



Foreword

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Sociology is a discipline born out of social change and upheaval. It is also a discipline traditionally seen to have a role in helping us understand the world around us and even contributing to those improvements emerging as a consequence of this understanding. Whether or not this is achievable and desirable is the subject of controversy within the discipline with some believing it to be an impossible, even futile, ambition. There is a view that sociology has forgotten about social issues, lost its critical edge and in so doing lost its public voice.

These were all issues raised in last year's *BJS* debate on the relationship between sociology and government (*British Journal of Sociology* 55(1): 1–34; *British Journal of Sociology* 55(2): 439–50).

Public sociology was also the theme of the American Sociological Association's annual meeting in 2004. In his Presidential address Michael Burawoy stated: 'More than ever the world needs public sociologies – sociologies that transcend the academy and engage wider audiences'. Whether they are successfully doing so is open to debate, certainly the *BJS* debate on the relationship between sociology and government didn't necessarily offer a positive answer to this question.

Michael Burawoy's Presidential address was reprinted in the last volume of *BJS* – the article attracted a deal of comment in the USA. We invited a number of leading international sociologists to respond to the debate and their responses, reprinted in this issue, reveal that Michael's paper has excited more general global interest. Issues about the importance of public engagement remain contentious as do the ways in which any engagement should take place. The importance of disciplinary boundaries is debated. So too is the possible ethnocentrism of the debate. There is however a consensus that the debate

should be globally relevant and that all parts of the globe should participate in the discussion. Hopefully this issue of *BJS* will help to further this ambition.

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