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A guarded welcome

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There is a great deal to welcome in Michael Burawoy's plea for public sociology. For one thing, sociologists can have an impact on public affairs, and in the varied ways in which he suggests. The role played by European sociology in ending capital punishment seems to me exemplary, and I have no doubt but that basic morality should lead sociologists into active engagement when they clearly have something to contribute. For another, the sociological literature on intellectuals (and so on us) surely shows that isolation from society is dangerous, the breeding ground not just for trivia but also for fantasies of place and power – which occasionally have led to dreadful historical actions. If contact with clients and interaction with social movements helps to breed a sense of reality it is to be endorsed wholeheartedly. Finally, much of what he admires – analysis of class relations and power structures more generally – should be at the centre of the sociological imagination. But despite all this, my welcome is guarded. A different view of the character and history of sociology and of the nature of contemporary social realities suggests qualifications to his view.

Sociology can be defined in various ways. Burawoy is almost Durkheimian in stressing the social, thereby leaving the political and the economic to other disciplines. Imperialism appeals to me much more. Sociology should be the king or queen of social science, asking when and why a particular source of power has dominance in social relations. This is what Weber was about, and my comment is of course deeply Weberian in that it takes for granted that different types of power can and do have autonomy at particular points in the historical record.

From this view follows the claim that there are three stages to sociology's history. First came the founders, from Montesquieu and Smith to Durkheim and Weber, whose greatness lies in combining theory with empirical concerns. In contrast, the second stage has been far too professional, heavily concerned with concepts rather than reality. If Parsons represented an early apogee of this tendency, it is crucial to insist that this stage most certainly has not ended

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– as endless pseudo-philosophic debate, relativist in spirit and far removed from the structures of modernity we are now in a third period, so surely demonstrate. None the less, a moment of genuine revival. What matters though is less the political engagement that Burawoy favours (and to which I am not opposed) than the fundamental rethinking of key concepts. We do now understand nations and 'society' far better than the founders because of systematic attention to the historical record.

The point that I wish to, or rather must, make is this. Burawoy is far too optimistic. The period of retreat after the years of foundation which he too observes has not allowed us to stock up intellectually in such a way that we are now ready to come forth, armed so as to contribute to human progress. The old joke about the deconstructionist and the member of the mafia surely applies instead: he made him an offer he could not understand. By and large, we do not have the capacity to undertake the tasks that Burawoy has in mind. Nor do I detect a groundswell of support for his plea for public sociology. There is more to be said for his position prescriptively than descriptively.

Of course, the third period that I have identified has led to a better understanding of the constraints and options of contemporary society, and more can be expected here. Some of this understanding sets it apart, in my view, from the world envisaged by Burawoy. He tends to see progress in the arming of society, naively presuming that strong social self-organization leads to progress. This is not necessarily the case: civil wars, ethnic conflict and the struggles between Nazis and communists in Weimar all attest to the need for a consensual frame without which life is often nasty, brutish and short. Further, he seems to suggest that political science and economics are responsible for unleashing the powers of states and markets. I doubt that, but question still more his wholly negative view of both forces. Of course, despotic states are dreadful, but he is far too American in failing to realize that very large parts of the world need states. It is a fantasy of the rich and ordered to imagine that decent states are not vital for human progress. Markets are of course still more complex, and I might well agree with much of a detailed critique that he might offer. Still, my own experience in Central Europe – and the experience of very many of the inhabitants of that world – suggests that there is some link between markets and democracy. Markets may need to be regulated, but the attempt to manage without them in socialism led to an historical dead-end rather than to the flowering of human progress.

Much of the time academics and intellectuals serve best by thinking about reality rather than by manning barricades. This was true of Marx. Differently put, activism does have its place but so does fundamental thought establishing our historical context. One element of that context on which thought is needed, as Burawoy would surely agree, is that of the position of the USA. He is right to stress that this Leviathan controls the discipline, as is true to a remarkable degree of intellectual life more generally. There are now few

alternative voices able to resist the intellectual agenda established by the all-powerful universities of the USA. This matters enormously. The greatest danger to – and from! – the USA is likely to result from the lack of historical context so characteristic of its culture. Activism is less important, let it be stressed again, than reflection on the lessons to be drawn from historical comparative sociology. Of course that may not be enough. Power needs to be balanced for intellectual lessons to be absorbed. There is precious little sign of that in the early years of this new century.

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