



## **Comments on Michael Burawoy's ASA Presidential Address**

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Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address to the ASA is an impressive example of the public sociology he advocates in action. Here, the public he is urging to involve itself in public sociology is the US sociological academy. As Burawoy notes in his Thesis IX, the international sociological enterprise is highly diverse and varies in its involvement with public, as well as the other three forms of professional, policy and critical, sociology. What then are the relevance and the implications of his speech for sociologists elsewhere? What implications follow from this for US sociology and sociologists?

Any consideration of this issue involves addressing the issue of the power, whether intended or unintended, of American sociology to set the international sociological agenda. Two key dimensions relate to US professional sociology: its prominence in influencing international career structures and, intertwined with this, its role in setting the methodological and conceptual agendas of sociology internationally. The attractions of the USA as the land of opportunity for migrants is even more significant for sociologists seeking well remunerated career and research opportunities and the intellectual stimulus derived from working with senior colleagues with international reputations. The realization of such ambitions are assisted by the availability of scholarships and financial assistance for graduate students, often among the brightest talents in their own countries. This in itself is not bad. We are increasingly aware that 'brain circulation' is a more appropriate way than simple 'brain drain' of viewing the exchange of knowledge and skills which are occurring in this period of escalating globalization. More significant, however, is the way career success often involves the adoption of the methodological and conceptual frameworks and topics dominating US sociology. While for the insider US sociology may seem extremely diverse, from the perspective of the outside this is less evident, perhaps in part because international links are dominated

by the sociological elite research departments and institutions where professional sociology is institutionalized and developed.

Even on migration overseas, or return to their home country, the influence of US sociology can still play a significant role in sociological careers. All too often there is a focus on research topics, theories and methodologies viewed as more 'interesting' to the US international reference group of colleagues, publishers and journal editors than those relevant to an understanding of the home society. While certain sociological communities such as those in Japan or Latin America may be able to withstand this impact because of their scale, elsewhere concerns are often expressed about the extent to which ambitious professionals undertake research with more relevance internationally than to the burning domestic issues of their own societies. New Zealand is one sociological community whose popularity as a destination for early career researchers has from time to time led to concerns about an absence of research in key areas pertinent to New Zealand society. The strength of the forces associated with this 'universalization' was evident when the International Sociological Association introduced book reviews into *International Sociology* so as to highlight significant sociological research and publications in languages other than English, or from countries outside the trans-Atlantic academic space. Initially the tendency, which is still evident, was for many of the review titles nominated by publishers, the academy or senior scholars, to be studies applying US models and theories to a domestic phenomenon.

Why should this necessarily be a problem? Does it not speak to the highly desirable cumulation and development of sociological knowledge and theories? Yes, in part it does. However, it also highlights the potential for restricting and diminishing the breadth of sociological understanding by excluding alternative phenomena and perspectives which otherwise can lead to the development of important new approaches. These new approaches are not necessarily only generated within one society such as the USA. Nor are they necessarily relevant only to it. By ignoring other sources of theoretical and empirical expansion, professional sociology risks limiting the insights it can contribute to the major issues confronting individual societies, including the USA.

In the 1960s and 1970s an often overly simplistic distinction was made between sociology in the USA and the UK: whereas the former was a sociology of affluence, the latter was a sociology of poverty and disadvantage. This distinction reflected the different topics which were popular at that time. There was also a greater policy or action orientation evident in the work of British sociologists. After all, the ills of the disadvantaged are more likely to engender support for policy responses and strategies than are those evident in affluent and powerful populations and societies. To relate and extend this insight internationally in the new millennium: it is evident that a professional

sociology which involves itself in analysis of its own society, taking account of its own socio-political context and being open to indigenous concepts and theories may provide a better base for sociologists to become engaged in public sociology and, potentially, policy-oriented sociology. Without such grounding in local reality, the criticisms of professional sociology as being abstract, jargonistic and irrelevant are hard to contest. This is all the more regrettable in societies undergoing extensive social, political and economic transformation where the need for informed social research and critical analysis is especially important. In such societies, even if the democratic processes common in the USA are absent, communication between sociologists and the public of policy makers are particularly important as a strategy for foregrounding relevant sociological knowledge. In highlighting some of the negativities of US professional sociology for the development of professional and public sociology elsewhere my intention is not to underestimate its many contributions to other sociological communities. Not least among these is its ability to provide an outside perspective from which to view the 'taken for granted'.

However, the relationship between USA and other sociologies is not limited to being a one-way process. It is also important to consider the potential domestic value which can flow from opening US professional sociology to other sociologies since the dangers inherent in its international dominance are several. On the one hand, the lack of interest in, and knowledge of, other countries' sociologies can prematurely foreclose opportunities for developing alternative theoretical analyses relevant to the USA. A case in point is the way in which the extensive focus on an assimilation model for analysing race and ethnic relations continues, more than 30 years after Schermerhorn wrote *Comparative Ethnic Relations: a framework for theory and research* (1970), to dominate sociological debates about minority incorporation in the USA. This is at the expense of alternative models with greater potential for building a dialogue with public and, also, policy oriented sociology. Another risk is that ignorance about other societies can seriously undermine the quality of public sociology, especially when it involves sociologists' participation in debates of major international significance such as those currently related to the War on Terrorism.

Contrary to Burawoy, the implication of my comments is not that it is necessary to '**provincialize**' US sociology but, rather, to recognize its '**provincialism**' and to pursue strategies which may open and expand it to other forms of sociological knowledge with mutual benefit to sociologists and their publics in the USA and elsewhere. The task is not an easy one and has many other dimensions which cannot be developed here. However, as he rightly notes, it is those with power who are best placed to develop strategies to further this process. Already initiatives involving groups such as the International Sociological Association, as well as the American Sociological Association, have commenced with the intention of strengthening the ability of sociology to

address the major social needs of our time. The hope now is that these can be enhanced and extended.

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## **Bibliography**

**Schermerhorn, R.A.** 1970 *Comparative Ethnic Relations: A framework for theory and research*, New York, Random House.