

Part Three

Public Sociology

It was naïve to think that sociology could present simple solutions to complex problems. The first lesson in sociology was to recognize that “social problems” cannot be divorced from the *context* out of which they arise and within which they swim. In the academic cloisters of Cambridge I could be narrowly focused on the question of the medium of instruction as though it were separate from the wider society, but once I arrived in India it was impossible to ignore the politics and social movements swirling around the language question.

It was no less naïve to think that powerful actors would use sociology for the benefit of all. The second lesson, therefore, was that behind any solution to a social problem were a set of *interests*. To be sure the mining companies were compelled for political reasons to introduce an integrated wage structure, but the solution they developed (with my help!) was to preserve the existing organization and racial hierarchy. In short, following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, one can think of the context as a field of actors with competing and conflicting interests.

My forays into the world of policy making exposed the social constraints on the feasible: both the constraints of context made up of actors and institutions and the constraints of interests carried by actors and embedded in institutions. Public sociology turns public attention

onto those constraints. It carries sociology into the public realm for an open dialogue, precisely on the limits of the possible and how those limits could then be transcended – the anti-utopian and utopian visions. As the next two chapters show, such public initiatives are also fraught with dilemmas and challenges, pointing to the third lesson of sociology – that the actors in a political field not only have different interests, but they also have a different capacity to realize those interests, what we call *power*.

In the first case of public sociology I attempt to expose racial practices in postcolonial Zambia not as a function of individual prejudices but as a function of class interests. By pointing to the strength of class interests inherited from the colonial order I underline the obstacles to social change in the hope that public awareness might lead to their mitigation or diversion. In propagating such an analysis one always has to be aware of the constellation of powers within the public realm. A sociological message critical of the mining industry, of the state, of the new ruling class can be suppressed or even mobilized in defense of the dominant powers.

Transmitting sociology via media into the public realm, what I call *traditional public sociology*, has to face the power asymmetries of that mediated world. It is often most effective when it does not directly challenge dominant powers, or launches itself in moments of crisis when the dominant are themselves divided or otherwise losing their power – their hegemony – over the dominated. In the case study below the mining companies were able to deploy my critical class analysis of their operations for their own ends.

An alternative approach to public sociology, what I call *organic public sociology*, is to avoid the distortions and interests of the media and instead pursue an unmediated engagement with publics. It means that the sociologist has a face-to-face relation with a more limited public, but one that is better organized and more determined. This was the case of my study of student rebellion. I was a student

at the University of Zambia; I lived on campus alongside other students; I was arrested with them. In other words, I participated in their projects, trying to understand their contribution to social change. I was accountable to them and when I steered my own course they rejected me. Organic public sociology has its own dilemmas to be negotiated – the dilemma of autonomy in collaboration.

