Publicizing sociology

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'For Public Sociology' by Michael Burawoy (2005) is a welcome effort to focus the sociological eye on sociology itself. It is brimming with insights about the institutionalization of sociology in the USA and the knowledge this institutionalization produces. While I agree with much of Burawoy's analysis, I will in turn be sociological in my criticism of it in the interest of furthering scholarly debate about public sociology.

I will address two concerns. First, I take issue with Burawoy's claim that there are four sociologies, each associated with a distinct type of knowledge: professional, critical, policy and public. I argue that these four types of knowledge are not discrete in the way he contends, and that all four are embedded in any sociological analysis. Second, Burawoy's article and wider research programme concern the institutionalization of sociology and its communicative relations with other institutions. I argue that his research should address the discrepant criteria of relevance and communication logics of different institutions and their implications for the sociological voice. Sociology does not translate easily into the discourses and practices of other institutions, for example the mass media, government inquiries, or the requirements of evidence in law. Sociological communication in these other public arenas may sometimes be impossible. When it is possible, there is often loss of sociological autonomy and influence as the analysis translates into the criteria of relevance and communication logic of the institution concerned.

In Burawoy's typology, professional knowledge refers to institutionally defined and regulated theories and methods of sociology. Through agreed upon conceptual frameworks and 'true and tested methods', sociology accumulates scientific knowledge, 'producing theories that correspond to the empirical world'. (Burawoy 2005: 276) Burowoy also calls this 'mainstream sociology' to differentiate it from critical sociology.

Critical knowledge is viewed as internal to sociology. It is an interrogation of professional sociology driven by normative frameworks and broader moral issues. For example,

> Feminism, queer theory and critical race theory have hauled professional sociology over the coals for overlooking the ubiquity and profundity of gender, sexual, and racial oppressions. In each case critical sociology attempts to make professional sociology aware of its biases, silences, promoting new research programs built on alternative foundations. (Burawoy 2005: 268)

In Burawoy's view, 'critical sociology largely defines itself by its opposition to professional ("mainstream") sociology' (Burawoy 2005: 269–70).

Policy knowledge is in the service of a client who defines a problem and asks the sociologist to help with the solution. It is judged by its practicality, effectiveness and usefulness to the client in making policy interventions.

Public knowledge appeals to broader audiences in public spheres. The sociologist is a public intellectual, communicating to educated people outside university contexts, especially through quality news media. In a variant called 'organic public sociology', the sociologist is engaged with organizations in public debate and reform. Burawoy feels that all such public 'knowledge is based on consensus between sociologists and their publics' and justified by its 'relevance' to them.

While Burawoy occasionally mentions overlap and interdependence among the four types of knowledge, it is at best 'antagonistic interdependence'. He sees each type of knowledge as relatively discrete: 'Our four types of knowledge represent not only a functional differentiation of sociology but also four distinct preferences in sociology' (Burawoy 2005: 269). In turn these preferences are reflected in different career routes for sociologists: 'most of us occupy only one quadrant at a time'.

Contrary to Burawoy, I contend that all sociology – including his own analysis in 'For Public Sociology' – involves knowledge that is at once professional, critical, policy and public. Burawoy's view that there is a professional sociology distinct from the other types is unfortunate because it suggests that the other types are not professional. Sociologists who do work that Burawoy labels critical – for example femininism, queer theory and critical race theory – are as rigorously professional in their theories and methods as any others! Furthermore, being critical is a core element of professionalism. Critical inquiry is what scientists, indeed all academics, do as professionals, challenging assumptions, theories, methods, findings and implications of research. As Burawoy himself recognizes, research entering into policy and public contexts only has credibility if this scientific ethos of critical challenge and independence remains at the core of professionalism.

All sociology is critical in another way. It refuses to accept social structures, institutions, organizations, processes and relations in the terms in which they are conventionally presented. This refusal is grounded in fine-grained

empirical investigations and creative abstractions of data that reveal the unexpected, violate common sense, and educate through irony.

Burawoy has a narrow view of policy sociology as expertise for hire that is practical, effective and relevant for specific governmental interventions. Other contributors to the *British Journal of Sociology* public sociology debate, especially Wiles (2004) and Davis (2004), have a similar view. They argue that sociology is usually not oriented to policy and is therefore largely impractical, ineffective and irrelevant.

In a connected vein, Lauder, Brown and Halsey (2004) call for sociology to become a new policy science that focuses on 'fundamental social problems', holds government to account, and contributes to democratic debate about policy. In my view sociology has always had these roles, and in the current rage for relevance, increasingly so. How else can one account for the expansion of sociological fields such as the study of crime and criminal justice, in which we witness huge increases in student enrollment, new university departments, degree programmes and faculty appointments, ample research funds from government, new journals, and new specialized book publishers? Many other fields – for example, the sociologies of health, education and law – are also heavily supported by governments. In the spirit of liberalism, these governments pay handsomely for university-based research and teaching that criticizes government operations and holds them to account both in public debate and through the invention and refinement of regulatory technologies. Furthermore, as Johnson (2004: 23) observes in the UK context, since 1997 the number of social researchers (including but not limited to sociologists) employed by government itself has risen by over 80 per cent, and spending on social science research has burgeoned. Moreover, from Johnson's viewpoint within the Department of Education and Skills,

> Empirical social scientific investigation is clearly responsible for directing much government effort, money and prioritization . . . [and] has done a great deal to help identify and quantify the great social problems of our time. (Johnson 2004: 24)

In the USA, Abbott (2001: 146) observes that 'social scientists remain completely in control of policy advice to governments on matters of American social life'.

Beyond these contexts in which sociology manifests explicit policy relevance, it is arguable that all sociology has policy relevance. As Giddens (1990: 16) remarks, 'the practical impact of social science and sociological theories is enormous, and sociological concepts and findings are constitutively involved in what modernity is'. Sociology originated, developed and sustained legitimacy as part of the modern, liberal, social imaginary of producing data on populations that contribute to governmental programmes of security, well-being, prosperity and self-governance (Taylor 2004). As such it has always

been integral to policy, defined simply as principled courses of action. More-over, as analysts of principled courses of action, sociologists cannot escape making choices among preferred principles and thereby contribute to policy. They make such choices in the topics they select for research, the classifica-tions they construct, the analyses they undertake, and the techniques through which they structure their research communications.

All social theory has rhetorical force regarding principled courses of action. Abbott (2001: 218) reminds us

> that it is of the nature of our perception of moral and political affairs to see
> – in any social system whatever – a dialogue of good and bad, or inclusion
> and exclusion, or whatever. Our very mode of judgment dooms us to per-
> petual dissatisfaction . . . there is no good society, but rather a universal
> straining after justice in any situation.

All social theorists exemplify Abbott's point. For example, Foucault's theo-rizing was critical and normative in seeking more principled courses of action and social change. Keynes viewed economics and related fields of study as 'a moral and not a natural science. Keynes therefore does not hesitate to rec-ommend his theory and its implied economic policies and measures which serve multiple political and moral aims in a harmonious manner' (Stehr and Grundmann 2001: 325).

Sociological data also have normative and rhetorical properties for princi-pled courses of action. This is so at all stages of the research process, from the selection of criteria of relevance used to create categories and classify, through analytical techniques and interpretations. Data collection is a practi-cal accomplishment in the context of disciplinary and institutional regimes and processes, influenced by extra-scientific factors, networks of interest, and the desire to persuade. In particular, quantitative figures are used as figurative lan-guage to dramatise problems and create a sense of urgency for policy inter-ventions (Haggerty 2001).

Quantitative data on human populations and their problems inevitably have a moral character that urges principled courses of action. Moral assessments guide the selection of population risks to research and how to mitigate them (Douglas 1990; Hacking 2003). Moral judgments are built into statistical norms that establish what is normal about a population. What is established as the standard or norm through probability statistics bears both factual and moral imprints. 'The norm may be what is usual or typical, yet our most powerful ethical constraints are also called norms' (Hacking 1990: 104). Probability sta-tistics 'make up people' in the sense of telling them both where they fit within a 'normal' population and what their normative obligations are as a result. That is, people experience the facts of probability statistics as normative obligations and therefore as scripts for principled action. They entail 'a power

as old as Aristotle to bridge the fact/value distinction, whispering in your ear that what is normal is also all right' (Hacking 1990: 170).

In moving from factual construction to authoritative certainty regarding the locus of a problem and its resolution, the researcher pinpoints *a* cause and urges *a* policy solution in relation to that cause. This point is made brilliantly by Gusfield (1981: 74) in his analysis of how impaired driving is singled out as a central cause of road accidents: 'The rapidity with which alcohol is perceived as villain exemplifies the moral character of factual construction. Without the moral direction the translation of data into policy directives is difficult.' The researcher mobilizes data of causal responsibility in order to shape response ability within the political and legal systems. This process inevitably entails moral determinations of how to mould and interpret the facts rhetorically for principled courses of action.

Sociology has a more direct, practical influence on policy at another level. The word policy is rooted in policing: the routine practices of surveillance, classification and regulation that govern conduct. As Giddens (1990: 14, 16) emphasizes, the influence of sociology is found not only at the level of abstract policies and frameworks, but also in how it constitutes institutional classification schemes, regulations, and routine practices of bureaucratic surveillance. Sociologists regularly conduct research that refines surveillance, audit and regulatory technologies and thereby contributes to the policing of organizational life.

All sociology entails public knowledge. There is no such thing as 'private' sociology in the sense of self-referential practitioners who do not actively seek to publicize their ideas and research. Sociologists publicize their ideas and research in myriad institutional contexts involving various audiences and different media. The media include classrooms at various levels of education (schools, colleges, universities, graduate schools), textbooks, research monographs, journals, government reports, mass media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines), and websites that can also be used to intersect with each of the above media. As Burawoy states, the key question is knowledge for whom and for what, to which he should add through what medium of communication?

Questions concerning the institutions and media through which sociology is publicized raise a number of additional considerations for Burawoy's analysis. Sociologists who communicate through other institutions experience loss of control as they are required to conform to the media logics of the institutions concerned. There is a world of difference between communicating in the *British Journal of Sociology*, twelve-second clip on television news, government policy report, and testimony before a court of law or commission of inquiry. The sociologist's text escapes her as it moves into these new contexts. She must speak in the voice authorized by these institutions, a requirement

that reconfigures how she thinks and acts (Foucault 1973; Douglas 1986). As Wiles (2004: 33) observes, this translation process is accentuated in the context of 'the more directly popularist nature of contemporary politics with a polycentric mass media'. The pressure to conform to the criteria of relevance and media logics of other institutions means that it is extremely difficult to follow Burawoy's admonition that public sociology must not only be a public good but good sociology. The translation process will often result in a product that does not look like sociology at all, but rather journalism, government consultancy or expert witnessing.

A key element in loss of autonomy is that other institutions ask the social problem question within their own criteria of relevance, rather than the sociological question of relevance to the advancement of academic knowledge. The sociologist is required to work within someone else's social problem framework and there is inevitable slippage into conventional wisdom and practical concerns of the other institutions. The result over time is that many of the explanatory structures and concepts used by sociologists derive from the narrative structures of everyday discourse about social problems.

The force of this pressure to work within some else's criteria of relevance is evident in the endless complaints about sociology that emanate from other institutional spheres. Thus Wiles (2004: 31) opens his contribution to the public sociology debate by asserting, 'the reputation of sociology for practical utility is at an historical low and sociology is regarded as the least developed of the social sciences in terms of the rigor of its methods'. Davis (2004: 499) weighs in with a barrage of complaints about sociological communications:

> [S]ome sociologists communicate with each other in a language that is opaque, impenetrable, and inaccessible . . . Sociology seems to have become inward looking, tribal and inaccessible. The so-called scientific value of sociology seems to have an inverse relationship to its utility. Many research projects undertaken by sociologists ask questions that are of interest to nobody other than fellow sociologists . . . The debates that take place in many sociology journals are of little or no relevance to analysts and policy makers who occupy the primary space in the 'new policy science'. Indeed, they often have little or no relevance to anyone other than professional sociologists.

Forces within the university often take such diatribes seriously, placing additional pressure on the sociologist to fulfill someone else's criteria of relevance. What Burawoy observes in American contexts is true internationally: universities are under pressure from other institutions in society – especially business enterprise, government and mass media – to serve their ends, including their definitions of what public constituencies need to be satisfied. The government wields its influence through control of university budgets; lucrative research contracts aimed primarily at overcoming the political problem of the day; and, changing social science research councils in the direction of their

criteria of relevance rather than those of applicants. Contrary to the view of Lauder, Brown and Halsey (2004: 19) that academics are not rewarded for mass media appearances, many universities now require their staff to report such appearances as part of performance reviews. Moreover, the mass media have now constituted themselves as a Standard and Poor's-like rating agency of universities. In Canada, *Maclean's*, a national news magazine, provides the most influential rating of universities nationally, and universities are very sensitive to the results lest consumers look elsewhere for relevant education products to consume.

Many of these inter-institutional sources of loss of autonomy erode the very professional, critical, policy and public features that make sociology relevant and engaged. Being pressured to pursue narrow social problem questions at the expense of sociological questions lessens professional focus on the advancement of scientific knowledge. In sociology, as in other sciences, there are methodological, ontological and epistemological sources of uncertainty that must be addressed and communicated in a professional manner. This professional manner includes caution about public communications, especially those that bear explicit policy interventions or other pronouncements that are not warranted in light of scientific uncertainty. Sociologists are often driven into public arenas where their reach exceeds their grasp, and they can easily contribute to their own professional diminishment in these contexts (Ericson 2003; Best 2001).

The lack of appearances in some public spheres may actually be a positive sign that sociology is maintaining its critical role. Sociology at its best can be more aggravating than mitigating. It 'hits a nerve' that is difficult for the institution being researched to deal with in public discussion and as a result the institution rejects the analysis. However, over time the analysis may prove cogent and relevant in contexts beyond the academy. It may even provide a new paradigm that has radical implications for policy and fosters new ways of organizing (for examples see Hutter and Power 2005).

On the one hand Burawoy is correct in stating that 'with public sociology knowledge is based on consensus between sociologists and their publics'. I take this as an empirical observation that a public constituency will only accept sociological analysis that accords with its own criteria of what the world looks like and therefore how its members should engage policy as principled courses of action. On the other hand this statement suggests public sociology is equivalent to management consultancy: playing back to one's public 'clients' what they have already agreed is the problem at hand and parameters of the solution. As such this statement contradicts what Burawoy says elsewhere about sociology's most significant contribution: critical engagement with major public issues that are a matter of controversy and conflict, and in reaction to which there is a need for informed sociological research and imagination.

Sociology can best serve in this critical capacity and be a public good if the primary institution through which it operates, the university, affords its practitioners enabling conditions in which to advance knowledge. Unfettered intellectual inquiry yields knowledge that is at once professional, critical, policy and public, and that improves the human condition. Such inquiry necessarily involves collaboration with other institutions, but always with sociological knowledge as the rationale for engagement.

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