



Private Troubles and Public Issues

Michael Burawoy

Perhaps the most widely cited and most celebrated words of any sociologist are those of C. Wright Mills when he defined the sociological imagination as the quality of mind that translates private troubles into public issues. The sociological imagination articulates individual experiences of unemployment, disease, murder, divorce, debt, poverty, and so forth as personal troubles. It then connects those personal troubles to the underlying wider social structures, thereby turning them into public issues for political contestation. What Mills fails to elaborate (what he leaves to the political imagination) is just how the transformation of private troubles into public issues takes place, who accomplishes it, and against what impediments it is accomplished.

The four case studies included in this volume (chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5) exemplify the sociological imagination—they link personal suffering to socially patterned inequalities in employment conditions, access to education, exposure to environmental hazards, and subjection to violence. But, more important, they exhibit a political imagination, that is, the political practice of turning personal distress into public issues. The contributors focus on the vehicles of such transformations, namely, the difficult and tension-ridden *chains of collaboration* linking university academics, the service professionals, and community activists to one another and to victimized populations. At the same time, they focus less on obstacles to *transforming common sense* that lie within the grip of an individual's psyche or the structure of lived experience.

At the other end of the collaborative chain, the studies also give short shrift to the *institutional obstacles* facing the organic intellectual, obstacles emanating from the university, the law firm, the community organization. I will deal with these three issues in turn—collaboration, common sense, and professional empowerment—but only after first considering the overall context that simultaneously demands and threatens the sociological imagination.

Privatization and Its Public Countermovements

As Andrew Barlow elaborates with such clarity in the Introduction, we are living in a period when the state no longer contains but promotes the excesses of the market economy. It has abandoned minimalist protection of its citizens against poverty and social insecurity in favor of tax incentives and lucrative contracts for corporations. The state is ever more hostile to policies that would reduce inequalities, limit the degradation of everyday life, and counteract exclusions and marginalizations. So, the advocates of social justice have had to turn away from the state as a site of struggle and direct attention to the disempowered communities themselves, seeking to rebuild civil society, even as it retreats. But this means a corresponding shift away from the top-down role of the traditional professionals who worked within the state on behalf of their clients and a shift toward an organic, direct connection of professionals and the communities whose needs and interests they defend.

One source of professionals is, of course, the university, but here too, changes are afoot, changes parallel to those in the state and redolent with implications for a public social science. After the eclipse of the wave of struggles for academic freedom at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the hallmark of the American university has been its insulation from various publics. The disciplines that live within its walls are uniquely strong in protecting their professional autonomy. In recent years, however, those walls have become porous as the university has received offers it could not refuse, enticements from private corporations seeking to turn knowledge into profits, or from wealthy donors seeking tax shelters with ideological payoffs. As public universities receive an ever-smaller proportion of their revenues from the state, fees have increased by leaps and bounds, making the college degree a major financial investment.

There is, however, also a countermovement to the privatization of higher education, a countermovement that includes reaching out to communities of the poor and disadvantaged minorities. Even as it is being brought into the orbit of state and market, parts of the university community are wrestling

themselves free to join forces with service professionals, also fleeing entrapment within the state. The case studies in this book exemplify this countermovement from private to public—projects that bring researchers, service professionals, and activists into an ongoing collaboration. Such exciting endeavors that extend rather than diminish the public role of the university and professions need to come out of the shade and into the limelight.

Chains of Collaboration

The organic relation between professionals and lower-class community is a two-way dialogue. It is based on a reciprocity that is hard to sustain as mutuality easily succumbs to domination. On the one hand, there is the danger of vanguardism in which professionals know best, imposing their learned theorizing on a recalcitrant community. On the other hand, professionals themselves can be captured by the communities they serve, or they can voluntarily bend over backwards to deny their autonomy, seeking full immersion. This is the danger of fadishism. What is striking about the four case studies is how they seek to avoid both pathologies and instead achieve a balanced mutuality that characterizes the organic relation.

One way to establish reciprocity is through the joint production of power. Professionals transmit their specialized knowledge—their cultural and social capital—to these communities, while the latter in turn mobilize what they have absorbed in order to advance their specific interests—to defend rights to respectful employment, education, and a healthy and safe environment. Although we don't hear directly from individuals who are members of the communities themselves (as all four chapters are written by the professionals) these are indeed presented as inspirational success stories. Anamaria Loya, in her moving rendition of the struggles of day laborers in San Francisco, shows how she transmits expertise and confidence to help them fight for their own rights, to be their own lawyers, to collectively organize against exploitative employers who might not even honor the simple wage contract. Michelle Renée, Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers, and Gary Blasi recount their efforts to work with community activists (advocates and organizers) to counter inequities in access to schooling. Manuel Pastor, Rachel Morello-Frosch, and James Sadd show how research identifies the unequal distribution of hazards from waste and toxic disposal facilities, helping communities hold public and private entities accountable to government regulations. Finally, Howard Pinderhughes argues for collaborative research that identifies the structural forces at work in promoting youth violence and the challenges of reversing those forces.

Successes these may be, but they are won in different ways. The collaboration between lawyers and day laborers involves transferring skills from professionals to community members, arming them with knowledge of their rights and with the collective organization to fight for those rights. Having grown up in a similar community of poor Hispanic laborers, Loya commands their confidence and conveys capital they didn't have before through the creation of a labor center. Howard Pinderhughes operates on an even deeper principle of immersion, compelling accountability to the community and voicing its needs to contain youth violence, often against misguided policies coming from outside. In both these cases, empowerment comes about through the merger of professional and activist.

In the other two cases presented in this volume, professional and activist maintain a certain separation. In the struggle against educational inequities, the professionals qua researchers are part of a university-based organization—IDEA (Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access)—and the activists are part of organizations (such as InnerCity Struggle, Parent U-Turn, and ACORN) that operate across communities. The researchers and activists collaborate under an umbrella organization, EJC (Education Justice Collaborative). The two-way collaboration does not rely so much upon self-imposed restraint or accountability on the part of the lone professional but upon institutional restraints. The chain of collaboration is held in reciprocal tension by the logic of organizations (IDEA, community organization, EJC). The same is true of the environmental justice movement. Here the researchers collaborated with activists in CBE (California's Communities for a Better Environment), but the collaboration was cultivated by Liberty Hill Foundation, which sought a sponsor of research (the California Endowment) that would demonstrate class and racial disparities in vulnerability to air pollution. This is so different from Pinderhughes, who is the lone activist-researcher immersed in a community.

Behind collaboration and reciprocity is the common endeavor to influence state policy or the distribution of resources. In this regard the professionals can help to increase the ability of communities to realize their interests and needs, by building their *mobilizing capacity* through, for example, the Day Laborers' Hiring Hall. Or professionals may act as mediators and interpreters to *legitimate, translate, and represent* demands of their community-based collaborators. With their social and cultural capital, professionals can give a particular type of public voice to demands for a more equitable access to education, or a reduction in environmental hazards or violence in poor communities, or the extension of rights for day laborers.

Empowerment involves not only endowing the community with the resources to fight for its interests but also disempowering institutions of domi-

nation. Of particular importance is the production and dissemination of science to counter the dominant ideologies that are part of the vehicles of oppression. Often, organic professionals find themselves arrayed against their professional colleagues on the other side of the fence. So Pinderhughes is unflagging in his opposition to "conventional" social science that would divide up the source of "problems" into a series of factors pointing to policy interventions (e.g., incarceration) that deepen rather than lessen violence. This piecemeal policy approach misses the overall context, failing to adopt a comprehensive approach necessary to bring amelioration.

The educational project of Michelle Renée and her colleagues began with a court case that sought to establish the State of California's responsibility for unequal distribution of educational resources. The State lost the case, and then the consortium of academics took on the role of overseeing implementation. Here, too, the academics had to fight a battle against state experts over the gathering and interpretation of data. Similarly in the case of the environmental justice movement, social scientists had to demonstrate that poor minority communities were at greater risk, which proved to be a major methodological dispute over units of analysis—zip codes versus census tracts. In other words, professionals can play an essential role in contesting hostile spokespersons of corporations and states, and this role becomes ever more important as the social justice agenda is publicly put on the defensive.

There was nothing preordained or "biased" about this research that sprung from contestation on behalf of social justice. Indeed, advocacy threw up unexpected discoveries—for example, that exposure to hazardous wastes peaked not with the poorest communities (who are removed from all economic activity) but in working-class communities of color. Yet, opponents of public social science often intimate that it is second rate, has lower standards. But the case studies presented here convincingly demonstrate not only the controversial character of so much public social science but the fact that because it is open to and subjected to public scrutiny and produced against great resistance means that it has to be of the highest quality. It has to withstand the assault of the paid servants of the dominant class and increasingly of the State. Poor research, no less than poor legal advocacy, will only bring defeat and disrepute to the cause of social justice.

Transforming Common Sense

Professional advocacy of social justice not only enhances mobilizing capacity, and not only contests dominant ideologies, but also elaborates, enriches, and sometimes even transforms the common sense. This dimension

of empowerment rests on the assumption that oppressed peoples do not fully comprehend the conditions of their own subjugation. This is a hotly disputed issue within social science: that is, whether oppression leads to insight or false consciousness. There are those like Pierre Bourdieu who consider that subjugated groups driven by necessity cannot appreciate the nature and conditions of their subordination. Symbolic violence inures them to their subject status. On the other hand, feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins argue to the contrary, that insight comes from multiple oppressions—the more oppressed you are, the more transparent the subjugation.

I find myself between these extreme positions together with Marxists, such as Antonio Gramsci, who argue for a limited rather than a false consciousness, limited by the immediacy of oppression and the opportunity structures open to communities. When it comes to matters of social justice, for example, individuals may invest in strategies of social or geographical mobility, seeking to avoid toxic waste, violence, or poor schooling, rather than staying put and struggling for the community interest. Given the prevailing ideology and the remission of the welfare state, strategies of individual mobility are often preferred—based on unrealistic expectations—to collective mobilization. Thus, day laborers might prefer to operate independently from street corners and adopt a more competitive and entrepreneurial approach to finding jobs rather than rely on the more administered mechanisms of the Labor Center. Rather than demanding greater resources be put into education, poor people might see schooling as the avenue of mobility for their children or even themselves. Social science can present the depressing figures about the outcomes of social and geographical mobility for those with limited resources, but the turn to collective action is quite another matter. Tying private troubles to public issues cannot be effective without also convincing communities that collectively they can, for example, actually succeed in upgrading their local schools.

Recognizing social injustice is best accomplished by showing how some people are—for no good reason—much better off than others. It requires compelling comparisons among communities to reveal inequalities, which to some are obvious but to others remain obscure. Oppressed communities are often isolated, leading to exaggerations as well as underestimation of the differences along racial and class lines. Social science and law can bring into perspective the exploitation that lies behind personal suffering—how the advantages of a few create the disadvantage of the many, whether these disadvantages concern environmental hazards, education, housing, income, or whatever dimension may be experientially salient. Social science can also bear testimony to the mechanisms through which social inequality is repro-

duced and deepened—the effect of state withdrawal of funds for social protection and welfare leads the richest communities to exit state provisions and instead create, fund, and expand private schooling, hospitals, gated communities, and so forth with the result that public provision of such basic goods becomes even worse. Here the social scientist does not replace the experiential truth with a scientific truth but rather through collaboration with community members expands, deepens, and elaborates the experiential truth with the help of scientific research.

The supply of descriptions and explanations of social injustice can easily be disempowering if alternative approaches are not available. Conveying the problematic character of research models that lead to counterproductive piecemeal policy changes, while focusing on the broader, more enduring economic and political forces responsible for youth violence, can, paradoxically, paralyze a community. To know that one is at the bottom of the heap and that forces beyond one's control are responsible for keeping one there can lead to despair or self-defeating strategies of individual exit if the professional does not offer effective ways forward. In addition to elaborating the analytical powers of communities, the professional has to assume the critical role of working with advocates to supply alternatives. Anamaria Loya provides us with a most apt example of the hiring halls, which have grown up across the country to cater to the growing informal labor force outside the jurisdiction of labor unions. The same may be said of the organizing strategies of the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) that pioneered social movement unionism connecting workplace and community. From being the most difficult group to organize, immigrants became the group most receptive to new mobilization strategies that skirted the law, publicly humiliated employers, and enabled immigrant workers to put down roots not only in the workplace but also in the community. The union organizer first undertakes careful and detailed research into the weak links of a particular industry and then sets about exposing those links with innovative strategies worked out together with the community of affected workers.

A crucial part of the sociological imagination is the identification, articulation, and elaboration of alternative institutions or ways of organizing that spring up spontaneously in one locality or another. The social scientist then seeks to generalize their features, the conditions of existence, their weaknesses as well as their strengths. This is the utopian, or rather real utopian function of intellectuals, namely to imagine an institutional fabric that can supply the needs of poor communities directly or facilitate their capacity to struggle for those needs. No amount of critical analysis of neoliberalism, capitalist degradation, or state despotism can substitute for the institutional

imagination necessary for forging an effective collective will. Indeed without this imagination for plausible alternatives, critique leads to cynicism and withdrawal.

Empowering the Professional

A public social science has three goals. The first is to empower subjugated communities in their relations to the structures of domination through collaborative relations between professionals and communities. The second goal is to transform common sense, turning private troubles into public issues. The third is to strengthen the legitimacy and power of the activist-professional and the public social scientist within the professional structures they inhabit.

While the intervention of the social scientist into the lived problems of poor communities generates new directions for research, the organization of the academy and the rhythm of the academic career are often at odds with that of the activist at work in the community. The academic has often considerable teaching and service commitments within the university and/or specific criteria for promotion and tenure that require academic publications in mainstream journals, all of which can be at odds with deep engagement with local struggles. Just as I noted at the beginning of this chapter that the policy world poses obstacles to the immediate realization of the interests of poor communities, so we may say the same of the professional world that expects research to be accountable to peers rather than subjects, to be accessible to a narrow range of specialists rather than a lay audience, and to answer the puzzles of scientific research programs rather than be relevant to public issues. These are real contradictions that coexist alongside the synergies described in the four projects that make up this volume.

Still, there are always spaces within the modern university to develop and practice a range of forms of public engagement. Indeed, teaching itself can be seen as one of those public engagements. At the same time, however, we should not think of the university as a homogeneous environment. Within the university there is a powerful ranking of different schools (professional versus academic), and even within schools there is often a strong balkanization of disciplines. Across the complex system of American higher education, we find a steeply hierarchical system ranging from high-flying research universities with internationally known faculty to two-year colleges and their often dedicated teachers. One might argue, and there is much evidence for this, that the lower tiers of tertiary education are more organically tied to dispossessed communities while the upper tiers are more

likely to follow traditional patterns of influence whether through media or policy research.

Here an old distinction, drawn from sociology, between locals and cosmopolitans is useful. Conventionally, social science has striven for theories or laws that have universal applicability, that are applicable irrespective of social and historical context. Even when the locality is studied, as in some of the most famous works of social science, the objective is to arrive at results that transcend or repress the context. Thus in the field of sociology, when Arlie Hochschild writes of the domestic division of labor in *The Second Shift* or Robert Bellah and his colleagues write of individualism in *The Habits of the Heart*, their accounts refer to all America, even though the material they gathered comes from interviews in specific places in California. In their cosmopolitan ambition they lose sight of the local upon which their generalizations rest.

The development of organic relations between social scientist and community, a relationship of mutual accountability and reciprocity, calls for the valorization of the local relationship. It calls for a vision of social science that builds up from the particularity to the general, to see the particular not as an instance of the general but as something determined and shaped by broader social forces in which it is embedded. The relation between community and context is the object of analysis when Mitchell Duneier studies the sidewalks of Greenwich Village or Loïc Wacquant studies the boxing gym in South Chicago. Their cosmopolitan reach is built on case studies that are explicitly understood to be local. This public ethnography can incorporate the organic relation between social scientist and community.

All four case studies in this volume are first and foremost local; they are responsive to the needs of communities in California. They are building toward a public social science that is not simply *in* California but also *for* California. Moreover, they have a pedigree that includes such eminent investigators as Cary McWilliams, Paul Taylor, Clerk Kerr, and Mike Davis. But we cannot stop here. California, after all, is at the crossroads of the world, of North and South, East and West, so that the local studies of environment, education, violence, and labor when put in their global context tell us a great deal about processes taking place in many parts of the world. Just as Mills spoke of turning private troubles into public issues, today we must speak of turning local problems into global issues. The empowerment of the organic intellectuals, whether they are lawyers or academics, must come through their collaboration in a common project of building a public vision that is local in its roots but global in scope.