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For public social science[1]

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Sociology and categorical social science

Should we be inspired by Michael Burawoy's vision of an integrated sociology to maintain sociology's renewed momentum? While we can value what sociologists, economists or philosophers do in their teaching and research, we can still believe universities would be better off if these disciplines disintegrated somewhat. So we might not wish to 'bind ourselves to the mast' of commitment to an integrated professional, public, policy and critical sociology with a 'common ethos' (Burawoy 2005: 14). That said, Burawoy makes a compelling case that these four types of sociology can learn much from one another and that scholars who are simultaneously public, policy or critical sociologists as they are professional sociologists make special contributions to that end.

The social sciences might benefit from the kind of shift the biological sciences has seen, where organization around categorical referents – like zoology (animals), botany (plants), entomology (insects), microbiology (microbes), anatomy (body parts) – has been substantially supplanted by organization of work around theoretical themes that cut across these categories (ecology, evolutionary biology, the new molecular biology of the DNA revolution, and structural biology that comprehends biological function through structural studies of large molecules, supra-molecular assemblies up to the morphology of whole organisms). Michael Burawoy's way of thinking about the disciplines is far from completely categorical, yet tends to the categorical at the level of 'standpoints': economics studies the world from the standpoint of the market, political science from the standpoint of the state, sociology from the standpoint of civil society. While these disciplines are of course more pluralized than this, and increasingly so, to the extent the social sciences are organized categorically – this discipline on the economy, that one on the political, another on the social, another the spatial – they are structured to block breakthroughs in knowledge that cut across categories.

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One might say that there is a story about biology making more spectacular progress than both the social and physical sciences in recent decades because it discarded clustering around categories of phenomena in favour of cross-category theoretical agendas. But the social sciences are different. What I advocate has been tried in a big way across the social sciences – it was called Marxism. Then there was poststructuralism in reaction. While the leading theorists of these programmes have bequeathed much of enduring value to all the social sciences, they have not motivated empirical programmes of work that have led to wave after wave of transformative insights. How much should we make of two half empty glasses? The biological sciences have had many failures of cross-category theoretical agendas. Because the social is even more contextually variegated than the biological, we should not expect theoretical projects that cut across categories to be especially grand. This is where Michael Burawoy is most persuasive – in the concluding paragraph that envisions 'myriads of nodes, each forging collaborations' from below. Yet we might not see this in terms of 'collaborations of sociologists with their publics, flowing together into a single current'.

Saving the North Atlantic from itself

Burawoy concedes that the structure of the social sciences disciplines arose in a series of historical accidents that occurred in a different world from the one we must today understand. We might not worry if structures of power over intellectual work (as sedimented in ASAs, BSAs, *ASR*s and *AJS*s) simply coalesced around historical accidents. But the disciplines were all accidents that happened in one region – the North Atlantic. Consider something as silly as the disciplinary separation of anthropology from sociology. If sociologists are honest they confess that sociology is the study of the social in societies that are like the dominant North Atlantic ones. Anthropology studies the same phenomena using a different mix of the same methods in societies that are not like the North Atlantic powers. American sociologists like to go to conferences where the programme is not cluttered with presentations about Samoa, even as they are pleased to have a President who has worked in Zambia. But this is why social scientists from Samoa are not very comfortable in Northern conferences.

Social scientists beyond the North Atlantic have no choice but to make a case for their promotion, for resources for their research group, based on citations and publications in the disciplinary editorial offices that matter in the Anglo–American world. As we do that, this does not mean we should let ourselves be swept into the ASA's 'single current', even if pluralized into four converging streams. One reason is that this is bad for North Atlantic scholarship. An insight based on a comparison of Samoan with other Pacific societies is

unlikely to score a citation in the *BJS*. If the Samoan insight is a really big one, however, in the long run of intellectual history, intellectual communities are likely to form around it and its Margaret Meads. We can all struggle to see that benefit come to the social sciences sooner rather than later by advocating resource shifts to what we see as the exciting developments outside the North Atlantic disciplinary structures. The biodiversity of the Galapagos Islands long existed before Darwin sailed in with scientific resources to understand their implications. Cross-cutting cultural, economic and political diversity that can engender transformative theory is precisely what gets least attention from hegemonic sociology, economics and political science.

The argument here is not only that cross-category, theory-driven innovation has promise for opening new horizons of social theory. It is also that the discipline of extant disciplines systematically shuts down that promise. It is a mistake for criminologists to study and respond to crime within their domain of special expertise in categories of institutions, criminal justice systems – what state police do, what happens in prisons. When criminologists do that, as they mostly do, they don't explain much. It is a bad idea for international relations scholars to understand war from what foreign ministers and national armies do. That is how al Qaedas come in under their radar; that is why we fail to predict or explain the collapse of the Soviet Union or understand genocide in Africa.[1] Of course these disciplines have pluralized, especially in recent times. Paradigmatic change is not about razing the work and the methodological rigour of disciplines; it is about reconfiguring the invaluable endeavours pursued within them so they can feed into more fertile modes of theory-driven organization.

Methodology and sloth

There is no denying the fact on the ground that it is disciplines that develop, teach and demand methodological rigour. This must be preserved. At the same time, we can resist the way disciplines enforce the methodological orthodoxy of their own tradition, instead of training students to scan the social sciences for the best method for a particular problem. No discipline is more heterodox than sociology, so Michael Burawoy's version of sociology is the most natural ally of social scientists who wish to resist the mediocrity of disciplines that teach their students to settle for a standard suite of disciplinary methods rather than the best methods.

So psychologists insist on an artificial experiment in circumstances when naturalistic qualitative work or a piece of survey research would better evaluate the hypothesis. Economists insist on econometrics to test a theory that could be tested, and would be more rigorously tested, by the psychologist's preferred

approach of a randomized controlled trial. Sociologists ignore recent advances in econometrics because being competent across them is expected of economists but not sociologists, or they use unvalidated single-item measures of attitudes in circumstances where psychology would rightly expect scaling of multiple items. Anthropologists stick with ethnography to answer quantitative questions. Sociologists of Foucaultian persuasion defend sloppy historical research of the sort Foucault himself did, ignoring accessible primary sources, because they claim they are doing a history of the present rather than the past! Sociologists of law do research without reading cases. Scholars of many stripes who are methodologically rigorous evaluating an explanatory theory have no taste for rigour in evaluating normative theory – as when a glib 'policy implication' is tossed off in a final paragraph. At least all these vices recur often enough. Disciplinary diehards implore that theirs is a realistic structuring of science because no one can be competent across all methods. That is why collaborations become more critical as knowledges mature.

Affirming the pathologies and virtues of the four sociologies

In this spirit, Burawoy can be seen as harsh on other disciplines and charitable to sociology. It is not quite fair to 'liken professional economics to the discipline of the Communist Party' (Burawoy 2005: 20), as we remember those seminars where a young scholar is berated with 'But that is not sociology', not the perceived party line of the discipline. While sociology is a 'decentralized participatory democracy' (Burawoy 2005: 20), political science, geography and anthropology are 'balkanized' (Burawoy 2005: 21).

Economics and political science are given the rap that 'between them [they] have manufactured the ideological time bombs that have justified the excesses of markets and states, excesses that are destroying the foundations of the public university.' (Burawoy 2005: 22). In contrast, sociology represents 'the interests of humanity' in 'keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny' (Burawoy 2005: 22). While it is true that a vibrant civil society is needed to check the tyrannies of states and markets, across space and time sociology has not proved essential to this. Moreover, a case can be made (Braithwaite 1998) that strong states and strong markets are important in preventing the tyrannies of civil society. The Ku Klux Klan and al Qaeda are part of civil society too. On the Burawoy vision, should the discipline discipline a theorist who advocates a strong state, strong markets and strong civil society as a path to non-domination, who rejects the notion that civil society should struggle to weaken the market and the state? I rather think the answer is that Michael Burawoy wants to welcome folk like me into his pluralist sociology. But it is actually not welcoming to set up the four sociologies behind barricades to resist the barbarians of markets and the state.

Here I am not being completely fair to Michael Burawoy. Poor fellow was at the rostrum in his role as party leader when he delivered this. His job from that rostrum was to get the congregation to put aside their bickering and find what they have in common. To his credit, in doing that he was seeking to pluralize the discipline and was critical of each of his four sociologies in turn. He is right that professional sociology can be insular, obsessed with puzzles that only seem important to inward-looking aficionados of the discipline; critical sociology can be sectarian and ingrown in its opposition to these umimportant activities of professional sociology; public sociology can be populist and trivialized by the obsessions that make the mass media commercially successful; policy sociology can be captured by state actors and contractually inhibited from fulsome publication of embarrassing results.

He is also right that professional sociology is populated by many brilliant and open minds that are turned to foundational questions; critical sociology helps us see those questions through a different lens that reveals more as it debunks; public sociology engages with civil society in ways that enrich democratic deliberation; and policy sociology is vital to understanding how a people can work with its state to struggle against problems that matter like poverty.

Burawaoy's submission is that we can nurture the strengths of the four sociologies and minimize their pathologies by putting them in creative tension. There is something in this. Sometimes relevance failings of professional sociology might be confronted by the more engaged dialogue of public and policy sociology and by critical sociology for its failure to be reflexive. Yet the challenges from the strengths of one sociology to the weaknesses of another all occur within a shared ideology of science. If important challenges to sociological blindspots, in method or theory, come from psychology or economics, disciplines for which most sociologists lack affection, disciplinary ideology is likely to ensure that road is not taken. Burawoy rightly implies this is not the problem for sociology it is for psychology and economics, because these are less plural disciplines. Of course if you believe that the social sciences have optimized the structure of the disciplines such that most of the important conversations are best accommodated within a disciplinary box, then this is not a problem: it is mostly best to leave the economy to the economists, interactions between individuals to the psychologists, and so on. But Burawoy and most sociologists do not believe this.

A model of a fork on Burawoy's road

One model of the social sciences might see Burawoy's four sociologies, beside a comparable four-box set for political science, four international relations boxes, four psychology boxes and so on littering a surface. Also scattered across the surface would be many different publics – disparate NGOs and

social movements, the media, states, firms, international organizations. Part of this model of the situation on the ground would be transnational networking, drawing strategic links among various boxes. Here are two choices of how to respond to the situation of social science on the ground as represented in this model. One is to shine the light of our scholarship from within a disciplinary four-box set in ways that illuminate more than one box at a time – critical sociology that is also public sociology, for example. From within the mutually illuminated four-box sociology, light then shines out from the discipline to linked publics.

A second choice is to construct new nodes of light in a different plane, above this surface. These nodes cast light upon different boxes of different disciplines on the surface below, and also draws light from them. Not being confined within a disciplinary box, this light source is more able to move: when its insights fail both to illuminate sociology effectively or to draw light from it, its focus shifts to exchange light simultaneously say with policy economics, critical legal studies and the labour movement in a novel way.

If you believe that a social science mostly structured around categories of social objects, as opposed to theory-driven groupings, is a disaster, then the second model is a better metaphor. I see it not as a fantastic metaphor, but one that fits what has happened in our lifetimes in the biological sciences, and one that guides my own practice. As in the biological sciences, most of the attempts to reframe social science will fail and be extinguished. My own attempts with different clusters of colleagues have failed to shed light very far or brightly: intellectual communities around a 'Reshaping Australian Institutions Project' to engage with the idea of a new Australian republic for the centenary of Australian federation in 2001 (and an associated theory of institutional design group), around regulatory theories of state and non-state governance and around restorative justice. While these efforts have failed to be intellectually transformative, they at least turned out to be pragmatic endeavours. When I abandoned sociology to travel this path, I thought it would be irresponsible to take PhD students on the journey because they would be spurned by the disciplines. Yet we found in the Regulatory Institutions Network that we attract more PhD students than disciplinary programmes, get them better jobs in conventionally prestigious (mostly disciplinary) places, attract more outside funding from a more disparate and trans-national range of funders, and our faculty achieve excellent citation rates in journals edited by the guardians of North Atlantic disciplines. The latter accomplishments do not matter intellectually, but they show that new groups with ambitions to create theory-driven structures of social science can survive.

To flourish, outside-the-box programmes really need serious scholars in them because they struggle against the hegemonic forces of disciplines that define the terms of excellence in research assessment, tenure, gateways to publication. When they do flourish, they are exciting places for PhDs. Mostly,

however, cross-category theoretically focused groups do not survive and students are badly served as they collapse. Still it is good for the social sciences that it is hard for outside-the-box programmes to survive. What are fertile theoretical projects for organizing social scientific endeavour will vary at different periods in the history of science. A social science with more tents and fewer buildings serves us better.

Nodes of cross-category theoretical innovation: some examples

Do these nodes of light actually exist in the social sciences? My theory of where they are most likely to be seen is not right at the centre of the intellectual world, where the vested interests in disciplinary structures have the strongest grip, nor in the resource-poor periphery, but on the edge of the centre, or at secondary centres well connected to the dominant centres. So the Scottish Enlightenment (1740–90), benefiting from its networking both to the salons of Paris and the clubs of London and Oxbridge, delivered sociology an Adam Ferguson who laid the foundations of the idea of civil society, delivered economics Adam Smith and David Hume. After World War I when the most influential universities were still European, American pragmatists such as John Dewey had particularly strong influences on the disciplines of philosophy, education and law that laid foundations for the vibrancy of American social science after World War II, including sociology through the agency of pragmatists like Philip Selznick (1992). To this day, American pragmatism has little influence on non-American philosophy. After World War II, when the German universities ceased to exercise more dominance over social theory than the Americans, the Frankfurt school reframed the relationship between explanatory and normative theories of the social most notably through the writings of Jürgen Habermas, and Austria transformed both political economy and microeconomics through Frederick Hayek, the pioneers of game theory and others. A diaspora of European Jews, like Hannah Arendt, dispersed to many corners of the world, made huge contributions to the social sciences in this period by not fitting comfortably within the disciplinary hierarchies.

Meanwhile, in a Paris less intellectually dominant than it had been for centuries, Michel Foucault reframed thinking in important ways across all the social sciences. Actually Foucault spent most of the 1950s in universities in Sweden and Poland until settling in Paris in 1960. Habermas and Foucault are interesting examples because they came out of the discipline of philosophy and would count on most historians' lists of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Yet the centre of the intellectual world redefined 'analytic philosophy' to exclude the 'continental philosophy' of the likes of Habermas and Foucault. The most influential ranking of philosophy

departments is actually of 'analytic philosophy' that awards no points for having Habermas on a faculty (www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.htm).

Perhaps the most appealing figure of a scholar succeeding in changing the intellectual landscape for good is Keynes. Keynes does not fit my hypothesis of being to the edge of the centre. Keynes was a Bloomsbury, at the centre of the discipline of economics at Cambridge, though he was a sometime gay man at a distance from the establishment. He had a certain disdain for the job at Cambridge, viewed econometricians as often 'charlatans' (Mini 1994: 1) and saw himself as escaping classical economics. Keynes was easily the most influential economist of the twentieth century, an influence on the way back up in the twenty-first. But just as Habermas and Foucault were not philosphers' philosophers, like Hayek, Keynes was not an economists' economist. As with Adam Smith, where the economists read *The Wealth of Nations* but not *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, the economists learnt only from the elements of Keynes that sat most comfortably with the economic tradition.

Keynes was in fact a sociologists' economist, as Barbalet (1993: 235–38) has pointed out. In *The General Theory,* Keynes (1936) had important things to say about the sociology of the emotions. He lamented the theoretical neglect of confidence, a neglect the discipline of economics perpetuated by ignoring this aspect of the *General Theory*. Keynes' theory of the marginal efficiency of capital turns on subjective expectation of yield. This renders confidence critical to the propensity to invest. It follows from Keynes that capitalist reproduction depends in part on a rationality based on trust rather than certainty of calculation ('spontaneous optimism rather than on a mathematical expectation' (Keynes 1936: 161)) Yet contemporary economics is about mathematical expectation, leaving the study of business confidence to journalists. Barbalet (1993) thinks economics must grapple with how architectures of trust generate emotions and cognitions of confidence that enable actions like investment. As we recover from the excesses of neoliberal myopias of mathematical expectation, once again we now see more clearly that prudential regulation is about prudence, that securities regulation is about security. Regulation is partly about mooring emotions like panic against the turbulent currents of the market.

Keynes was an international relations theorist's economist. He lobbied and wrote furiously at the end of World War I against punitive economic measures on Germany that he reasoned would risk a second world war. This made him an intellectual forebear of the Marshall Plan, the finest moment of the American century. He was also a political scientist's economist. He was hands on in shaping the national institutions that dragged the West out of the depression, and the global institutions created at Bretton Woods. While the Bretton Woods institutions fell far short of his hopes, they still laid important foundations for postwar peace and full employment. So my submission is that social

science at its centre needs to be risk-taking in nurturing more scholars like Keynes, who jump outside their disciplinary box in conscious efforts to shine light upon other disciplines, other publics. For Keynes, the good economist 'must be a mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher, in some degree' (Mini 1994: 10). Keynes is better described as a professional-critical-policy-public social scientist rather than an economist. Sociology might during this century produce a Keynes. Perhaps it has a better chance of that than economics, for the reasons advanced by Michael Burawoy.

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Note

1. Thanks to Christine Parker for helpful comments on a draft.
2. Manuel Castells (2000) is a fine example of a sociologist who has understood such phenomena, not always after the event, by being a trans-societal network sociologist beyond sociology.

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