

## ROBERT OWEN IN THE HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: THREE PRESENTIST VIEWS

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This paper argues that the present-day disagreements over the right course for sociology and its public role are reflected and paralleled in contemporary historiography of Robert Owen, British social reformer and a self-described social scientist. Historical accounts, written from the perspectives of public sociology, “pure science” sociology, and anti-Marxism, interpret Owen’s historical role in mutually antithetical and self-serving ways. Contrasting the three presentist accounts, I engage in an analysis of “techniques of presentism”—history-structuring concepts, such as “disciplinary founder” and “disciplinary prehistory,” that allow presentist authors to get their effects. Along the way, I elaborate Peter Baehr’s classification of sociology’s founders. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

### INTRODUCTION

In a now classic editorial of the first number of this journal, George Stocking (1965) expressed his concern with the historiography of the social sciences, which merely extends the arena of modern-day competition. He argued that, as the tensions in a given discipline increase, authors attempt to legitimize their present views by appropriating certain “firsts” and “founders” of the discipline, as well as presenting the history of their field as a “dramatic struggle between children of light and children of darkness.” Stocking was deeply skeptical toward such “presentist” historiography of the behavioral sciences due to its propensity to judge the past instead of understanding it. However, despite Stocking’s and subsequent critiques, “presentist” and “utilitarian” approaches continue to mark much of what practitioners have to say about the great men and women of their field or the “underlying logic” of that field’s development. Perhaps, then, we also need a different approach to the study of the presentist uses of disciplinary history, an approach that would supplement the critique of historical anachronisms with sociological analysis, an approach that would replace judgment with understanding on this higher level of historiographical analysis as well. That way we may learn to investigate the historical disagreements over the roles and images of the dead authors with the aim of enriching our understanding of academic and political tensions, which gave birth to these very disagreements. Presentist history may often be simpleminded history, but it is also strategic and functional, and it is hardly ever studied as such.

This article explores such an approach to presentism in a case study of modern-day disagreements over the public role of sociology and their reflections in the contemporary historiography of Robert Owen (1771–1858), the British social reformer, community builder, factory manager, early socialist, and a self-described social scientist. Now, Owen has a long

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history of being exploited for all kinds of *boundary work* (Gieryn, 1983), and it is easy to understand why he is such a useful token in sweeping claims about the history and current state of modern ideologies, political movements, and academic disciplines. Owen was making his fortune and theorizing at the very dawn of the industrial world and was pioneeringly involved in a multitude of theoretical and practical activities, many of them characteristically modern: industrial cotton spinning, poor relief, community building, trade unionism, cooperativism, education, feminism, millennialism, secularism, political economy, socialism, social science, etc. Furthermore, Owen and his followers are hardly surpassable when it comes to coining and disseminating the key terms of modern political vocabulary. It was in the context of the Owenite movement that “individualism,” “socialism,” and “social science” were publicly introduced to the British audiences (Claeys, 1986).

All this goes a long way in explaining Owen’s legacy as a central character in a variety of scholarly and political agendas and their historical legitimations. In the hands of K. Marx and F. Engels, Owen became both a “father of English socialism” (perhaps Owen’s best-known image) and a key exponent of “utopian socialism,” a term juxtaposed to their self-described “scientific socialism.” Karl Polanyi credited Owen for nothing less than the discovery of society (Polanyi, 2001). British conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott held Owen’s project to be the most sublime manifestation of what he pejoratively called “politics of rationalism” (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 10). Different movements sought their paternal origins in the image of Owen, most famously the British cooperators and the Fabians (Harrison, 1969, pp. 1–8; Gatrell, 1970). More interestingly, Owen was also described as the “father of scientific management” (O’Hagan, 2007), as well as the “father of a particular form of conservatism” (Gatrell, 1970, p. 15).

In the present study I explore the latest chapter of this story. I focus on three recent interpretations of the historical role of Owen’s “science of society.”<sup>1</sup> Michael Burawoy invoked Owen as the first sociologist in his public sociology writings. In marked contrast, historian of science Antoine Picon in his 2008 contribution on *Utopian Socialism and Social Science* explicitly refused Owen the status of the “founding father of modern social sciences” and relegated him to their “prehistory.” Owen also appeared as a central character in Joshua Muravchik’s (2002) *Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism*, where the classic Marxist distinction between utopian and scientific socialism is reversed, and Owen, rather than Marx, is presented as the true scientist of the socialist tradition.

My thesis is that the three claims are oriented by mutually antithetical outlooks concerning the appropriate public role for social (and socialist) knowledge in the twenty-first century. In that sense, I engage in a case study of Stocking’s (1965) thesis stating that “when there is no single framework which unites all the workers in a field, but rather competing points of view or competing schools, historiography simply extends the arena of their competition.” The “arena” in this case is an ongoing sociological debate kick-started by Burawoy’s presidential address during the 2004 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (Burawoy, 2005a), a debate popularly referred to as the *Public Sociology Wars* (Burawoy, 2009). First, I show why Burawoy’s choice of Owen as the first sociologist must be seen as part of Burawoy’s advocacy for public sociology. Second, although Picon and Muravchik did not participate in the public sociology debate, I explain that their treatment of Owen extends and reinforces the categories and arguments over what social science should be about, used by Burawoy’s

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1. Owen used the terms “science of society,” “science of human nature,” and “science of man” in his *Outline of a rational system of society* (1830), and “social science” in his *Book of the new moral world* (1836). Other synonymous terms used by Owen and his followers were “the science of surroundings” and “the science of promoting human happiness”. See Harrison (1969, pp. 78–87) and Goldman (1983, p. 606).

direct critics, namely proponents of a “Strong Program in Professional Sociology” and anti-Marxist sociologists. In other words, I reconstruct the clashes over Owen’s historical image as a battlefield of present-day sociological wars.

It is important to note, however, that this reconstruction will not share the historicist criticism of presentist anachronisms, distortions, and neglect of context, but will instead engage in a functional analysis: Why is Owen attractive in making larger claims about the nature and general character of sociology, social science, and socialism? What aspects of Owenism are selected to make those claims? What kind of historiographical tools are used to advance one’s presentist agenda? In answering these questions I will mainly concentrate on what I call *techniques of presentism*, history-structuring concepts such as “disciplinary founder,” “disciplinary prehistory,” “experimental socialism,” as well as periodizations used to historicize competing disciplinary visions as products of bygone eras. I will explore the benefits that each of these *techniques of presentism* gives to authors in the business of telling purposeful creation stories of science. My preliminary insights on such *techniques of presentism* are meant as an argument for a novel approach to presentist historiography, one that offers historians of science an alternative to the oft-unproductive historicist critiques, and encourages them to focus on the actual intentions and work that is being cunningly done by the presentist authors to get their effects. To give but one example, in this study a focus on *techniques of presentism* will enable an intervention to Peter Baehr’s (2002) classification of “founders of sociology.” I will argue that Burawoy’s decision to nominate Owen as the first sociologist cannot be grasped by Baehr’s conceptual types of “founders of discourses” and “founders of institutions,” and thus requires a new type, reflective of a new type of sociology that Burawoy is proposing.

Before we set out, a few sentences are in place regarding previous attempts to determine Owen’s importance in the genesis of the social sciences. According to Harrison (1969), the Owenite doctrine of philosophical necessitarianism (or environmentalism) anticipated later developments in social psychology and behavioral science in general. “The character of man is formed for and not by him” was the central tenet of Owen’s “science of surroundings” as well the basis of his socialism, therefore one should not find it surprising that Owenites frequently used the two terms—*social science* and *socialism*—as synonyms (Harrison, 1969, p. 78). The Owenite science of man and society was never just an intellectual adventure, but also an urgent attempt to protect the society from degradation. Along with other authors (Goodwin, 1978), Harrison also explored the indebtedness of Owen’s quest for the science of society to the rationalism of Enlightenment, especially its Scottish variety. Goodwin (1978) ascribed Owen the role of the “midwife of sociology,” claiming that he was the first one to realize fully the political dimension of the free will/determinism problem. In Owen’s view, liberal doctrines based on free will, moral responsibility, and the myth of equal opportunities were based on a false conception of human nature and ignored its social conditionings. Owen called upon the language of science to argue the determinist case and to construct new institutions of character formation, all of which Owen attempted to put into practice in the New Lanark cotton mill village (Scotland), and later, with less success, in the New Harmony socialist community (Indiana, United States). Claeys (1986) did a great deal of archival work to uncover Owen’s and his followers’ role in the social career of “social science” as a term. Not only does Claeys pinpoint the first public English-language usage of the term in the Owenite writings, but he also shows that it was probably from the Owenite movement that the term was taken up by John Stuart Mill, rather than from Auguste Comte as the popular story goes.<sup>2</sup> The challenge

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2. See Claeys (1986) and Claeys (1989). For the importance of the Comte-Mill link in disseminating the term, see Burns (1959).

of Owenite economy of cooperation to classical political economy was studied by Polanyi (2001), Harrison (1969), Gattrell (1970), Treble (1971), Claeys (1989), and others.<sup>3</sup>

Today Owen studies are as vibrant as ever,<sup>4</sup> but it seems that Owen's claim to have created a science of society and to have established the laws of social dynamics no longer interests the students of the Owenite movement. Instead, "Owen, the scientist" continues to be an attractive token for a somewhat different group of authors with broader academic or political agendas. The present paper reflects on three such novel accounts of Owen's science of society and exposes the essential historical flexibility of the image of Owen, the social scientist. Perhaps such an exposition will inspire Owen students and historians of science to take up the topic again and come up with a more balanced and nuanced account of Owen's importance in the birth of our social sciences. "Owenism as it really happened," however, is not the purpose of this study. What I am interested in is not a historicist account of Owen's attempt to create a science of society, but an analysis of different presentist accounts of this attempt, meant as an alternative to historicist critiques of such accounts.

The structure of the paper follows from my decision to consider three sociological visions and three respective historical accounts of Owen. In the three sections of this paper I will in turn focus on Burawoy's, Picon's, and Muravchik's interpretations of Owen's historical role, revealing their argumentative correspondence to the three respective stances in the contemporary public sociology debate: public sociology, "Strong Program in Professional Sociology" (or pure science model of sociology), and anti-Marxist sociology.

#### MICHAEL BURAWOY DISCOVERS A FOUNDER: OWEN, THE FIRST SOCIOLOGIST

Why did Burawoy, a reformer of twenty-first century sociology, find it important to proclaim that "the first sociology was utopian sociology, expressed in England by Robert Owen and his reflections on New Lanark, the communal projects in the United States, and the various visions of socialism" (Burawoy, 2006a, p. 53)?<sup>5</sup> What is the relationship between Burawoy's public sociology and his choice of Owen as the first sociologist? What is the meaning of invoking the New Lanark cotton mills (which Owen successfully managed from 1800 to 1824) in an account of sociology's history? In this section of the paper, I first present, if only briefly and selectively, Burawoy's call for public sociology. I then reflect upon Burawoy's presentist account of sociology's history and the centrality of Owen in that account. Finally, Burawoy's "politics of founders" is examined against Peter Baehr's typology of the "founders of sociology." I propose that the recent appearance of a number of reformatory visions for a more engaged sociology gave rise to a new type of "founder of sociology," or, to be more correct, to a new kind of use of that concept.

#### *Burawoy's Program*

To put it in a nutshell, public sociology stands for a politically activist and essentially leftist sociology, in which the tasks of a sociologist go beyond his academic duties. Burawoy's call for public sociology is an invitation for his colleagues to engage in a constructive dialogue

3. A number of economics-related articles are included in a *Robert Owen and His Legacy*, a 2011 collection of articles, based on papers given at a colloquium held to commemorate the 150th anniversary Owen's death (Thompson & Williams, 2011).

4. For biographical studies, see Donnachie (2005) and Chris (2009). For collections of articles, see Thompson and Williams (2011) and Bickle and Cato (2009).

5. Owen's role in the birth of sociology is considered in Burawoy's other three publications: Burawoy (2005c, 2006b, 2007).

with the publics of our declining civil society and to empower them to withstand state despotism and market tyranny under the common flag of neoliberalism (Burawoy, 2005a). Burawoy encourages sociologists to work “in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counter public” (Burawoy, 2005a, p. 7), bringing their professional knowledge and skills to enter an ongoing dialogue with these publics about fundamental values and means. Although Burawoy himself comes from the Marxist tradition and is “unapologetically of the left” (Zussman & Misra, 2007, p. 10), he insists that “public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence” (Burawoy, 2005a, p. 8), meaning that a public sociologist is oriented by his personal values in his choices of publics to collaborate with, be it a “labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant right groups, human rights organizations [. . . ] it can as well support Christian fundamentalism as it can liberation sociology or communitarianism” (Burawoy, 2005a). Nevertheless, Burawoy (2005a) is unambiguous in his assessment of the sociological profession as being politically “left” (while “the world has moved right”) and in his call for sociology’s accountability to a “vision of democratic socialism” (Burawoy, 2005b).

Another important point of Burawoy’s program is that nowadays sociologists can no longer hope to defend the social against the market—Burawoy’s unquestionable *raison d’être* for sociology—through the state because in the neoliberal age the state is “no longer the bulwark of market expansion but its agent and partner” (Burawoy, 2005c, p. 157). Due to these external circumstances, sociology now turns to the last remaining bulwark of the “social defense” in the name of civil society, and collaborates with local publics.<sup>6</sup> According to Burawoy (2005c), “the diversity of their value orientation” requires sociology to drop the now dysfunctional myth of “pure science” for what is called “value science.” Sticking to the “knowledge-base of the empirical research” of the positivist sociology, the new sociology must dialectically combine this empirical knowledge with the “value dimension” and “utopian dimension” of the first-wave sociology, as Burawoy calls the inceptive stage of sociology’s history.

#### *Burawoy’s Wave Model of Sociology’s History*

As is already evident, Burawoy conceptualizes his project not as a mere vision of one sociologist, but as a historically emerging and thus necessary change in sociology’s orientation. This is in line with the familiar sociological bent for restructuring the discipline’s past “in order to reexamine its present and revise its future, turning to the history of sociology in an attempt to build or dismantle, construct or deconstruct, one sociological tradition or another” (Philips & VanAntwerpen, 2007, p. 733). Burawoy’s historical strategy (2005c, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) is based on a scheme of three waves of marketization and three respective waves of sociology (as functions of broader social responses to the force of markets). In this scheme, the ideal of pure, positive science of sociology is presented as the historical product of the second-wave marketization (1920–1970). This wave was the “era of national self-protection,” with the state assuming increasingly larger functions in guaranteeing the social rights. Where such protection had taken the form of totalitarianism, sociology was destroyed. In democratic societies, however, sociology “becomes focused on policy questions of the emergent welfare states (Burawoy, 2005c, p. 157)”. Sociology strikes a coalition with the state in dealing with the issues of “inequality, educational opportunity, poverty, political stability, industrial organization, and the family” (p. 157) and assumes the role of developing corresponding state

6. For how this collaboration looks in practice, see a collection of case studies in public sociology (Jeffries, 2009). In particular, see part II: “The Practice of Organic Public Sociology: Case Studies.”

policies. Therefore, Burawoy argues, the claim of this generation of sociologists “was not that sociology should be a science for science’s sake but rather that it should be applied to the world through the mediation of the state” (p. 155). It was these historical circumstances that gave birth to the program of a pure and value-neutral positive science. An efficient participation in the policy world required a coherent disciplinary framework, which was achieved by structural functionalism and an emphasis on method.

In marked contrast, the first-wave marketization (-1920) and the third-wave marketization (1970-) share the state’s inactivity in restraining the market. It is this argument—more than any other—that allows Burawoy to fish for inspiration and legitimating heroes in the period of sociological beginnings. But what kind of sociology has the first-wave marketization produced? Appearing together with civil society, the first sociology was of a *utopian* kind, and the character of its science was *speculative*. It appeared in England “as a moral enterprise defending the society against the market, especially the destruction of community as newly proletarianized, destitute and degraded populations made the city their home” (Burawoy, 2007, p. 363). From here emanates Burawoy’s nomination of a founder, apparently chosen on the basis of Robert Owen being the first to commit to the fundamental sociological mission à la Burawoy. Drawing on K. Polanyi’s hero-worshipping of Owen as the great prophet of the nineteenth century idea of “society,” Burawoy (2005c, p. 157) substantiates Owen’s status as a father-figure by claiming that “both his theory and his organization of the self-regulating community at New Lanark epitomizes the creation of an industrial society against the market.”<sup>7</sup>

### *The Symbolism of Owenism*

What is of particular interest about Burawoy’s “politics of founders” is that, although he refers to Owen’s central role in the birth of sociology in at least four different publications (2005c, 2006a, 2006b, 2007), the claim is left unelaborated and not a single Owenite concept or social innovation is referred to in a thorough fashion. Such a seeming paradox is very much in line with what Harrison (1969, p. 260) meant when he wrote that after 1850s Owenite writings “had come to be regarded not as a legacy but as a relic.” Neither socialists, nor social scientists had ever much use for the legacy of the Owenite literature, which “lay forgotten in the little libraries of the cooperative societies, secular halls and working men’s institutes,” but what they did find useful was the huge symbolic charge of the very image of Owen.

This is also the case with Burawoy. Without any interest in *using* Owen for theoretical purposes, he *invokes* him for symbolic purposes. In Owen’s image Burawoy finds someone who was fervently protecting the industrial workers against the forces of the market at the very dawn of the “first-wave marketization”; who pioneeringly used the language of social science as a socialist alternative to the “individual science of political economy” (Claeys, 1986), an archenemy of both Owen and Burawoy; who practiced that science together with impoverished publics in locations of real human life, instead of the ivory tower of the academy or the offices of the conservative state; a socialist (indeed, the “first socialist,” according to many) whose legacy was not compromised by the state socialism of the twentieth century. Seen in this light, Robert Owen is indeed a fitting historical icon for public sociology,<sup>8</sup> Burawoy’s extension “of

7. Having crowned the founder of sociology, Burawoy proceeds to list the other heroes of the “First-wave (utopian) sociology,” such as Comte, Marx, Engels, and Durkheim, who are all described as *speculative* authors, “imbued with moral concerns to reverse the degradation brought about by nineteenth century capitalism” (Burawoy, 2007, p. 363). In the next chapter the reader will be presented with a cardinaly different periodization of sociology’s history and a radically different interpretation of the relationship between Owen and the classical sociologists like Durkheim and Weber.

8. This, however, is a rather one-sided picture of Owen. Moreover, one could employ Burawoy’s own analytical tools to effectively challenge his “politics of history” and the choice of Owen as a historical icon for public sociology. At this



what is to become the future as far as possible into the past, thereby constructing an image of continuity, consistency and determinacy” (Lepenes & Weingart, 1983, p. xvii).

*Classifying the Founders of Sociology: Owen as a New Conceptual Type?*

In a historicist line of critique, Burawoy’s identification of sociology’s starting point with Owen’s undertakings in the New Lanark cotton mills would be denounced as a mere act of legitimation of “a present point of view by claiming for it a putative ‘founder’ of the discipline” (Stocking, 1965, p. 215), as yet another regrettable *origin myth* constructed to strengthen and traditionalize “present views by showing that a great thinker ‘discovered’ these, our truths a hundred years ago, that our questions are ‘perennial ones’” (Samelson, 1974, p. 223). Following Alvin Gouldner’s (1962, p. 12) famous proclamation, one could also add that a “discovery” of a new founder should always be interpreted as a sure sign of “a dispute over the character of the profession.” Surely, all this is true, and it is no longer an original or controversial point to argue that disciplinary founders are determined arbitrarily and subjectively, or that such nomination is “partly a matter of opinion and partly the result of an unexamined assumption about how new disciplines emerge and crystallize” (Merton, 1968, p. 2). We are now aware of this if we ever have not been. What *is* instead highly controversial is the persistent loyalty to the concept of a disciplinary founder despite clear arguments pointing to its mythological, ahistorical, and asociological nature. “Firsts,” “predecessors,” “precursors,” “founders,” “founding fathers,” “founding mothers,” and even “founding sisters” remain commonplace in descriptions of sociology’s past. In fact, if we are to believe Connell (1997), no other discipline takes such an acute and mythologized interest in its “putative founding fathers” as sociology, the self-described “social science of modernity *par excellence*, the child of Enlightenment secularism and empiricism, the great debunker of tradition” (Baehr, 2002).<sup>9</sup>

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point it is worth mentioning that Burawoy does not intend public sociology to supplant the other types of sociology. In fact, he proposes a cooperative division of labor between four subfields of sociology, grouped according to two parameters: audience (academic vs. extra-academic) and the type of knowledge (instrumental vs. reflexive). Hence, Burawoy identifies professional sociology (*academic* and *instrumental*), critical sociology (*academic* and *reflexive*), policy sociology (*extra-academic* and *instrumental*) and public sociology (*extra-academic* and *reflexive*). Burawoy’s innovative classification of sociologies inspired a number of attempts to impose this scheme on past sociologists, with Burawoy himself playing the presentist game on multiple occasions. Where does Owen fit in Burawoy’s 2 × 2 table? Although it is not the purpose of this article to challenge presentist accounts with different presentist accounts (thereby anachronistically imposing modern categories on persons who could not have been aware of them in principle), it is easy to imagine why students of Owenism could have a problem with Burawoy’s portrait of Owen as a utopian-public sociologist. Owenism was as much a philosophy of strict instrumentalism, determinism, social engineering, scientific management, and scientific absolutism, as it was of activist, humanitarian struggle against the destructive forces of free market. In other words, an equally strong case could be made for Owen as a scientific policy sociologist, rather than a “do-gooder” public sociologist. Burawoy chose to present only one side of the coin, for the other side would have caused problems for the structure and message of his historical narrative.

9. Most strikingly, the language of “founders” was uncritically used even by those authors who had labored to demonstrate the inadequacy of the concept. Thus, Merton (1968) described Comte as the “founding father” of sociology (pp. 34–35) in the same work where he characterized such nominations as mere opinions, because “there are no generally acknowledged criteria for having fathered a science” (p. 2). Analogically, Gouldner (1962) opposed the language of “founders” only to jump—in the same publication—to a defense of Saint-Simon’s status as the father of sociology. This points our attention to the strong appeal of the concept, as if an author may be engaged in serious historical work only to suddenly drop the standards of scholarship for what is often called “collective memory.” As Baehr (2002, p. 71) put it, “collective memory is not history; it is a way of framing knowledge that invests it with a particular emotional saliency [...] selections from the past that help to define who we are.” Aiming to explain why so many sociologists sacrifice history for collective memory, Baehr (p. 72) hypothesized that the mythical search for founders may have served as a way of forming and protecting the collective identity of sociology, “a struggling discipline from the beginning, beset by disciplinary antagonists who denied its right to exist.”

Not all authors, however, agree with founding claims as an effective strategy of influencing disciplinary identities. For example, Connell (2007, pp. 1–69) ridicules not only the usual “discussion of founding fathers focused on Marx, Durkheim and Weber” (“the mystique of classical theory,” as Connell calls such conversations [2003, p. 540]), but

Perhaps, then, the right approach to this seeming paradox should be “less historiography, more sociology”—that is, to focus less on the “sins of the history written for the sake of the present” (Stocking, 1965) and more on the motives for committing those sins and on the conceptual strategies of committing them in an effective and convincing way. If so, we should do well to follow in the footsteps of Peter Baehr (2002) left for us in his *Founders, Classics, Canons: Modern Disputes over the Origins and Appraisal of Sociology's Heritage*. Having established “why, in logical and historical terms, discourses and traditions cannot actually be founded, and why the term founder has limited explanatory value” (p. 2), Baehr proceeds with what he holds to be more important sociological questions, namely, why sociologists subscribe to the idea of a founder or a founding father, and what “different ideas are being canvassed under these labels” (pp. 2–6). In dealing with the latter question, Baehr attempted to classify the different uses of the concept.<sup>10</sup> Where does Burawoy’s selection of Owen as the first sociologist find itself in this classification?

According to Baehr, when sociologists remember their founders, they either refer to figures that “are believed to be responsible for founding a specific discourse, that is, a stock of presuppositional ideas formative of one of sociology’s traditions” or “people whose significance lies in the fact that they established some artefact or institution demonstrably related to the sociological enterprise: for instance, a sociological journal, an academic society or association, a university department” (p. 6). From here emanates Baehr’s key distinction between “discursive founders” and “institutional founders.” For example, Marx would fall under the former type, whereas René Worms (founder in 1893 of Institut International de Sociologie and the *Revue internationale de sociologie*) would be classified as an institutional founder. The most obvious example of a founder belonging to both categories would be Durkheim.<sup>11</sup>

Now, Baehr maintains that, when it comes to sociology’s professional legitimation, it is “founders of discourse” that are usually remembered or appropriated. As he put it, “in sociology it is discourse, general theory, above all, which appears to make a founder iconic” (p. 8). This is certainly a fair account of why sociologists keep on invoking and using Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Comte, Simmel, Pareto, and a number of other authors, but what about Owen?

Would it be reasonable to argue that Owen founded something at least remotely close to a discipline-defining theoretical-textual tradition of sociological thinking? The answer is “No.” Even his most sympathetic students concede that Owen was “a man of a single idea, and that not very original”<sup>12</sup> and that “there could not be any claim to intellectual pioneering” (Pollard, 1971, p. vii). Similarly, Gatrell (1970, p. 28) spoke of “Owen’s intellectual inadequacies” and

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also attempts to create alternative founders as part of the advocacy for alternative schools of sociological thinking: “It is futile to challenge metropolitan predominance by discovering alternative ‘founding fathers’ of the same social science – for instance, by claiming that Ibn Khaldun invented sociology back in the fourteenth century CE” (2007, p. xi). In Connell’s interpretation, sociological battles can only be won by producing “social thought about the modern world,” for a search for alternative founders “may even be counter-productive, placing the glories of Arab or African thought [or other alternatives to mainstream sociology – A.P.] firmly in a distant past” (p. xi).

10. As for the first question, Baehr suggested that the attractiveness of the concept may lie “in the myth of monogenesis (and of lineage), deeply rooted in Occidental culture, and whose influence has been felt in religion, politics, and social science alike” (p. 75).

11. Baehr also proposes a second distinction (cutting across the first one) between “deliberative founders” and “appropriated founders.” The first type refers to authors like Durkheim who considered sociology to be their “prime intellectual vocation” or/and “intentionally and strategically sought to build, and were in some part successful in building, the institutional matrices of sociology.” The latter type refers to authors like Marx “for whom sociology was not part of their own identifying self-concept but who have been adopted retrospectively by sociology as founders nonetheless.” Baehr considers Weber to be an in-between type (pp. 9–10).

12. Pollard is referring to Owen’s social-determinist insistence that human characters are exclusively the products of their circumstances.



reduced his intellectual achievements in the *New View of Society* (Owen's main work, published in 1813) to "an incoherent reformulation of eighteenth-century rationalist doctrine."<sup>13</sup> Harrison (1969, p. 260) also joined the group in downplaying Owen's intellectual-textual achievements, concluding his book on Owenism with the nostalgic note that neither Herbert Spencer in the next generation, nor any other social scientist found Owen's writings useful for their own theories of society. To put it in M. Foucault's (1984) terms, Owen was no "founder of discursivity," whose texts are referred to and reread by later generations in attempts to modify the very discourse initiated and defined by that founder (in the way of Marx and Marxism, or Freud and Psychoanalysis). This is hardly surprising given that Owen was a busy, "self-made" capitalist and a keen social reformer, who, as his son recalled, "glanced books over without mastering them, often dismissing them with some curt remark as that '*the radical errors shared by all men made books of little value,*'" and who frequently attacked the "learned" for their bookish theories and lack of practical knowledge (Gatrell, 1970, p. 27)

Likewise, Owen was no founder of academic institutions. As committed as he was to everyone's "best education, from infancy to maturity, of the physical, intellectual, and moral, power of all the population," Owen never attended a university and unsurprisingly practiced his "science of society" outside the academy of early nineteenth century Britain.<sup>14</sup>

The conceptualization of Burawoy's pick of Owen as the first sociologist has to go beyond Baehr's "founders of discourses" and "founders of institutions." This does not point to any inadequacies on the part of Baehr's typology, but rather to the freshness and relative marginality of Burawoy's vision of sociology and its supporting historical account. Since the essence of public sociology—as articulated by Burawoy—is not textual theorizing or purely academic education, but rather public engagements, the project gives birth to a new type of a disciplinary founder, a "public founder" as we may call this type. What is being demanded from such a founder by a presentist author is neither theoretical guidelines for present-day theoretical innovations (or conservations), nor deliberative attempts to institutionalize the discipline to be remembered in sociological textbooks. What a "public founder" provides for a reformer of social sciences like Burawoy is a successful symbol (or relic) of uncompromising value commitments and practical engagements with the suffering publics, as well as a conception of scientific knowledge coincidental with the efforts of social improvement.

Robert Owen is not the only example of a "public founder" of sociology, nor is the New Lanark cotton mills the only location of real human life to be remembered as the birthplace of sociology. For instance, Jane Addams (1860–1935) and the Hull House settlement were likewise invoked in another similar narrative of disciplinary creation. Four year before Burawoy, Joe R. Feagin (2001) also used the platform of ASA presidential address to advance a like-minded sociological program. In his speech on *Social Justice and Sociology: Agendas for the Twenty-First Century*, Feagin called for an activist and engaged "countersystem" sociology, committed to the social justice agenda (later Feagin came up with *Liberation Sociology* as a preferential term for his program [Feagin & Vera, 2001]). Central to this agenda was the resurrection of the "neglected first founders" (Feagin, Elias, & Mueller, 2009, p. 73) of U.S. sociology whose work "may well point us toward a new conceptual paradigm for sociology" (Feagin, 2001, p. 11). Challenging the "collective amnesia" regarding the "social justice" roots of U.S. sociology, and reflecting on his "neglected first founders," Feagin (2001, p. 7) stressed the special importance of Addams whom he calls "a key founder of U.S. sociology."

13. This comes in Gatrell's introduction to that very same work, Owen's *New View of Society*.

14. For an account of Owen's "excessive anti-intellectualism" and his difficult relations with the men of the University, see Gatrell (1970, pp. 21–38).

Now, from Feagin's substantiations of this claim it is obvious that Addams earned this nomination due to her leadership of Chicago's Hull House complex and her pioneering efforts in using social research to promote "tenement reform, child-labor legislation, public health programs, feminism, and anti-war goals" (Feagin, 2001, p. 7), rather than due to her theoretical originality or connections with the University of Chicago.<sup>15</sup> Just like Owen, Addams was no founder of discipline-defining sociological discourses or sociological departments. If today a president of ASA invokes her as a founder of sociology, it is because he feels a need for inspiring symbols in urging sociologists to commit to social activism and public roles in modern locations of real human life. The idealized images of Addams' achievements in the Hull House settlement and Owen's labors in the New Lanark cotton mills village are two such symbols. Sociologists are not invited to read the "public founders" or to use their theories, but only to be inspired by their stories and to follow their activist example.

In this section of the paper I explored the attractiveness of the romanticized image of Owen for a visionary of a leftist, activist, locally engaged, grassroots sociology. In order to advance a novel founding story, yet at the same time encompass the more conservative elements of the sociological past, Burawoy had to employ appropriate *techniques of presentism*. His central tool was the periodization of the three waves of sociology, which differed in their methods and orientation, but were united in the underlying sociological commitment to the social defense against the market. This two-tiered historiographical structure presupposes a theory of science with different levels of continuity (ideological commitment to the social defense against the market) and discontinuity (methodological and theoretical adaptation to external circumstances). It is only due to this duality the Burawoy was able to claim a "public" and socialist founder—supposedly selected for having originated that underlying ideological commitment—for what later became a discipline dominated by positivism, detachment, value neutrality, and anti-Marxism (from which Burawoy now aims to liberate it).<sup>16</sup>

### *Public Sociology Wars*

Needless to say, the proponents of detachment and anti-Marxism have their own views on both Burawoy's vision and the role of Owen in the social scientific past, and it is to these views that we turn to in the two remaining sections of this paper.

Burawoy's presidential address "For Public Sociology" created a hurricane of reactions, amounting to a three-figure number of articles and a double-figure number of books (Burawoy, 2009, p. 450). His call for public sociology has been attacked from a variety of sociological standpoints. For instance, a significant number of sociologists have blamed Burawoy for not going far enough: not cutting the ties with the "irrelevant" professional sociology, or not

15. As with Owen, Addams' intellectual achievements are downplayed even by her sympathetic biographers. "Jane Addams was not an original thinker of major importance," writes Levine (1980, p. x). For a more positive assessment of Addams' intellectual credentials, see Deegan (1988).

16. Such a two-tiered historiography of science reminds one of Steven Seidman's (1983) attempt to find a third way between presentism and historicism in the historiography of the social sciences. He proposed a historiography of science based on a theory of science defined as a "two-tiered structure consisting of an 'analytical' realm of hypotheses, empirical statements, logical rules, theoretical postulates, models, and explanations, and an 'ideological' realm of reality-defining assumptions and epistemological presuppositions." The first "realm" represents discontinuity (theoretical developments are driven by social change) and invites historicist approach to the scientific past. However, the second "realm" is one of stability and thus justifies a certain level of presentism. Burawoy's wave model shows how such a two-tiered structure can be exploited as a *technique of presentism*. Assuming the historically invariable character of sociology's ideological commitments, Burawoy is able to pacify the conflicting sociological orientations by characterizing them as products of attempts to achieve the same goals in different historical circumstances.

dropping “political neutrality in favor of an explicitly leftist sociology.”<sup>17</sup> What interests us here, however, is the critique coming from an opposite and arguably dominant standpoint, that of a more conservative and scientific “professional sociology.” For our purposes we will distill two related lines of critique coming from this direction: the first attacks Burawoy for confusing science with political activism and for compromising the discipline’s core values of detachment and value neutrality; the second condemns public sociology for its affiliations with Marxist ideology.<sup>18</sup> As I will aim to demonstrate, both positions are argumentatively reinforced and paralleled by corresponding interpretations of Robert Owen’s role in the history of social science and socialism. I will first deal with critiques coming from the advocates of detached and value-neutral sociology, whereupon revealing the analogy between their statements about the core principles of sociological identity and Antoine Picon’s historical account of Owen’s role in the birth of the modern social sciences. In the final part of this paper I will analogically analyze the correspondence between the anti-Marxist critique of Burawoy and Joshua Muravchik’s account of Owen’s “experimental socialism.”

#### OWEN MEETS VALUE-NEUTRAL “SOCIAL PHYSICS”: AN ILL-FITTING FOUNDER DUMPED TO “PREHISTORY”

In this section I briefly describe the arguments of a group of sociologists who reject Burawoy’s project due to its politicizing threats to the “science of sociology.” I then proceed to show how the core values of these sociologists—value neutrality and detachment from political activities—are paralleled and given added weight by Anoiné Picon in his interpretation of Owen’s role in the history of the social sciences. Finally, I reflect on Picon’s historiographical tools used in dealing with Owen with an aim of preserving the privileged status of “detachment” as a core principle of the modern social sciences.

##### *Defending the Pure Science of Sociology*

The first line of critique against Burawoy’s public sociology to be considered at length in this paper is a defense of a pure science of sociology as a value-neutral, dispassionate production of disciplinary knowledge. “I would, indeed, argue for knowledge for knowledge’s sake,” writes Lynn Smith-Lovin (2007, p. 127) in her response to Burawoy. In her view, sociology’s scientific project would be threatened if the divisions of the world were imported back into sociological departments. Such critics like Smith-Lovin (2007), Stinchcombe (2007), and Massey (2007) make a clear distinction between “individual political participation” and “collective participation by the discipline,” with the first one regarded as entirely legitimate and the second as dangerous. In other words, Burawoy’s plea for “value-laden activity to be embraced within the disciplinary structure itself” is categorically rejected (Smith-Lovin, 2007, p. 125). If implemented, the institutionalization of public sociology would be “at best, a distraction, at worst, an imminent threat to the core tasks of generating professional knowledge.”<sup>19</sup>

17. For the summary of these arguments, see Zussman and Misra (2007). Piven (2007) calls for an explicitly leftist public sociology. Feagin, Elias, & Mueller’s (2009) critique of Burawoy also falls into this group of arguments.

18. There is no pretension that the sociological stances under discussion in this article fully cover the multilateral controversy that is the public sociology debate. I am exploring only three sociological standpoints regarding one of many, albeit a central theme of this debate. Admittedly, this is a strategic choice, for the three stances in question correspond neatly to the three historical interpretations of Owen’s role in the history of the social sciences, thereby providing appropriate material for a case study of presentist uses of disciplinary history in the context of intensified disciplinary competition.

19. A summary of the views of Massey, Stinchcombe, and Smith-Lovin by Zussman and Misra (2007).

The scientific impulses of professional sociology are directly related to the calls for “policy sociology.” According to Stinchcombe and Massey, it is only by valuing the detached and idle curiosity of a scholar, protecting the ivory tower from politicization, and retreating from social movements, that sociology may come up with relevant causal relations, to be used in decision making. Tittle (2004) argues that sociology still needs more time, and, most importantly, insulation from external pressures before it develops a “body of reliable knowledge” and becomes capable of playing a role in decision making, whereas the current “public pretense that we do [*have the body of reliable knowledge* – A.P.] actually undermines any hope of influencing society or obtaining the support necessary for such knowledge” (p. 1641). “The only way for sociology to become more influential is to be a discipline committed to science and engineering,” adds Turner (2005, p. 44), stressing that the project of “social physics” has nothing to do with ideologies and political activism.

To sum up, the “Strong Program in Professional Sociology,” as the views of this group of authors came to be labeled (Boyns & Fletcher, 2005), stands for value neutrality, detachment from politics, and a silent cumulation of intersubjective knowledge that can be used instrumentally by the clients according to *their* values. If such a project is to be successful, sociology itself must abstain from value laden activities such as political activism (and *ipso facto* public sociology) because involvement in political action would compromise the reliability of what should be neutral causal knowledge about the external world.

If these characteristics are deemed to be universally essential to the sociological enterprise and to the rejection of Burawoy’s vision, then there is no way these authors could agree with Burawoy’s version of sociology’s history or with his nomination of Owen for the symbolically momentous role of the first sociologist. Although, to my knowledge, Burawoy’s direct critics have not challenged his controversial choice, a reinforcing extension of their critiques into the historiography of Owen has been articulated by historian of science Antoine Picon (2008) in his contribution to the Cambridge *History of the Modern Social Sciences*.

#### *Owen’s Dethronement and Relegation to Prehistory*

Picon’s goal is to ascertain “the importance of utopian socialism in the birth of the social sciences” (p. 71). Following Marxist listing of utopian socialists, he discusses Owen, Charles Fourier, and Claude Henri Saint-Simon. Attributing their “desire to build a science of man,” as well as their characterization of Utopia as an implementable universal model, to the influence they received from eighteenth century theories, Picon goes on to investigate the extent to which the utopian socialists break “with Enlightenment and its utopian component and mark a new era in social thought” (p. 71).<sup>20</sup> In other words, what is being looked for in the thought of Owen, Fourier, and Saint-Simon are ideas that anticipated, inspired, or proved to be useful for later social sciences.

Owen’s name is thus associated with the introduction of the “class” concept, the anticipations of a “social science based solely on the study of collective functions and behavior,” sociological concern for the restoration of an organic social order in the industrial society, investigation of the relationship between economic and social organization, social scientific tensions between determinism and a more positive assessment of human agency, and feminist thought (pp. 71–81).

What follows this list of anticipations is a decisive question, namely, “were the utopian socialists the true founding fathers of nineteenth century social science?” (p. 81). Picon’s

20. The reader will immediately notice the contrast between this question and Burawoy’s conviction that “utopian dimension” constitutes/must constitute a central part of the sociological enterprise. This has much to do with the very different historical roles, which the two authors attribute to Owen.

answer seems to be negative, and the reason behind his skepticism toward the paternal role of Owen and his French contemporaries is determined: utopian socialists engaged in communal experiments and saw them as constitutive of their science. The failures of Owen's Harmonies and Fourier's Phalansteries, Picon argues, served more "as a counterexample than a direct source of inspiration," demonstrating "the need to separate reflection and action," and "after Durkheim and Weber, the *split between academic disciplines such as sociology and reformist activism* was to serve as a guide for the further development of the social sciences" (p. 81, my emphasis). From here Picon proceeds with his final verdict, interpreting utopian socialism as "a kind of prehistory of our contemporary social sciences rather than as an early stage of their history in the strict sense" (p. 82).

### *History and Prehistory: Getting Rid of Ill-Fitting Founders*

Building his argument on the same Owenite practices—reformist activism and community building—as does Burawoy, Picon nonetheless arrives at an opposite conclusion. Owen is deprived of the status of the "founding father" of the modern social sciences and is relegated to their prehistory. Taking the dissociation from reformist activism as a dividing boundary between "prehistory" of the social sciences and their "history in the strict sense," Picon establishes detachment from direct political participation to be the central characteristic of "modern social sciences," a characteristic to be used in measuring the scientificity of the historical claimants to real science.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, Picon extends the claims of the "Strong Program in Professional Sociology" into the historiography of Owen. Just like public sociology, Owen is denied the admission to the shrine of "genuine" social science due to a "failure" to separate research and theory from values and politics.

The distinction between *history* and *prehistory* is a tool of presentist historiography used to "distinguish those who erred and heretics in the field from the few forerunners of true science" (Lepenies & Weingart, 1983, p. 1) and to disentangle ideological residues from what is held to be valid science.<sup>22</sup> In this case, the historical nuisance to get rid of was the Owenite unity of theory and communal praxis. The commencement point of "history," on the other hand, is established where the past starts bearing a direct relation to what the author deems to be valid contemporary practice of the discipline ("... after Durkheim and Weber..."). According to Heilbron (1995, pp. 1–2), "history is a recognized part of the disciplinary identity," a storehouse of concepts, models, and insights, but also of "symbols and idols," whereas the

21. Many a reader of this journal will find Picon's argumentation reminiscent of Samelson's (1974) challenge to Gordon Allport's influential characterization of Comte as the founder of social psychology. In an attempt to disqualify what he deemed to be Allport's disciplinary *origin myth*, Samelson (p. 225) pointed out, among other things, that in Comte's writings one finds absent the modern "dichotomy between objective science which describes the world as it is, and reformist impulses; science and ideology are still happily united." A "presentist moment" from the tireless debunker of whiggish ideas in the history of psychology, perhaps?

22. According to Anthony Giddens (1979, p. 241), the *prehistory/history* distinction also served as the main legitimating strategy for a great number of authors who thought of themselves as originators of the new social science ("deliberative founders," as Baehr calls them):

"Members of each generation of social thinkers since at least the early part of the eighteenth century have been inclined to assert that they were initiating a newly scientific study of man in society, in contrast to what went before. Vico conceived himself to be founding a 'new science' of society. Montesquieu and Condorcet made similar claims, and held they were breaking with what went before. Comte said much the same thing in his time, acknowledging the contributions of these forerunners, but largely relegating them to the prehistory of sociology, which was only coming to be placed on a scientific basis through his own efforts. And so it continues: Marx argued much the same in respect of Comte; Durkheim in respect of Marx; and yet another generation later, Parsons of Durkheim and others."

figures of “prehistory” or “early history” are remembered only as an “enjoyable pastime, or to satisfy historical or literary curiosity,” but not as suitable examples for sociological work.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the precise location of the border between the two is of crucial importance, it may change over time, and is widely considered to be worth fighting for.<sup>24</sup>

It is also noteworthy that the history/prehistory dichotomy, as it is employed by Picon, comes close to what Gouldner (1962) had to say about the propensity among sociologists to demarcate the history of sociology from the history of socialism. Gouldner speculated that the persistence of the “myth of Comte the founder of sociology” (p. 12) may well be the function of such propensity. Because, while Durkheim “rightfully” considered Saint-Simon to be the originator of positivist philosophy, and of sociology, later authors tended to push the starting point of disciplinary history to Comte, since in Saint-Simon they would not only acquire a father, but also “a blacksheep brother, socialism, thus reinforcing lay opinion to the effect that socialism and sociology must be similar” (p. 12). To a certain extent, Picon reproduces this nonsocialist image of sociology,<sup>25</sup> relegating Owen, Fourier, and Saint-Simon to the prehistoric stage of the social sciences and, indeed, arguing for the importance of Comte, whose positivism is maintained to have served as an intermedium between the not-quite-scientific heritage of the socialist triplet and the genuine social science of Durkheim (Picon, 2008, p. 78). However, in Picon’s case, communal socialism falls under the broader category of practical engagement, and it is this category that informs the constitution of his symbolic boundary between prehistory and history of the social sciences, Picon’s central *technique of presentism*.

#### THE UNLIKELY HERO OF ANTI-MARXISM: OWEN SCIENTIFICALLY DISPROVES SOCIALISM

Gouldner’s hypothesis draws us closer to a third camp in the *Public Sociology Wars* to be discussed in this paper, namely sociological anti-Marxism.<sup>26</sup> After presenting this line of critique against Burawoy’s project, I will show why Joshua Muravchik’s unconventional interpretation of Robert Owen’s scientific undertakings may well be read as a historiographical reinforcement (or extension) of the anti-Marxist stance in modern-day sociology.

#### *Against Marxism*

The anti-Marxist line of critique against public sociology builds on the doubts regarding the sincerity of Burawoy’s assertion that “public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence”

23. For the consideration of the presentist uses of the *prehistory/history* distinction in the history of the social sciences, see Heilbron (1995, pp. 1–2). For a discussion on the inherent propensity of presentism to structure disciplinary history upon the dubious distinction between “valid scientific knowledge” and “ideological residues,” see Seidman (1983).

24. This is how Heilbron (1995, p. 2) summarizes the mainstream view of the border:

“In sociology, the demarcation between history and early history is drawn at the mid-nineteenth century. The great names of the second half of the century are part and parcel of ‘classical’ sociology. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim and several others are still widely read, commented upon and published. They have their followers and their critics, and in the margin of the sociological craft there are always a few specialists who stand guard over their texts and the various interpretations. But this is not the case with earlier authors.

As we have just witnessed, the traditional boundary is reinforced in Picon’s conservative account, whereas Burawoy challenges this view and arms his vision of “public sociology” with “symbols and idols” from the early nineteenth century.

25. Compare this with Burawoy’s claim that sociology begins with “various visions of socialism” (2006, p. 53).

26. My distinction between the “anti politicization” and “anti-Marxist” lines of critique against public sociology is analytical and established for argumentative purposes only. The two sociological positions are not mutually exclusive, and a number of sociologists quoted in this article support both lines of critique. However, it remains true that it is one thing to be *against sociology’s affiliation with any kind of political engagement*, and another to *reject Marxism as a falsified scientific program*.



(Burawoy, 2005a, p. 8). Sociologists debate whether “Burawoy would be as enthusiastic about public sociology if it were to be turned to the purposes of the Right” (Zussman & Misra, 2007, pp. 10–11). The relationship between Burawoy’s “manifesto of public sociology” and Marxism has been critically investigated by Deflem (2004), Nielsen (2004), as well as Boyns and Fletcher (2005). According to the latter two (Boyns and Fletcher, 2005, p. 10), “Burawoy’s affiliations with Marxism elevate the concern of whether or not public sociology is simply an attempt to redress the late twentieth-century failings of Marxism, to place old ‘red’ wine in new bottles, creating a new niche for sociologists inspired by left-leaning politics.” Deflem is more direct: Burawoy “does not want to tear down the ivory tower; he is merely trying to paint it red” (Deflem, 2004, p. 17). Equating Burawoy’s outspoken Marxism with the entire project of public sociology, these critics go on to explain why Marxism is not a legitimate program for sociology.<sup>27</sup>

Nielsen accuses the “ex-Marxists turned public sociologists” of substituting faith for a scientific disposition: instead of interpreting the collapse of socialist societies as a disqualification of socialist theory, these sociologists stuck to the faith and found a new venue for it: “One wonders if public sociology is a new avatar of denial, a new packaging of the old ideas, a new ideological mantle to cover up the embarrassing shortcomings of the ‘really existing Socialist societies’” (Nielsen, 2004, p. 1621). Moreover, Nielsen continues, “economic foundations of Marxism, including the labor theory of value, have been rejected by Western social scientists” (p. 1621). Therefore, he finds it incomprehensible “to proclaim today that Marxism is a viable scientific program” (p. 1621), as Burawoy is said to have done in his earlier writings and is supposed to have dragged the entire project of public sociology along this line.<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, the anti-Marxist critique against public sociology deplores Burawoy’s project for its alleged concurrence with a mere political faith, which is by now empirically falsified as a scientific program. Therefore, Marxism (and *ipso facto* public sociology) is proclaimed to be antithetical to real science. What is important for our purposes is that the same message—socialism’s religious nature and its incongruity with the human nature and science—was propagated in Muravchik’s (2002) *Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism*, which, to hint at the presentist aspirations of this study, was greeted by the reviewers as a must-read for all the naive campaigners for a “decent left” (Decter, 2002; Valiunas, 2002; Sibley, 2003). In other words, I claim that, in this self-consciously presentist account of the socialist story and the historical role of Owen’s “science of society,” Muravchik reinforces and gives added weight to the arguments of the anti-Marxist sociologists. I also show that Owen’s pioneering role in the history of socialism and social science constitutes the core element of Muravchik’s *technique of presentism*, which he employs to convince his readers of the scientific impossibility of a working socialism.

### *Who’s Utopian, Who’s Scientific? The Marxist Dichotomy Turned on Its Head*

Although not concerned with the history of the social sciences as its core theme, Muravchik’s (2002) *Heaven on Earth* is *inter alia* an intervention to the *utopian socialism vs. scientific socialism* controversy, a central theme in the history of socialism. A brief account of this intervention will reveal the conceptual parallel between Muravchik’s handling of Owen’s claim to be a scientist and the anti-Marxist critique of public sociology.

27. For Burawoy’s response to such criticisms and for his discussion on the relationship between Marxism and public sociology, see Burawoy (2005c, pp. 159–160).

28. Nielsen is referring to Burawoy’s (1990) article “Marxism as Science.”

From Owenism to Soviet communism, from democratic socialism of the European left to the Israelite *kibbutzim*, the implementation of socialist theories, Muravchik tells us, has led either to disastrous economic and social consequences or, where more successful as in *kibbutzim* communities, to their voluntary cessation. While Muravchik's *explanans* for the incessant string of socialist collapses is a rather crude "Socialism is incongruous with the human nature," he puts more effort in explaining why this incongruity did not prevent the socialist idea "to spread faster and further than any other belief system ever devised" (p. 337). Muravchik's answer to this question is the religious character of Marxism, a faith clothed in the scientific language of inevitability. Having thus denounced Marxist science for its religious and utopian character (as well as the empirical falsification of its hypotheses), Muravchik (p. 342) introduces an unexpected twist of thought in arguing that socialism in fact *had* one genuine scientist:

"Robert Owen always characterized his activities as scientific, and the claim was valid. Owen hit upon the idea of socialism and then set about to test it by creating experimental communities. Such experimentation is the very essence of the scientific method. Owen strayed from science only at the point that he chose to ignore his results rather than reconsider his hypothesis."

Just like Picon, Muravchik is referring to Owen's short-lived communal experiment in New Harmony, Indiana (pp. 31–60). The alleged failure of Owen's attempt to replace the "individual selfish system" with a "united social system" in the New Harmony community is attributed by Muravchik to the incompatibility of such a system with the human nature ("instead of striving to see who should do the most, the most industry was manifested in accusing others of doing little" [p. 48]). The significance of New Harmony's failure was historical because it scientifically exposed the incongruity between socialism and the motives of human efforts, thus irreversibly falsifying the socialist hypothesis and disqualifying Marxism even before its appearance on the historical scene.<sup>29</sup> In order for socialism to escape this scientific knowledge, Owen's "experimental socialism" had to give way to the "prophetic socialism" of Marx. Therefore, the remainder of socialism's history was nothing but a religious denial of the human nature, which was first exposed by the actual scientist of the socialist tradition, Robert Owen.

#### *Exploiting the Pioneer: Failed Practices as Scientific Falsifications of Theories*

Agreeing with Burawoy on Owen's scientific credentials, Muravchik nevertheless shares Picon's assessment of the general failure of Owen's community-building activities. The result is a rather bizarre description of Owen as the great experimenting scientist of the socialist tradition who failed to understand the results of his own experiment. Despite the eccentricity of the claim, certain historiographical observations can be made regarding Muravchik's *techniques of presentism*.

Pioneer figures are a convenient material for sweeping historical claims about the *general character* of a practice under consideration. If the consequences of that practice are held to be historically invariable, their causes may be deemed to be historically stable as well. Therefore, to understand these causes it may be enough to look at the first instance of the practice, especially if the first practitioner is showed to have practiced under the rules of the "scientific method."

29. For a more positive assessment of the New Harmony community, see Kumar (1990).

Profiting from Owen's father-figure status (Owen "hit upon the idea of socialism") and his claim to be a scientist, Muravchik employs this historiographical technique to reverse the Marxist distinction between utopian and scientific socialisms. It was the genuine experimental science of the first socialist that proved the incongruity of the socialist hypothesis with (what is held to be) historically invariable human nature. This *technique of presentism* allows Muravchik to employ Owen's failures as a covering explanatory framework for the conceived history as well potential future of socialist disasters.

#### CONCLUSION

The full picture of the historiographical extension of the *Public Sociology Wars* has now been unfolded. Public sociology, the pure science model of sociology, and anti-Marxist sociology are paralleled by respective historical claims about Robert Owen: Owen, the first sociologist; Owen, the prehistoric character; Owen, the (paradoxical) scientist who experimentally disproved the socialist hypothesis. Different aspects of Owenism have been brought to the fore to make these claims: "social defense against the market," the "unity of reflection and action," "experimental socialism." These aspects or rather their interpretations correspond to the central claims of the three sociological standpoints regarding what the science of sociology should be about: For Burawoy, sociology should defend the social against the market; for the pure science model of sociology, it should be strictly separated from political engagements and value commitments; for anti-Marxist sociology, it should have nothing to do with the socialist faith and the falsified scientific program of Marxism.

Yet, in a sense, those are not different aspects of Owenism, but rather one and the same. Interestingly, all these claims build on one particular element of a great variety of Owenite ideas and engagements, the organization of communities. This link permits some comparative observations. On the one hand, different handlings of the same historical material spring directly from divergent claims about science. For instance, Picon and Muravchik could probably agree on all the historical facts about the Owenite communities, and still remain true to their claims, since it is the very conception of science, rather than the actual achievements of the communities, that determine the claim. On the other hand, all three authors have made convenient choices of emphasis. For example, Burawoy traces back the origins of sociology to Owen's "reflections on New Lanark," whereas Muravchik and Picon build their cases on New Harmony. No history of Owenism fails to contrast the social and economic achievements, as well as longevity and enormous contemporary fame of the New Lanark with the failures of the short-lived New Harmony.

Do these choices of emphasis add up to the exposed flexibility of the employed *techniques of presentism* in a strong case against the distortions of presentist historiography? Perhaps so, but such a case was not the objective of the article. Instead, I aimed for a case study of Stocking's thesis regarding the historiographical extensions of present-day social scientific controversies, accounting for the intentions and discussing the techniques of the three presentist authors instead of critiquing their "failure" to live up to some kind of a standard of the historical craft. I inspected the weapons selected to fight with when sociological wars take place in such far-away battlefields like the historical image of Robert Owen. The exposed variety of diversely sharpened weapons—or *techniques of presentism*—testifies to the vitality of the historical battles fought over professional symbols, the character of science, and the political imagination.

Perhaps, then, the chief achievement of this paper was an exploration of a rarely used approach to presentist history of science. It is eye-opening to think that Feagin spent half of

his *Agendas for the Twenty-First Century* presidential address talking about the heroes and villains of nineteenth and early-twentieth century sociology, or that Burawoy found it necessary to supplement his call for public sociology with a number of complex historical articles. In a truly Orwellian fashion, one aims to change the future by rewriting the past. One throws the future-changing spell by recomposing the images of heroes who were “unforgivably forgotten” or “badly misunderstood.” One looks for founders or strips them of that status in a magical hope of transforming the identity of the whole discipline. Such strategic, not to say hermetic, efforts require reflection and understanding, not only historicist condemnation. In other words, while Franz Samelson (1974) demanded a categorical rejection of heroic origin myths as a precondition for an understanding of the actual relationship between social scientific past and present, it may well be wiser to study those myths functionally with the same goal in mind.

Focusing on one such hero’s destiny in present-day historiography, I provided a number of preliminary insights on a number of conceptual tools cunningly used to order the scientific past in a gainful way. It is my hope that, as a result, we know a little bit more about the “public founders” of sociology and their attractiveness for proponents of a more engaged social science, about the concept of “disciplinary prehistory” and its uses in minimizing the symbolic weight of an ill-fitting founder, and finally about the ways of exploiting the alleged failures of a scientific pioneer. These preliminary insights on certain *techniques of presentism*, or historical instruments of discipline formation, suggest a novel approach to presentist historiography, one that allows historians and sociologists of science to focus on the actual work that is being done by the presentist authors to get their effects in setting enduring disciplinary guidelines for the new millennium.

Admittedly, such an approach is far from uncontroversial. It further blurs the line between what is to be *understood* and what is to be *judged* by the students of the history of the social sciences. In his manifesto of the new historiography of the social sciences, Stocking (1965) asked us “to understand the ‘reasonableness’ of points of view now superseded,” defining *understanding* as “the attempt, by whatever means, to get at the ‘reasonableness’ of what might otherwise be *judged* as falling short of some present or absolute standards of ‘rationality.’” In this article, we were playing with an idea that the aforementioned principle of Stocking’s historicism could be pushed to its logical extreme and expanded to encompass its object of critique, namely, presentist historiography. For, if the historian must ask “not whether something is true or good, but why and where and to what end it came to be enacted or expressed,”<sup>30</sup> could not the same questions of “why,” “where,” and “to what end” be productively applied to the *judgments* of presentism (no matter how much those judgments fall short of the historicist principle themselves)?

One possible way of criticizing our approach would be to argue for the immunity of the historical craft (as an object of analysis) from its own principles of historicist analysis, based on *understanding* rather than *judgment* and on the search for *reasonableness* instead of applying standards of *rationality* (timelessly and abstractly). In failing to recognize such an immunity, the approach of this article, it could be objected, confuses two fundamentally different tasks of the student of history: the first is to describe and explain the past (*understanding*), while the second is to discuss the best way of performing the first task, which necessarily involves the rational critique of colleague historians and their methods (*judgment*). Following this view, a (historicist) historian of sociology should aim to *explain* and render *reasonable* past sociological ideas that may seem irrational or even ridiculous to the modern mind, determining factors that led those ideas to violate our criteria of rationality, but no such generosity should be

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30. Joseph Levenson’s historiographical principles approvingly quoted in Stocking (1965).

available for the irrational or ridiculous ways of a colleague historian of sociology, whose views are to be judged on the basis of the standards of the historical profession, not rendered reasonable. For to view the methods of the historiography of science exclusively as a “formation” to be explained and rendered reasonable (by accounting for the historian’s motives and techniques) in the same way as we render reasonable the ideas of the past, it could be argued, is to cut the branch of rationality on which we are proudly sitting. Although such an objection leaves unanswered the question of whether or not a presentist historian would be deemed worthy of *understanding* and immunity from *judgment* once the date of his work passes from what is arbitrarily considered “present” to the equally ambiguously defined “past,” it does provide a legitimate defense of historicist critiques of presentism.

This is all fine, because the aim of the thesis was not to discredit historicist critiques, but to show that there are other useful ways of studying the presentist historiography of the social sciences. We need both historicist and metahistoricist (as we may tentatively call the approach of this thesis) ways of dealing with presentist historiography. Historicist critiques expose the distortions of presentist historiography and stand guard over the standards of proper historical scholarship, based on affective contextualist/intentionalist *understanding* rather than anachronistic and utilitarian *judgment*. Metahistoricism, on the other hand, applies the historicist principles of analysis to presentism itself and, in doing so, enlightens our knowledge of the instrumental and strategic uses of history as functions of the intensification of present-day conflicts.

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