

Part Six

Real Utopias

It was some time in 1997 that I received a call from Teresa Sullivan, then Secretary of the American Sociological Association (ASA), more recently President of the University of Virginia (2010–18) where she valiantly defended the university against corporatization. We had been graduate students together in Chicago. “Michael,” she said, “it’s time you did something for the ASA. I want you to stand for the Publications Committee.” She was right. I had done nothing for the ASA. In my mind the ASA represented the dominance of the more conservative elements in US sociology, the very elements against which I had been struggling. Even though I had been at Berkeley for twenty years and was chair of my department, my professionalism was skin deep. Or so I thought. She said, “I just want you to stand; it doesn’t mean you’ll be elected.” Not thinking it was likely that I would be elected, I agreed. Much to my consternation I was elected. A new world opened up before me.

In that first year, the Publications Committee received a handful of submissions for new editors of the association’s top professional journal – the *American Sociological Review*. Our role was to evaluate and rank the submissions. After careful study of all the submissions and much discussion we all agreed to put forward two especially enterprising proposals that we thought would give new

energy and direction to the journal. Our top choice was a team led by an African American who would have given the journal a new lease of life. Our proposal went to Council, the top legislative body in the ASA, which conventionally rubber-stamps the decisions of the Publications Committee. In this case, however, Council voted to reject both nominations and instead selected another editorial team not even in our top three. We on the Publications Committee were aghast. It confirmed my worst suspicions of professionalism.

We protested without effect – the President said Council was within its rights to overturn a decision of the committee. That was correct, but then why have a Publications Committee? We wanted to protest publicly but our hands were tied by a confidentiality rule – breaking that rule could embarrass those who had been chosen by the Publications Committee and discredit the editors chosen by Council. From our point of view there was a clash of principles – the formal rights of Council against our accountability to the membership we were elected to serve. Already fed up, I inclined toward the latter. I publicly resigned in the summer of 1999 with a letter that explained what had happened and the issues at stake, but mentioning no names. The President accepted my resignation but, he said, in making it public I was in clear violation of the ASA Code of Ethics, and he would charge me with misconduct before the ethics committee. He had declared war, so I circulated his letter to all and sundry. These are the struggles within the professional community: seemingly petty and trivial from the outside, real and significant from the inside.

In standing my ground I had no idea I was tapping into resentment that had been welling up for some time – the membership latched onto the conflict to protest the arrogance of Council. The high-handed action of the President – he could have consulted with the Publications Committee, he could have asked us to reconsider our decision, he could have negotiated a path forward

– crystallized mounting opposition that reached a climax in a massively packed business meeting at the annual meeting of the ASA, when the President and members of Council were roundly condemned. Vindicated but no longer a member of the Publications Committee, I was asked by the nominations committee to stand for Council, which I did, and two years later in 2002 for President, which I also did – in each case winning. This was a very rapid and totally unexpected ascent up the professional hierarchy. Despite my reluctance, fate decreed that I change my attitude.

This entry into the world of professional sociology coincided with a growing disillusionment with my own research. I had begun to wonder what I was doing in the Arctic, witnessing Russia's unregulated descent into merchant capitalism. Here was an opportunity to turn my gaze back on sociology – what did it all mean? The election also coincided with the end of an eight-year stint as department chair that I shared with my close friend and colleague, Peter Evans. As I explained in Chapter 2, throughout that time I had already been promoting the idea of public sociology that, I believed, distinguished Berkeley sociology. Now I had a chance to take this idea into the heart of professional sociology – a return to my naïve vision of sociology cultivated in my Zambian research, but now with thirty years of experience of teaching, research, and administration.

So I became an evangelist for public sociology, arguing that not only did the world need public sociology, but in order to flourish the discipline also needed public engagement. I was not the first to make public sociology central to a campaign. Herb Gans had done it before me when he had been President of the ASA in 1988. But he was less a preacher and more a practitioner, having written a great deal about journalism as well as being immersed in debates over the causes and alleviation of poverty. Where he was looking outwards, I was looking inwards at the composition of our discipline. I placed public sociology

in relation to professional, policy, and critical sociologies, and behind that I was asking two fundamental questions: Knowledge for whom? Knowledge for what? (Burawoy 2005). This would lead to more than a decade of ferocious debates, countless articles and symposia, edited collections – all effectively raising the question of what we were up to as sociologists. My national campaign culminated in the ASA's annual meeting of 2004 in San Francisco that broke all attendance records. It was a good time to be advocating for public sociology – the ASA membership had passed motions against the Bush administration's initiation of the Iraq War and against moves to outlaw same-sex marriage.

As ASA President I was using what power I had to set the terms of a debate about the meaning of sociology and, thereby, supporting many who had been marginalized or ignored by the dominant professionalism. I was attacked from every side – professional sociologists attacked public sociology as a cover for my Marxism, policy sociologists attacked me for politicizing the discipline and undermining its scientific credentials, public sociologists attacked me for giving too much credence to professional sociology, critical sociologists attacked me for refusing to endow public sociology with a singular normative stance. But the attacks only gave vitality to the question of public sociology.

During this period, I began visiting South Africa on a regular basis. My friend Eddie Webster, leading labor sociologist in South Africa, director of SWOP (then the Sociology of Work Unit, now the Society, Work and Politics Institute) persuaded me that it was time to give up my Russian research and return to South Africa. So I did. In 2000 Eddie invited me to be an advisor on a Deep Mining Project, investigating the feasibility of gold mining 5 kilometers underground. So began regular visits to South Africa almost every year for the next fifteen years, working with PhD students and faculty tied to SWOP, giving lectures in different departments across South Africa, and

attending conferences. I did not attempt any research of my own, but focused on trying to understand the practice of sociology in South Africa, in particular how SWOP was so successful in engaging with diverse publics through research, seminars, and their famous breakfasts, attended by politicians, government officials, unions, and the wider public.

On one of these trips to South Africa Peter Alexander, later Kate Alexander, from the University of Johannesburg invited me to work with his MA students on their collective research. There on an island in the Vaal River I met Sujata Patel, who was also invited to work with the students. It proved to be the beginning of a professional relationship that drew me into the International Sociological Association (ISA) as well as a succession of visits to India. Sujata was then ISA Vice-President for National Associations, and she encouraged me to stand as her successor. I became Vice-President 2006–10 and was then elected President, 2010–14. I was becoming the archetypical professional!

Those eight years gave me a platform to discuss public sociology in very different places, forcing me to consider the production and reception of sociology across the globe. During those years I also taught two (video-recorded) courses with Laleh Behbehani – Global Sociology Live! and Public Sociology Live! – involving Skype-orchestrated discussions with some of the most inspiring public sociologists from all over the world. In a parallel venture, I began *Global Dialogue*, designed to foster international debate and discussion of contemporary issues through a sociological lens. It began as a newsletter in three languages and ended as a colorful quarterly magazine in seventeen languages, powered and translated by teams of young sociologists from many different countries. It continues to this day under the direction of Brigitte Aulenbacher, Klaus Dörre, and their young colleagues.

Coming to terms with “global sociology” entailed understanding the global field of knowledge production and

consumption, its patterns of domination and exclusion. It meant studying the crises of the university, attempting to situate those crises in a theory of capitalism. Public sociology, in particular, lies suspended between two intersecting fields. On the one hand, it battles for expression within an external field shaped by the forces of capitalism – forces that simultaneously inspire the need for but also circumscribe the possibility of sociological engagement. On the other hand, public sociology is produced within an academic field that is itself shaped by the same capitalism. We need to locate public sociology both in relation to a theory of capitalism and then a theory of the university. That is my task for this last part of the book.

We have already engaged Karl Polanyi's ideas in their application to the Russian transition to capitalism; its pathological form captures key features of the contemporary order – the confluence of precarious labor, a devastated environment, and the corrosive effect of finance capital. Russia also led the way in privatizing the production of knowledge, wrecking its public universities in the process. While I had seen few signs of collective struggles against unregulated capitalism in Russia, my Presidency of the ISA coincided with a wave of social movements that spread across the globe – the new movements of the Arab Spring, Occupy, and Indignados energized older movements of peasants, labor, women, and environmental justice. If anything united these movements, it was not their opposition to economic exploitation in production but to the destructive commodification of what I call third-wave marketization – the subject of the first chapter that follows.

Public sociology cannot ignore third-wave marketization and the devastation it has brought to life on earth and will continue to bring to life on earth if it is not drastically reversed. Public sociology has a special role to play in contesting third-wave marketization. I follow Erik Wright, pioneer and founder of the “real utopias project,” in focusing on the institutions, organizations, and social

movements that appear within capitalism but, at the same time, challenge its principles. I had worked with Erik in the early development of the project during the 1990s after the Soviet Union had dissolved and with it the very idea of an alternative to capitalism; it was a time when Francis Fukuyama was declaring the end of history, so new visions of what could be were urgently required. Now I am bringing his project into line with public sociology. After all, Erik elaborated the meaning of his real utopias through conversations with their practitioners, turning them into generalizable alternatives that could be widely disseminated. The task, however, is not only to elaborate these experiments as alternatives, but to connect them to each other as responses to marketization. While Erik's real utopias expand freedom, equality, and security, reactions to third-wave marketization can also move in the opposite direction. My colleague Arlie Hochschild, in her 2016 book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, engages Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, trying to understand their very different responses to market-induced environmental degradation. Here the public sociologist wrestles with a reactionary utopia, with people who do not share her values. After four years of Trumpism and similar phenomena in so many other countries, engaging with right-wing movements has become imperative.

Third-wave marketization polarizes classes and politics, creating new audiences, clients, and partners for public sociology, but it is also transforming the very conditions of the production of knowledge and its reception in the public sphere. As I describe in the second chapter that follows, third-wave marketization is transforming the university, subjecting knowledge to commodification, turning it from a public good into a private enterprise in search of revenue. In attending to its fiscal crisis, the university generates governance, identity, and legitimation crises that can only be reversed through active reaffirmation of its public character. Sociology is well suited for this challenging task, not just in its engaged research

but, as I shall argue in the last chapter, in its participatory pedagogy. The commodification of knowledge has yet to destroy this recalcitrant discipline whose roots lie in civil society, and whose *raison d'être* is to oppose the over-extension of market and state.