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Student Rebellion

The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines (1972a) represented *traditional* public sociology, transmitting sociology to wider audiences in the hope of generating public debate. It aims at a form of public education: developing a sociological appreciation of the way everyday experience is subject to internal as well as external constraints, and thus opening the possibility that things could be otherwise. Here sociology competes with messages from neighboring disciplines but, even more significantly, with official and unofficial media, and today social media, that have a grip on the terms of public discussion, a grip that panders to common sense, often at odds with sociology. Traditional public sociology can be an uphill battle.

There is, however, an alternative type of public sociology – *organic* public sociology – in which the sociologist has direct access to publics, in which the sociologist and public enter into an *unmediated* face-to-face relation. Instead of a broad, thin, passive, and mainstream public, organic public sociology encounters or creates narrow, thick, active counter-publics. If traditional public sociology's reliance on media entails losing control of the message, the more confined engagement of organic public sociology restores a semblance of control but at the cost of wider visibility. In this next project I engaged directly with the students at the new University of Zambia (UNZA). They,

too, were a successor generation – largely, to a Zambian ruling class – and as an aspirant class developed a hostile relation to those they would replace.

After working on the Copperbelt for a year and a half, I registered for an MA in sociology and anthropology at the University of Zambia. There were just two of us – an African student from Zimbabwe and myself. The degree was beset with controversy from the beginning. How could an under-resourced university in the Third World justify devoting so much time to training two students, neither of whom were Zambians nor had a background in sociology? Still, the chair of the department, Jaap van Velsen, insisted that it would be good for the department to have an MA program and this would be a good way to begin.

It was painful for both of us. We were thrown in at the deep end and we just had to learn to swim. The three senior faculty – an overpowering Dutchman trained as an anthropologist, a South African freedom fighter and learned academic, and a young anthropologist from Delhi – competed with one another to destroy our weekly essays. All three were broadly Marxist in orientation and that is how I, too, became a Marxist. In hindsight I was the fortunate recipient of a terrifying force-fed education in sociology and anthropology. I've never learned so much so quickly and under such duress.

Those were heady days when one felt, as a social scientist, that one was at the center of a turbulent transformation of society, in which utopian and anti-utopian visions openly clashed. What one was learning, even the most romantic anthropology, had immediate relevance to the challenges of national reconstruction. The multidisciplinary seminars held in the school of social science had an air of excitement – which I have rarely experienced again – as our research was connected to Zambia's exit from colonialism and entry into a new world. Debates that opposed socialism to capitalism had a sense of urgency and immediacy. Our research seemed to really matter.

The country was sufficiently small – at that time some four million inhabitants – that it presented a perfect social science laboratory. In those years and in that place disciplines were not impregnable silos but complementary and intersecting perspectives focused on the same object – a nation in transition.

Apart from pursuing a sociology degree I did have another motive in enrolling for an MA at UNZA and that was to learn about the politics of Zambian students. I was the only white student pursuing a degree while living among the undergraduates on campus – an education in itself. I turned my presence on campus into a study of the Zambian student movement. It became my MA thesis – a sprawling 500-page account of the place of Zambian students in the social and political structure that I condensed into a short article a few years later (Burawoy 1976b). My participant observation became a form of public sociology as I partook in campus activism alongside other students. I did not understand that I was playing with fire.

At the time of independence in 1964 there were but 100 university graduates – the new nation needed its own university, a symbol of its independence. It needed its own people to fill the positions occupied by expatriates. When I arrived on campus in 1970, the University of Zambia was only four years old. It had opened with an enrollment of 310 students and by 1970 its enrollment had risen to 1,469. The goal was to increase the number to 5,000. It was a modern concrete structure on the outskirts of the capital, Lusaka. Students saw themselves as a presumptive elite that would eventually replace both the remaining expatriates and the generation of Zambian leaders and professionals reared under colonialism.

The university was integral to Fanon's National Bourgeois Road, a channel of upward mobility. If students deployed contempt for the incumbents of the new ruling class, for the most part, it was not with a view to transforming the class structure but rather for themselves to

occupy the ramparts of power. There was a latent and sometimes blatant conflict between the aspirants of two roads into the ruling class – one via the university and educational credentials and the other via the youth wing of the dominant political party, the United National Independence Party (UNIP). Two principles of entitlement were at war: expertise versus loyalty. Each group was contemptuous of the other.

While I was learning sociology from books, from writing papers, from my teachers, I was also learning to practice sociology on a day-to-day basis in the student community. I turned up to the founding meeting of the University of Zambia Sociological Association (UNZASA), and even though I hardly said a word I was unanimously elected chair of the association – whether because of my color or my seniority I do not know. From that position I led a series of dangerous and problematic ventures. In the name of UNZASA we began inviting leading politicians and ministers to the campus. They knew they were entering a cauldron of hostility, but they were fearless, brilliant orators. They would stir things up by berating students for their arrogance and sense of entitlement. Students returned the compliment by turning their wrath on what they believed to be corrupt politicians betraying the public trust. UNZASA ran opinion polls that sought to define the student oppositional consciousness – polls that only confirmed the worst suspicions of UNIP's political leaders. I would write columns for the student newspaper, *UZ*, that often drew on the ideas of Fanon. You might say this was taking observant participation too far – or you might say this was a form of organic public sociology. In Latin America they called it *participant action research*.

In an annual ritual, students would organize a protest outside one of the foreign embassies – usually British or French – for their support of apartheid South Africa. It was always a protest that began in support of government policy. Zambia, after all, was one of the front-line states providing a home for the exiled African National Congress

(the banned opposition party to apartheid) and, as a result, bearing the brunt of hostilities from South Africa. In 1970 I was absent from the protest, having a prior engagement on the Copperbelt, and so fellow students began to question my loyalties. The following year I made sure I was marching with them – this time against the French Embassy, protesting the sale of Mirage jet fighters to South Africa. That year the protest turned into a battle with the police. Decked out in riot gear, they took to disbanding the students with tear gas. Students fought back and several arrests were made, including myself, an all too visible white protestor. We were in jail for a few hours before being released on our own recognizance, with a trial to follow. Having joined forces with the protesting students, I became an instant hero.

Infuriated by the police response to their demonstration of support for government policy, student leaders turned on President Kaunda, publicly exposing secret letters he had been exchanging with the South African Prime Minister, John Vorster. From the standpoint of the ruling party, students constituted an unruly opposition. Such flagrant attacks on the most sacred of national symbols – President Kaunda himself – could not go unpunished. UNIP Youth marched on the university in protest against the students, and that night the police, supported by the military, invaded the campus. We were herded out of our dorms at gunpoint and the following day the Chancellor declared the university closed. Two expatriate lecturers were expelled, accused of inciting students and spreading subversive ideas – convenient scapegoats to explain the disloyalty of students.

When the university reopened three months later, the political atmosphere on campus had been transformed. The party had infiltrated the student body, instigating the creation of a UNIP Branch on campus, designed to monitor and regulate student politics. Previously free of party politics, the campus was now divided between UNIP supporters and those of the opposition party, the United

Progressive Party (UPP). The conflict had a strong ethnic coloring, as the UPP was based in the Copperbelt, the home of the Bemba people. We ran another opinion poll on student reaction to the closure of the university and the expulsion of the lecturers. The opposition sentiments, clearly expressed in the results, only exacerbated hostilities between government and students. UNIP students turned on me, attacking me as a secret agent of South Africa. I was already on my way out – a fitting but depressing end to my involvement in Zambian student politics.

Traditional public sociologists can hide behind the protection of the university and its safeguard of free speech and autonomy – where they exist. Organic public sociologists, on the other hand, give up such autonomy when they immerse themselves in their community of engagement. They become vulnerable to forces they don't control. Being directly accountable to those one studies can be a matter of life and death, as sociologists have found in the dictatorships of Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere – dictatorships that can threaten the very existence of sociology as civil society is eclipsed.

My experience in Zambia was at once exhilarating and sobering. Social change does not come easily and when it does occur it cannot be easily engineered. It often takes place behind one's back. Sociology had begun to provide me with the tools to understand those occult forces: how they operate within a context, a field of contestation among actors who mobilize power in pursuit of their interests. I was still groping for theories that might help me better understand what that field looks like, who were the actors in it, how they mobilized power, and what shaped their interests.

But theories are not simply ways of organizing research, differing in their explanatory power. They also have political significance. Theories become actors in the political arena: ideologies that justify the existing array of institutions, constellations of interests, and the distribution of power; utopias that grip people's imagination

and thereby propel collective action. Theories animated the ruling class's perspective on development, the corporation's abstention from politics, and student engagement in politics. Both as scientific schemes and as political forces, theories become the necessary backdrop of any public sociology. I needed to learn about theory.