



## **What is 'public sociology'? Why and how should it be made stronger?**

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Alluding to one of the discipline's classics, Michael Burawoy has presented 11 theses on 'public sociology'. Some of his main claims can be summarized in three statements. 1) Public sociology is part of a four-fold bundle of disciplinary activities. 2) Public sociology is important and should be made stronger and developed as an integrated part of the discipline. 3) Public sociology requires well functioning publics.

I find Burawoy's paper stimulating and important and think I am basically in agreement with him. But I am not quite sure if we have the same understanding of 'public sociology' and its relationship to other forms of sociological work. Burawoy has introduced a neologism. It has been more common to talk about 'popularization', 'public discourse' and 'public enlightenment'. The following comments have been produced on short notice and are only related to the presidential address.

### **Academic institutions as bundles of activities**

Within science studies it is unusual to focus on disciplines as bundles of activities (Kalleberg 2000a: 219–20). Burawoy, however, is well aware of such bundles and in the case of sociology operates with 'four sociologies' (professional, policy, critical and public). I suggest a more general concept of academic disciplines, as fivefold bundles of disciplinary activities. The typology can be used for the description and analysis of all academic disciplines. There is nothing special about sociology as an academic discipline in this context.

Any scientific discipline can be analysed as constellations and combinations of five different institutional programmes (Kalleberg 2000a: 229–32; Kalleberg 2000b). It is easier to see the specific character of each type of activity by focusing on the resulting end-products:

- 1) *research programmes* resulting in scientific publications;
- 2) *teaching and study programmes* resulting in educated students at different levels;
- 3) *dissemination programmes*, involving both the dissemination of ideas resulting in scientific and cultural literacy and contributions to democratic discourse;
- 4) *'professional' or expert programmes*, resulting in advice or improvement for users (clients), and
- 5) *self-governance programmes* resulting in well functioning institutions, such as university departments, professional associations and academic journals.

Consequently, academic disciplines are five-fold bundles, being sciences, academic studies, disseminators of ideas, centres of expert activity and centres of institutional governance. The social status of the individual academic, then, consists of five roles: researcher, teacher, disseminator (and participant in public discourse), expert and academic citizen.

Many differences exist between individuals, disciplines, institutions and countries. Role-combinations shift between people, institutions and over the life course of the individual. The different tasks can often only be separated in an analytical way. They can stimulate, correct and distort each other.

How is this typology related to Burawoy's? Some of it, I think, is parallel (professional, public and policy sociology), two of his activities (professional and critical) can and should be integrated into one type of activity and two tasks (sociology as teaching/study and self-governance) are not to be found in his typology.

Burawoy labels the discipline of sociology as a science 'professional sociology'. As he underlines, this is the basic activity in any academic discipline. If we did not have scientific knowledge at our disposal in the form of articles, chapters and books, there would be no knowledge to teach, disseminate, use as part of a knowledge base when working as an expert for users, and nothing to design and develop in institutional governance.

Burawoy identifies 'critical sociology' as the examination of the foundation of research programmes 'both the explicit and the implicit, both normative and descriptive' (Burawoy 2005: 268). I do not see good reasons for the classification of this as a separate disciplinary task. This is scientific labour, having to do with the (re)construction of adequate concepts and typologies and the clarification of basic presuppositions and insights. Robert Merton insisted on the importance of the analysis of sociological concepts as part of scientific work in order, among other things, 'to liberate ourselves from the patterns of cognitive misbehavior' (1968: 146).

Normative knowledge claims – Burawoy's 'reflexive knowledge' – can also be criticized and developed with reasons, both in science and daily life

(Habermas 1994: Ch. 1; Boudon 2001: Ch. 4,5). Normative argumentation is a normal element in research, as in work-environment studies related to value standards of health, ecological sustainability, efficiency and democratization (cf. Kalleberg 1993).

Burawoy's conception of policy sociology is similar to my categorization of the academic as an expert, working for a user who defines the problems and tasks. The task is to give advice and solve problems for the user (Kalleberg 2000b: 408). Obviously, there are differences between disciplines with regard to the importance of this task. It is, for instance, much more important in psychology and medicine than in sociology.

Burawoy has not included teaching and study as a specific type of disciplinary activity, but it should be included as a separate type of sociological work. This has to do with the general goals, methods and end-results. According to Burton Clark's (1995) historical-comparative study of universities, the specific bundling of science with teaching and study in the American research universities is an essential ingredient in the explanation of the fabulous success of this university system in the twentieth century.

Burawoy does not include self-governance as a disciplinary task. But designing, directing or developing scientific institutions cannot be a purely administrative activity. Such work requires an understanding of the relevant discipline. It does not result in separate end products, but constitutes a more or less fruitful infrastructure for the others (Kalleberg 2000a: 231).

### **What is 'public sociology'?**

In his second thesis Burawoy seeks to clarify what he means by 'public sociology'. The central element in this is his conceptualization of the forms of communication between sociologists and people outside of sociology, 'extra-academic publics'. He refers to classic contributions from DuBois, Myrdal, Riesman and Bellah, which 'are read beyond the academy' (Burawoy 2005: 264), where he distinguishes between two main types of public sociology, traditional and organic.

My main problem with Burawoy's discussion of public sociology, is that it is difficult to distinguish it from consultancy (policy sociology), institutional governance and academic studies. This is typical of the discussions all over the OECD-area. Burawoy guesses that 'the bulk of public sociology' (in the USA?) is of an organic kind (Burawoy 2005: 264). Here he refers to working with a 'labour movement, neighbourhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights associations' as examples. This sounds like 'policy-sociology' (the sociologist as expert). I would guess that in most of these projects, sociologists are primarily participating as experts, seeking to improve the situation for client groups. I also guess that some of this work

should be classified as political activity, perfectly legitimate but outside the boundaries of the discipline.

In our age of information leaders and PR-agencies, it has become usual to mix up dissemination with PR, the same is also the case in universities. I wonder if that is now also a tendency in US-sociology. One of the legitimate and important sub-tasks for academic leaders – be they chairs of departments, rectors of universities or presidents of the ASA – is to make their own institution and discipline visible, to get money or increase respectability. American sociology was in trouble during the 1980s. Is the strong interest in public sociology among American sociologists to some degree part of a PR strategy for regaining legitimacy? That is legitimate, but as a disciplinary task it should be identified as institutional governance and not as public enlightenment.

In my view, we should not claim that teaching is a form of ‘public sociology’ as Burawoy suggests. It should be developed and evaluated as a distinct disciplinary task (Parsons and Platt 1973; Habermas 1989; Clark 1995).

I know of no good and generally accepted terminology in any OECD-country for classifying the kind of activity Burawoy focuses on. That signals a general lack of clarity with regard to the content of the task, outside and inside academia. I prefer to underline two subtasks in such clarification: dissemination (‘popularization’) and contributions to public discourse (Kalleberg 2000a: 237–40; 2000b: 407). In the first, scientific knowledge is treated as a value in itself. Darwin’s *The Origin of The Species* and Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* are not only fundamental scientific achievements, but also parts of our common culture. In the second, we are interested in science as the translation of scientific knowledge, contributing to deliberative democracy (Habermas 1996: Ch. 8; Elster 1998).

There are few good studies documenting and analysing what is actually done in this field of dissemination and public discourse. In the only national survey of activity in this field I know of, covering Norwegian universities, it was documented that the most productive research professors were also the most productive contributors to dissemination and public discourse (see Kalleberg 2000a: 242).

Everyone outside a research specialty is a ‘layman’. In most knowledge contexts, each and every one of us is a layperson. That is a basic condition of living in a modern knowledge society. If it were the case that dissemination and public discourse primarily was meant for people without any academic education, there should be less and less use for it, as the education-level in the OECD-countries is steadily rising. In my view, the opposite is the case (Kalleberg 2000a: 239). An increasingly important task is to disseminate to specialists in other fields. This has to do with the enormous complexity of many of the most pressing challenges in the modern world, for instance related to ecology. No single discipline can provide the solution to such challenges.

Burawoy appears to assume that dissemination and public discourse in sociology, and in other disciplines (?), are new activities and therefore 'at a primitive stage' (Burawoy 2005: 265). But this is an old activity in USA and Europe, going back to the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment (cf. Habermas 1989; Bender 1991).

### **Why and how should 'dissemination and public discourse' be made stronger?**

Burawoy insists on the importance of getting in contact with publics and stimulating the development of publics. He also insists on the importance of the institutionalization of public sociology. These are important points, but are in need of being made less abstract.

What is a 'public'? In dissemination and public discourse, we communicate with people as members of publics, not as clients, customers or potential supporters to be reached with PR-strategies. When we – senders and receivers – are members of publics, we are subjecting ourselves to norms similar to those Merton has christened 'the ethos of science' (Merton 1968: Ch. 18). We are basically asking if the claims presented are valid. We are under an obligation to listen to counter-arguments and eventually respond with better arguments. This is different from how we behave as customers, clients and members of interest groups. Habermas articulates the same insight when he defines argumentation and publics with reference to the force of better arguments, not the co-ordinating force of money, formal authority or tradition (Habermas 1996: Ch. 1).

Rationality in public discourse today is under pressure from business enterprise, the entertainment industry, commercialized mass media, one-sided special interest groups and technocratic science.

The dissolution of a public sphere and the limited role of academic intellect in whatever survives of that sphere is worrisome . . . Restoring a place for academic knowledge in the public culture and a role for public discussion in academic culture ought to be a high priority of both academic and public leaders. (Bender 1997: 47)

This is an institutional challenge.

Parsons and Platt showed 30 years ago how the functions of research and advanced teaching, professional training and general education were assigned to different institutions within the American research-university. The 'intellectual function' – i.e. public enlightenment or 'public sociology' – is a task 'which has not become so formally institutionalized in organizational divisions of the university system' (Parsons and Platt 1973: 6, 104). They spoke of a

'structural vacuum' and noted that there 'does not now exist any specific organizational framework within the university structure for meeting this ideological need' (Parsons and Platt 1973: 292).

My impression of the American university system, is that this is still a valid description. If anything, this function seems to have become weaker since then, whereas the importance of PR-strategies and useful (and profitable) work for clients has become stronger. According to my (somewhat impressionistic) knowledge, the function of dissemination is generally poorly institutionalized in universities in the OECD-world. The lack of institutionalized publics in this area expresses a sort of widespread institutional misconduct.

The institutionalization of such activity is essential. Let me use my own university, the University of Oslo, as an example for what that can mean. A few years ago I chaired a committee with representatives from the whole university with the task of strengthening dissemination and public discourse. The report was accepted and implemented. The package of recommendations required a certain amount of documented dissemination for people applying for academic positions, introduced dissemination practices into graduate studies, suggested new fora for dissemination and public discourse, increased the sum of money for the University's annual prize for dissemination, required regular documentation of this activity, suggested ways of stimulating more research on actual dissemination and made academic leaders responsible for the quantity and quality of dissemination in their respective units. Since then, reforms have also been introduced to create economic incentives for individuals and groups to stimulate such activity.

One of the most important elements in the reform-package, was the insistence on the importance of creating new 'publics' within the university itself and in cooperation with mass media, schools and other institutions in civil society. One of the most interesting ideas was to have discussion fora where it was possible to focus on broad challenges, such as ecology, crime or the analysis of the US/UK-led intervention in Iraq. These discussions should include different disciplines from within the university and also knowledgeable people from outside. It is my experience that when a biologist has been able to make his argument understandable for a social scientist, and vice versa, most other interested parties within the wider community will also understand the points. It can be an important experience for students to see their teachers in such discussions with peers in other fields, also experiencing the limitations of how much it is possible to understand from within any single discipline. (Scientific humility is a basic moral norm in academia and public discourse, cf. Merton.)

The relationship with the mass media, including local newspapers and radio stations, is important. An essential point is to keep and develop publics, where participants – including readers and listeners – have to present and defend reasons. An example is an interesting institution in Norwegian newspapers,

the daily 'chronicle' (*kronikk*). This is an open, public forum where citizens present a longer reasoned argument on a specific issue. University academics are productive participants in this open public space. There is room for much interesting experimentation in this field, such as where an important element is to create fora (publics) requiring participants to listen to arguments (Friedland 2003).

The school system is the most important cultural system in any OECD-nation. The interface between the disciplines and schools is essential and little developed. Surveys have repeatedly shown that half the American population believes that human beings lived together with dinosaurs during an earlier period in our history, the so-called Flintstone-effect. (The Europeans are not much better.) This is just another indicator of the importance of institutionalizing fora for public discourse where we do participate as cultural and political citizens, members of publics, and not as clients and consumers in markets.

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