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# Who will speak, and who will listen? Comments on Burawoy and public sociology[1]

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Michael Burawoy's (2005) call for a renewal of commitment to a public sociology has had a massive impact. Writing in the tradition of C. Wright Mills's (1959) clarion call, Burawoy seeks to defend the critical and reflexive role of the sociologist through his or her autonomous engagement in the public sphere of political decision.

His argument has had a mixed reception in the USA. For the most part his views have been welcomed as re-emphasizing an important dimension of sociological activity that has, perhaps, been lost or submerged in the current political and financial climate of conservatism and retrenchment. Within the universities, many have found it easier to keep their heads down and get on with purely academic work, lest political involvement bring unwanted attention. Burawoy has been seen as re-asserting the political legitimacy of public participation. In some quarters, however, his views have met with a more negative reaction and have been seen as a scarcely concealed attempt to abandon impartiality and to advocate a leftist radicalism. This mixed reception was, perhaps, inevitable, given the political context in which Burawoy has intervened. He is, necessarily, critical of sociologists, other social scientists, the universities and the other institutions for which sociologists work, and also the wider structures of power in which these are enmeshed.

So far, the response to his views in Britain have been somewhat muted. To the extent that British sociologists are aware of the debate, there is confusion between the idea of a public sociology and the related – but quite distinct – ideas of policy research and critical sociology. The publication of Burawoy's Presidential address in the *BJS* is an important step towards clarifying and opening up the debate for a British audience.

Burawoy draws a distinction between four types of knowledge production and application within sociology, without seeking to privilege any one of them. There is, first, the *professional* 'objective' knowledge embodied in academic

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research, both theoretical and empirical. Secondly, there is the 'expert' knowledge of the *policy* sociology that generates knowledge geared to the provision of solutions to problems defined by clients or external agencies. Thirdly, the knowledge generated through a *critical* stance engages with both professional and policy sociology to disclose their limitations and the interests that underpin them. *Public* sociology, finally, is seen as the autonomous and reflexive engagement with external audiences in which the preferences of the sociologist him or herself are made clear and those audiences are spoken to as equals.

Within the academic division of labour, Burawoy notes, there is a differential distribution of these forms of knowledge amongst sociologists. For some, a professional commitment to the advancement of knowledge is uppermost, while others are heavily involved in policy agendas and advisory relations with government and private sector bodies. This is not, however, a sharp and rigid division of labour. Burawoy shows that people typically move from one or other category during the course of the trajectories they follow in their professional careers, and they may shift back and forth fairly frequently. Many sociologists are engaged in two or more sociological styles simultaneously. Thus, Burawoy's concern is not to disclose fixed sociological roles among which people must choose, but specific aspects or moments of the academic career around which people should be able to move with ease. His arguments for public sociology are intended to ensure that such a commitment retains its rightful place amongst the others ways of being a sociologist.

Burawoy notes, however, that the social sciences and the universities are fields of power embedded in wider fields of power. This produces an academic hierarchy that privileges professional sociology by rewarding those who pursue their careers in this direction. In this respect, Burawoy's arguments must be seen in the tradition of Max Weber's (1918, 1919) great essays on science and politics as vocations, which Alvin Gouldner (1973) sought to update in his view of the modern university as a context for social scientific knowledge production. Advocacy of a public sociology is a crucial means for redressing an imbalance in the development of sociology as a discipline and the development of its professional 'pathologies' that overemphasize one or the other of the types of sociological knowledge.

It is important to recognize, however, that the privileging of professional sociology is, in one respect a very beneficial thing. The ability of sociologists to get on with their work without undue interference from outside is a marker of the autonomy that the profession has been able to achieve. The growth of regulation through research assessments has been an onerous burden, but it has not subordinated sociological concerns to extraneous and heteronymous interests. This autonomy has, however, been attained only at the price of public isolation. Because of this autonomy/isolation, sociologists have been largely

absent from public debates. They have been marginalized because of their own professional commitments to the pursuit of academic knowledge and because of the lack of awareness among informed publics that sociologists might actually have anything interesting to say. Our silence has led others to ignore us. In such a situation, we can hardly blame the publics for this neglect.

Public sociology and a commitment to advancing it involves a willingness to engage with publics in ways that go beyond the conventional, professional criteria of science. Scientific objectivity must, of course, be maintained, but there is an obligation to communicate this effectively in contexts where policy is formed from contested political goals. This is what distinguishes public sociology from policy sociology.

The promotion of public sociology, however, is empty unless publics are willing to listen. If sociologists are to speak out, then there is also an obligation to ensure that publics listen to and pay attention to what is said. This is easier said than done. How is it possible to *make* people listen? More importantly, how is it possible to make people *want* to listen.

Many of those who constitute the publics to which sociologists should speak have their own answers. They feel that sociologists should be attended to only on very limited terms. They tend to restrict any engagement with sociology to that of the client's – the user's – adoption of policy advice. Politicians, civil servants, business leaders, journalists, and others assume that sociologists should be the subservient providers of answers and solutions to practical problems related to externally-determined and given goals.

This instrumentalist view of the contribution of sociology is manifest in the frequent statements that sociologists have a responsibility to communicate their work more effectively to policy makers: that they should not write only in professional journals, they should avoid professional 'jargon', they should write in non-technical ways that can be easily understood by busy policy makers, and so on. There is, of course, much that is important in these arguments. Sociologists should write in accessible ways and should not use unnecessary technical language. They should seek to contribute in the forums where they are likely to encounter the publics that they wish to influence. But none of this will ensure that sociology adequately informs public discussion in a way that reflects the subtlety and depth of sociological analysis.

It is striking that such comments are rarely made about natural scientists. We do not hear policy makers and politicians arguing that nuclear physicists must avoid technical terminology and make their work comprehensible to non-scientists. Natural science can – and has – been popularized. High street bookshops and newsagents are full of books and magazines on popular science. Many of these, however, are quite technical in their content, and require some intellectual effort on the part of their readers. If these works could be understood by untrained members of the public without any

significant effort, then it would arguably have been unnecessary to have trained and employed scientists to discover the ideas they contain. Why should sociology be any different in this respect? Indeed, many of the books and articles produced by sociologists are quite as accessible as the works in popular science. The problem is that publics do not want to read them.

A key element in a strategy of public sociology must be to persuade publics that engagement with professional sociology is worth the effort. A strategy of simplification is, arguably, counter-productive: when journalists read simplified accounts of sociological research their response, all too often, is that 'of course, we knew that already – it's obvious. Why do sociologists waste their time on such trivia . . .' and so on. Sociologists must not, of course, obfuscate, but they must make it clear that sociology is a technical and difficult discipline and that its value to public discussion lies precisely in its complexity and difficulty. This is all the more important where sociologists seek to shape the direction of public policy. Such contributions cannot be achieved through short and accessible newspaper articles alone. The details of sociological knowledge have to be conveyed. This is what happens in areas depending on natural science research. In debates over global climate change, GM foods, and similar issues, for example, the need to engage with specific pieces of natural science research and to assess their findings on their own terms is recognized. No one would alter a policy on the basis of newspaper articles alone, they would require access to the research that underpins them.

The key task for public sociology, then, is to establish the means through which publics are motivated to take seriously and to engage with its academic products. This is a slow, incremental process in which people must be persuaded and enticed into reading sociology and, most importantly, thinking sociologically. A great deal can be achieved through the public that we encounter every day – our students – but there is a more difficult task of building a dialogue with the publics outside the universities.

The advocacy of public sociology is a claim for autonomy combined with a claim for engagement – and that is its challenge. The public role of the sociologist, as Max Weber might have said, is not to participate in policy research (though he or she may, of course, do that) but to speak autonomously as a citizen from the standpoint of a well-grounded base of sociological knowledge.

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## Note

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