

Comments on Burawoy on Public Sociology

JOAN ACKER
(University of Oregon)

Introduction

I want to thank Michael Burawoy for putting public sociology in the spotlight. His efforts are important to the potential rekindling of radical debate in our society and to the further development of a sociology that can contribute to that debate. Burawoy should also be thanked for recognizing that the feminist critique in the 1970s was different from the other radical critiques of the period. For feminists, our “subject theorist and theoretical subject were one and the same.” Feminist sociologists were criticizing sociology for its failure to produce understanding of our own lives and of the women’s movement. And we were doing ‘public sociology.’ Burawoy is one of the few male sociologists who understand the importance of feminist thinking.

While agreeing with Burawoy’s intent and most of his proposals, I think his analysis would be strengthened with more attention to the feminist critique and to the complex involvement of gender in the issues he discusses. To make these points, here I briefly touch on, first, Burawoy’s history of sociology, including the loss of much of the critical factor even as the old consensus was undermined; second, the notion of civil society as sociology’s object and the distinctions between sociology, economics, and political science; third, the relationships between public sociology, critical sociology, and professional sociology; and the prospects for a more ‘socialist’ public sociology. I am going to suggest that critical sociology is not critical enough to support the kinds of social movements that may be necessary to protect our institutions against rampant neo liberalism and ambitions of empire.

Sociology's Gendered History

Sociology's gendered history is relevant for assessing Burawoy's proposals for the domain of a renewed public sociology. The university based, academic discipline of sociology emerged in the late 19th Century as a male profession with claims to scientific status. Establishing these claims involved the definition of the field of sociology as distinct from and better than social reform and its moral/ethical base. Sociology, seen as 'objective' and masculine, was separated from social work, seen as subjective (dealing with feelings) and feminine. The process of defining sociology as scientific and separating it from social work was gendered and contributed to sidelining and often excluding women sociologists, such as Jane Addams and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, from the faculties of emerging sociology departments (Deegan 1981; Nichols 1997). One of the consequences was a view of society from the perspective of highly advantaged white males, as feminists of our period, such as Dorothy Smith (1987), have pointed out. This standpoint (ostensibly an objective view from nowhere) has defined how we sociologists conceptualize "the social" and how we formulate questions about it.

Understanding that sociological research and practice have been developed from a particular gender perspective only began to emerge in the 1970s as feminist theorists criticized basic conceptual and research practices. For example, the dichotomizing of the public and the private was seen as concealing the underlying gender structures of the society; the conceptualizing of the economy as dealing only with the market obscured the essential economic activities taking place, without pay, in the household. The radical implications of these insights for sociological theory and professional sociology were largely lost as sociology-in-crisis selectively appropriated radical, including feminist, sociology, to paraphrase Burawoy. The result was a separate academic area of 'sex and gender' but no incorporation of the radical feminist insights in more general sociological perspectives. I am going to argue that any revitalized public sociology that does not incorporate the feminist insights about the systemic nature of gender subordination will be in danger of giving support to movements that inevitably reproduce domination.

Civil Society as Sociology's Object and Value

Burawoy argues that civil society is sociology's object and value, in contrast to economics whose object and value is the market and its expansion or political science whose object and value is the state and the defense

of order. I want to raise two questions: first, how do we define civil society, and second, how are the dividing lines between civil society, economy, and polity determined. I suggest that gender and practices of domination help to answer both questions.

Civil society is an ambiguous concept, as Carole Pateman (1988) has pointed out. She notes, in a much more complex discussion of the history of the concept “civil society,” that civil society consists of both the public and the private spheres, but that the private sphere – the necessary pre-condition for the public – disappears in the discourse on “civil society” which refers only to the public sphere of organizations, labor unions, etc. Both spheres are structured as male dominated, but that recognition is lost in the disappearance of the private sphere. In addition, women’s work in the private sphere, domestic labor, became increasingly defined as without value commensurate to men’s work in the public sphere in the 19th century development of civil society (Folbre 1994; Zelizer 2002). In another, prevalent interpretation, the private sphere is the sphere of capital and economic relations, thus the private is redefined as differentiated from the state as the public sphere, and the private sphere of the family and sexual relations disappears completely. So, what do we mean when we say that public sociology should support civil society? At the very least, I think we need to examine how gender subordination is reproduced, along with other subordinations that Burawoy recognizes, in both the processes of conceptualization and in the processes through which ‘civil society,’ however we define it, functions.

The division of the study of human societies into sociology, economics, political science, and even anthropology, can be seen as the consequences of male-dominated processes of professionalization (Sanja Magdalenic 2004), carving out domains and differentiating themselves from others. But, these boundaries may impede understanding. The feminist critique of ‘the economic’ shows how restrictive the definition of economics has been. To understand human survival and societal processes, the essential, unpaid labor of mostly women has to be figured in to economic processes. Ceding ‘the economy’ and the ‘polity’ to Economics and Political Science is ceding too much, and further hiding the private or consigning it to culture or psychology. A critical sociology, contributing to a public sociology, must question these 19th century boundaries, not reify them. Indeed, we should ask if the boundaries were ever there in actual life. The virtual boundaries of economics are apt to be broken as people continue to protest against the ongoing, catastrophic inability of ‘markets’ to meet their needs, needs no longer met in the excluded sphere of daily life that is ‘the private.’

Relationships between Critical, Professional, Public, and Policy Sociologies

I think we should have additional discussion on the four sociologies and their relations with each other. What is the relationship between professional and public sociology? I am not clear if Burawoy thinks of public sociology as primarily educative and interpretive or if he allots a research role to public sociology. And, I'm not sure what an "organic" public sociology is, what we will be validating when we bring public sociology "into the company of professional sociology." Professional sociology does, as Burawoy says, disparage moral commitment and often oppose public sociology. But, there is an implication in his analysis that 'good' research is only done in the sphere of professional sociology. I think there is an integral connection; often engagement with publics contributes to professional research; the road may lead from practice to theory as well as from theory to practice. This I have found in my own research, and I can infer as much about Burawoy's research. So, how do we tell the difference . . . perhaps professional sociology is that sociology that does not find its impetus in urgent issues of the society, but only pursues academically proposed conundrums (that appear in boring articles in the *ASR* or *Social Forces*). But, that does not account for most of what I think of as 'professional.' Much of the best professional sociology is rooted in 'public' questions.

As for policy sociology – it seems to me that whether or not sociologists successfully do policy research that gets commissioned, taken up, and implemented depends on the political climate. Sociology may be too left at the moment, but it was not always so. Think about the impact of sociologists on policy during the War on Poverty years. Economists do so well right now because they are in power and their theories are exactly what business and government leaders want to hear. That will not always be so. I am an optimist who believes, along with Polanyi (1944), that the neo-liberal paradigm will fail because it imagines a system that is not sustainable.

I agree that public sociology must be critical, but also critical of itself. I think we should be cautious about proposing solutions for others and instead should participate with them in finding solutions. This is not to reject the idea of spinning out plans for *real utopias*, but to suggest that we be careful about defining the realities of others. I would, for example, not take as a simple fact that there are publics such as 'the poor', 'women with breast cancer', 'the delinquent', 'single women', etc. These are categories created for statistical and administrative purposes. Publics have to emerge in a political process, they are not invented in the minds of

sociologists. The success of feminists, as Burawoy notes, is an instructive case. Feminists were an integral part of the category ‘women,’ that was not really so inert. It was through the changing consciousness of women of their social and economic situations, a collective process, that women created themselves as feminists. Feminist sociologists were an integral part of that process; feminist sociology was more the outcome than the cause. I do not think that as sociologists we can give normative and political valence to new categories. We can be alert to changes in the society that may be bringing new publics into being, and selectively support those new movements. I say selectively because, as Burawoy points out, repressive and reactionary movements arise in civil society.

I am all in favor of a new and critical public sociology and hope that it somehow can incorporate feminist insights that may help to keep it from becoming a support for new forms of domination.

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