point. Social theorists are not astronomers mapping the universe; it matters that they are in the world they are theorizing. Smith, Marx, Engels, Durkheim, and Weber are not impartial observers offering competing theories, they are partial participants in a world they construct from different standpoints. Feminist theory throws the world back into the face of the student, forcing them to interrogate their own life from the standpoint of their gender and sexuality, then their race or their class. Theory has come home: from students of theory they become producers of theory. The last assignment is to construct their own map – a poster that summarizes the entire year-long course, illuminating the connections among the theorists through the lens of feminist theory. In a final twenty-minute conversation with their teaching assistant students present and defend their pictorial representation. I have a museum of the art of theory.

To treat teaching as public sociology is to think of students as a public, carrying a vision of who they are and how the world works. They are not empty vessels into which we pour pearls of wisdom, but living, sentient beings who are always thinking about the world around them and how they fit into it. Even if they don't see it in sociological terms, they are always thinking about their

9781509519149_Burawoy_print.indd 204 26/05/2021 11:14

place in the division of labor. I try to bring that thinking to the surface. A theory course based on the division of labor opens students' eyes to different meanings and dimensions, not only of the division of labor but also of their own lives.

Public sociology does not succeed by simply postulating alternative visions. It succeeds by bringing participants into four dialogues: the first is a dialogue between teacher and student that sets up the parameters of the course; the second is a dialogue between teaching assistant and students that brings theory to the world in which they live; the third is a dialogue among students in class and section but also around the succession of assignments and papers where they rediscover who they are; the fourth dialogue, the most ambitious one, carries social theory into the world beyond as they interact with fellow students, with family and with friends. This, at any rate, is the vision that I seek to realize.

I exploit my advantage – students are a captive public, consent backed up by force. They need the credential, the grade that means they are their own audience for two semesters, or, more broadly, for four years in which they are bombarded with interpretations of the world they inhabit. Public sociology in the world beyond is so much harder. Out there conveying sociology is intermittent at best – an interview, an opinion piece, an essay, a book – there is little that is systematic. Moreover, sociology faces competition from other disciplines, as well as from journalism, from film and television, and from social media. The public sphere is a terrain of power; because it competes with and disrupts common sense, sociology is near the bottom of the totem pole. In moments of crisis when common sense is shattered, then the space for sociology potentially widens.

And that's just the situation I face now in the fall of 2020. COVID-19 has led to cascading crises, each intensifying the next – health, economic, political, racial justice, and environmental – forcing a move to remote teaching. I wonder whether this will be the end of my life as a

teacher or possibly the beginning of a new one? It's not only a matter of learning new modes of communication and interaction but abandoning what I have practiced for forty years. I succumb to the use of PowerPoint – clearer to be sure but less alluring than the spontaneous drawing on the board. There's no room to walk around, no patrolling, no provoking, no joking – so my talk speeds up to make up for the loss of connection, of intimacy. There's no knowing if the students follow, except for the lively exchange on "chat." This is a most unusual year, as the pandemic feeds economic crisis that ricochets into political crisis. To be sure, theory is living in the world beyond, but does the medium overpower the message? It's a fundamental transition from the theater created in the lecture hall to the film composed in my study.

Used to marshalling an enclosed space of interacting bodies, I now have to engage and entertain tiny faces, some revealed, some not, on a desktop display. I can only see twenty-five of them at one time, and even then I cannot monopolize their attention. What about the other 150? With so many videos off, I wonder if they are even there. Behind those little squares are human beings in complex situations, struggling amid the unemployed, scrambling for a place of quiet, perhaps homeless, peering into their cell phones or their tablets, the Internet often failing. The inequalities we've been analyzing become part and parcel of learning – not just visible but magnified. Sociology becomes everyone's common sense, but can I take it one step further? In these bleak times can I convince students that another world is possible when they are struggling to survive; when close family members are dying in horrible circumstances, leading students to drop out of school. We dilute the course, give extensions on papers, show as much sympathy as we can. What can we build out of this crisis teaching in which the much-maligned education of the past becomes a utopia? I realize what a privilege it is to extricate students from their lives and have them right there, physically, in front of me, a captive audience.

9781509519149_Burawoy_print.indd 206 26/05/2021 11:14

It's the last throw of the dice. I transform the course by making the two semesters pivot around Du Bois, putting him in dialogue with the Marxist tradition in the first semester and with sociology in the second semester. Does his entry show us the way forward – a sociologist who stretched lived experience to the regional, to the national, and from there to the global, who wrote from the margins, who marched through crisis after crisis, who saw the barbarism of lynching but also the barbarism of European wars to colonize Africa; a sociologist whose social theory had its Durkheimian, Weberian, and Marxist moments, but who transcended them all, driven forward by his engagement with an unjust world as socialist, as Pan-Africanist, as civil rights leader, as journalist, artist, and novelist – public sociologist par excellence. Can he help us reconstruct sociology's foundations to give new visions to a world out of control?

It turned out that Du Bois's entry exploded the course, burst the bounds of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, undid the imaginary conversations I had developed over forty-three years. His literary genre, his unsystematic theory, his radicalism, his uncompromising public engagement, his outrage at the atrocities of racism, speaks directly to the students and to the times we are living in. I have changed, the students have changed, the university has changed, and the original inspiration of the theory course – Sociology versus Marxism – has run its course. Putting practice to paper is already a bad omen – threatening to petrify what had been open and experimental. I may not have sounded the death knell to living theory, but my version has had its day. It's time to move on. To retool, to start anew.