Preface

To the 1960s generation sociology promised so much – addressing questions of social justice, social inequality, social movements, and social change. Its potential was famously captured by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills in his definition of sociology as turning "personal troubles" into "public issues." This proves to be easier said than done.

In the chapters that follow I explore the promise of sociology by tracing my own trajectory into and through the discipline. I set out for India in 1967 with the naïve view that sociology would fix social problems if only we have adequate knowledge based on rigorous research. We just have to inform policy makers and they will do the right thing. I call this species of sociology *policy sociology*. My first lesson in sociology was to learn the importance of the social, political, and economic context of decision-making. Recognizing the limits of this policy sociology led me to *public sociology*, which did not speak to policy makers. It transmitted the result of research to broad publics. Here, again, I was naïve, overlooking the operation of power within the public sphere that repressed, diverted,

or co-opted the aims of public sociology. That was my second lesson – a lesson I learned in newly independent Zambia from 1968 to 1972.

Instead of giving up on sociology, I decided I didn't have an adequate grasp of its intricacies and its underlying theory. I left Zambia for the PhD program at the University of Chicago. There I discovered that the material I was expected to learn and absorb, what I call *professional sociology*, was more concerned with preserving rather than changing the status quo – or changing it only to keep it the same. So my third lesson concerned the umbilical cord connecting professional sociology to ideology, its complacent adjustment to ubiquitous exploitation, domination, and dispossession. I was not the only one to be disappointed. I became part of a rising generation that advanced a *critical sociology*, critical of the world but also of the reigning professional sociology.

That was the 1970s, when critical sociology was gaining adherents in many universities, not just in the US but across the globe. After graduating from Chicago, through an unlikely succession of events, I landed in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. There the struggle between insurgent graduate students and divided faculty had been particularly intense. After six tumultuous years I survived a tenure battle by the skin of my teeth. During the 1980s, now with the security of tenure, I sought to contribute to an emergent Marxist research program that led me to explore the meaning and possibilities of socialism in Hungary and then in the Soviet Union. I had hardly begun research in the Soviet Union when it collapsed, turning into a crony capitalism that sought to wipe out its "communist" past. Witnessing the inevitable dénouement, what I would call *involution*, I felt helpless and ineffectual. My fourth lesson was the marginality of sociology to ongoing debates.

Disillusioned with my research, facing a backlash against Marxism, I was in retreat when my journey took an unexpected turn. It was 1996. Desperate for

a new chair, my colleagues promoted me from departmental pariah to department head. From there I became head of the American Sociological Association and then head of the International Sociological Association. I had become a professional sociologist par excellence. I used these platforms to once again project the idea of public sociology.

Now I saw more clearly how public sociology depended on the three other knowledges – professional, policy and critical – if it was to create a conversation between sociologists and publics concerning the devastation of society. Drawing on my experiences in Russia I advanced theories of what has come to be known as neoliberalism, what I call *third-wave marketization*, how the world has been subjected to a destructive commodification of labor, nature, money, and knowledge. I searched for counter-tendencies, counter-movements that might avert the catastrophes that lay around the corner. I sought to understand how the commodification of knowledge was degrading the university – a vital source of alternative futures. With a better sense of the context and a more focused vision of what might be changed, I claimed to better understand the possibilities of public sociology – both its production and its reception. An evangelist for public sociology, I determined that teaching was my own immediate contribution to public sociology.

This is how I now make sense of my successive experiences as a sociologist, but those experiences emerged through a quite concrete research journey. If I began my initiation in 1967 in India, studying university education, for the next thirty-five years I became an intermittent worker – a "participant observer" of industry in Zambia, the US, Hungary, and Russia. My training as an anthropologist in Zambia led me to study others by joining them in their lives, that is, in their space and in their time. It meant that I became an unskilled worker in factories, helping to produce (and sometimes ruin) engines, gear boxes, steel, and furniture – my incompetence being an

embarrassment and often a danger to myself and my fellow workers. I traced the lived experience on the shop floor to the wider political, economic, and social realms. I demonstrated how my experience in the Zambian mining industry expressed the transition to postcolonialism, how my experience in the Chicago branch of Allis-Chalmers reflected the physiognomy of advanced capitalism, how my experience in the auto industry and steel industries of Hungary carried the dynamics of state socialism, and how my experience in rubber and furniture plants in the Soviet Union was shaped by the demise of state socialism and the transition to capitalism. My professional life was enlivened by a continuing struggle to defend the legitimacy of such an extension from micro-processes to macro-forces, but such an extension is the necessary foundation of any public sociology, for turning those personal troubles into public issues.

Since beginning this critical memoir five years ago I have lost my close friend Erik Olin Wright. He was a constant companion in the reconstruction of Marxism, what we were to call *sociological Marxism*. Technically, we were sociologists, rooted in the sociology departments that recruited us in 1976 – he at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and I at the University of California, Berkeley. Undeniably our professional commitments made us sociologists, but we were Marxist sociologists committed to the advance of sociological Marxism, a Marxism that restored the *social* in socialism. We had set out to supplant sociology, showing that Marxist science was superior to sociology. Over time we diluted our grandiose schemes but without ever losing our commitment to Marxism.

Erik moved from a scientific Marxism focused on "class analysis" to a critical Marxism focused on "real utopias," discovering the rudiments of socialist principles in the interstices and dynamics of capitalism. He scoured the globe for such concrete manifestations of an alternative world, collaborating with activists and practitioners to connect these different experiments and struggles. He

became a public sociologist. He will, perhaps, be best remembered for his last two books, both appearing posthumously. The first is a manifesto for real utopias, *How To Be an Anticapitalist in the 21st Century* (2019) – a popular version of his magnum opus, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010). The manifesto was instantly translated into thirteen languages, a reflection of his enormous influence not just in academia but among activists fighting for a better world. The second book, *Stardust to Stardust* (2020), is an extraordinary daily journal of reflections on living and dying. It begins in April 2018 when Erik was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, and ends nine months later with his death. Always one to live for the future, Erik showed us how to sustain optimism in the face of both personal and human extinctions. The book radiates utopianism not just in theory but also in practice: it relates how he turned life around him – family, neighborhood, school, department, and hospital – into a real utopia. His spirit guides this memoir, continuing the explorations that we began together – the tensions between utopia and anti-utopia.

Although I have acknowledged my teachers many times before, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge them once again. In their different ways Jaap van Velsen, who died in 1990, Adam Przeworski, and Bill Wilson made indelible imprints on me and my intellectual outlook. But I have had so many other teachers, too. My friends from South Africa, especially Eddie Webster, Luli Callinicos, and Harold Wolpe, who died in 1996, continually reminded me that another world exists, one of hope and struggle. My Hungarian and Russian escapades would not have been possible were it not for friends, colleagues, and collaborators, especially Iván Szelényi, János Lukács, Zsuzsa Hunyadi, Pavel Krotov, Tatyana Lytkina, Svetlana Yaroshenko, Volodya Ilyin, and Marina Ilyina, who inducted me into the byzantine world of socialism and postsocialism. Elsewhere, thanks to Shen Yuan who guided me through China, to Ruy Braga for introducing me to

Brazil, to Nazanin Shahrokni for giving me an unforgettable glimpse of Iran, to Sari Hanafi who showed me so many different sides of Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, and to Mona Abaza for walking me through Cairo's urban life during and after the Arab Spring. In England and in Wales, Huw Beynon has been a close friend, ever since we met to discuss industrial ethnography in a dark Chicago bar in 1975. I'm grateful to so many others in so many countries who have helped me understand how sociology contributes to making a better world.

The influence of students, both undergraduates and graduate students, has been deep, incalculable, and irreversible, not just in educating me but in making me, as I like to think, a better person. One former student, Laleh Behbehanian, now a brilliant teacher in Berkeley's sociology department, became the driving force behind this project. She became my coach. Her enthusiasm helped to dilute my skepticism concerning the value of my sociological account of my sociological life. She read the manuscript three times; each time her detailed comments sent me scurrying back to revise the manuscript. I was getting a dose of my own medicine. After the fourth iteration I couldn't bear to give it to her again. Enough already!

Besides, I was exhausting the patience of my editor at Polity, Pascal Porcheron, who had first approached me to write a short introduction to sociology. I originally agreed in the hope that I could write something for the undergraduates I had been teaching for 40 years. I owed them so much. It soon became apparent I was incapable of such an introduction. Instead I developed a reflection on my own trajectory through the four sociologies I had elaborated as president of the American Sociological Association in 2004 – the matrix of policy, public, critical, and professional sociologists. Unhappy with the drafts I sent him, I would have junked the whole enterprise were it not for the generous comments of two anonymous reviewers, as well as encouraging suggestions from Pascal himself who read

it not once but twice. They had found value in my reflections, so I continued in what seemed to me a Sisyphean task. I also benefited from the suggestions of Chris Muller on Chapter 10 and of Chris Newfield on Chapter 15. With Tyler Leeds's meticulous corrections and pointed suggestions, I was able to push the manuscript over the hill and into the abyss below. Ann Klefstad's careful editing delivered the final touch.

William Faulkner famously wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," yet still the past is understood differently with time. Even in the last five years my views have evolved in unexpected ways. It could not be otherwise as I struggled to complete this little book in the midst of COVID-19 – a mounting health and economic crisis – not to mention police atrocities, insurgent movements on left and right, and Trumpian megalomania. From the perspective of Oakland, California, it looks like the planet will never be the same again. The pandemic has exposed the deepening inequalities and suffering that sociologists have been studying for decades. But COVID-19 has not just exposed those inequalities, it has amplified them. This should be a time when sociology comes into its own, as the crisis compels everyone to adopt a sociological vision; sociology shows us how capitalism can be defenseless against the accumulating crises it nurtures. But the state response, the social protest against anti-Black policing, the successful struggle against Trumpism, and the strategies of human coping have opened up new possibilities, new imaginations of what the world could be like, should be like, has to be like, if it is to contain global pandemics, climate change, and racial injustice. Sociology's utopian mission remains making those possibilities real, an endeavour that also depends on recognizing what an uphill struggle that will be. But, as Erik Wright used to say, optimistically, "Where there's a way there's a will."