

Comments on Michael Burawoy's “The Critical Turn to Public Sociology”

STANLEY ARONOWITZ

(Graduate Center, City University of New York)

I came to sociology after working in the steel industry for more than nine years and for unions as an organizer for another seven. In addition to my writing and teaching I spend a good deal of time as a union activist, have been elected a re-elected to the executive council of the Professional Staff Congress, the union of nearly 20,000 faculty and staff of the City University of New York. I write occasionally for non-academic publications, appear on radio and television commenting on public issues, am interviewed by the European and Latin American press on politics and economic questions, routinely give talks to community and labor groups on a variety of subjects ranging from politics, science and technology, education and work and the labor movement. Two of the last four of my books were published by trade presses.

My relationship to sociology as a discipline is, consequently, tenuous. Although I have contributed, among others, to *Theory and Society*, the *American Journal of Sociology* and to this journal's ancestor, *The Insurgent Sociologist*, and I teach in a PhD sociology program, I have never considered myself a sociologist, (and most professional sociologists have always been puzzled by my stuff). I am a member of the ASA because I advise PhD students who need jobs since, apart from media and communications, there are few academic departments who hire outside the discipline. But mainly because I am not a professional sociologist, in Burawoy's sense of the phrase, I attend ASA only when invited to present in a city I want to visit, or when one or more of my students is on the job market and my presence may help get them an interview. I have organized only

one session at the meetings in my thirty years of membership, and will organize another next year because of my interest in citizenship. I have never been active in the Association although I helped organize the Sociology of Culture section but left when the professional sociologists took it over.

In 1987 Russell Jacoby published his influential book *The Last Intellectuals*, which make his case that there once was a considerable mass of intellectuals who had or actively sought “publics” Jacoby’s aim is to bring critical thought into the public debate and as an intellectual historian he plumbs the recent past to demonstrate that there once was a public intellectual who participated in American life. The term “public” derives, in its modern incarnation, from the celebrated 1920s debate between the journalist Walter Lippmann and the philosopher John Dewey who differed on the fundamental question of whether direct, participatory democracy was possible in a highly complex industrial society. Lippmann argued in his incredibly influential book *Public Opinion* (1921) that this was the age of experts and that the public was important only as a check on their sometimes arbitrary power. In his reply “The Public and its Problems” (1925), Dewey acknowledged that only in small towns or neighborhoods could genuine democracy flourish because in these locations there is, at least in tendency, a flourishing civil society. The theme was taken up again by C. Wright Mills who, in the 1940s and 1950s remarked frequently on the crisis in democracy as a consequence of the vanishing public. After explorations of the labor movement, the mass of white-collar workers and his monumental study of the tripartite Power Elite, Mills concluded that the intellectuals had a unique and decisive role in resistance to unbridled corporate power. For both Dewey and Mills the intellectuals had to play a key role in providing the grist for the emergence of an active public capable of making the key decisions that affected their lives. Through their interventions in books, articles, public lectures and the mass media, they can influence the discussion by articulating alternative and oppositional values and knowledge to the main conservative drift.

Jacoby deplores the retreat of intellectuals into the academy, and for the professionalization of the intellect. But he also calls for the revival of the “public” intellectual. Although Jacoby cites those whose work and influence lies outside of the academy, notably Lewis Mumford, the majority of so-called “New York Intellectuals” grouped around the small magazines, especially *Partisan Review*, many of his exemplars – C. Wright Mills, Lionel Trilling and most of the “revisionist” historians of the 1960s and 1970s such as W.A. Williams, Herbert Gutman and the former trade unionist, David Montgomery, were career professors. The issue is not whether they had jobs in colleges and universities. The question is to

what and to whom is their thinking and research directed? These were writers who marshaled their considerable intellectual energies to influencing the current public conversations on international relations (Williams), black freedom (Gutman) and the revival of the labor movement (Montgomery). Jacoby's intellectuals were all white men who worked on universal, history-making themes, having consigned women, blacks and gay intellectuals to the realm of the particular.

Michael Burawoy's call for a public sociology is a serious challenge to the prevailing direction of sociology which has parallels that of economics and political science which have ceased to perform critical, let alone public social science, but instead have become the servants of power. While, as he argues, sociology is far more diverse than either of these disciplines and has preserved a scientific as well as a critical project more than the others, with few exceptions its inwardness has separated its minions from active engagement with publics. Burawoy has issued a kind of manifesto to two distinct enclaves of sociology: beginning with his own, he admonishes radical sociology for having, unwittingly, added to the professionalization of the discipline by becoming scholars and analysts of the vagaries of late capitalism, without finding a concomitant political practice. Implicitly, he suggests their militant opposition to the mainstream has contributed to a long series of "defeats" suffered by the discipline as a whole. And, he criticizes sociologists mired in the Merton program of privileging the work of adding small measures to the discipline's trove of social knowledge, or those who have focused on social policy. Unlike the radical tradition, in his proposal for public sociology he defends professional, "scientific" sociology and policy studies for their "positive" contributions to social knowledge.

Burawoy wants to end radical sociology's attack on the discipline but also wants to reverse sociology's inward direction. Consistent with C. Wright Mills' project he calls to the discipline to address the "multiple publics" of US society, in order to "bolster the organs of civil society". What civil society consists in – is it the Gramscian, Hegelian or Deweyan conception – he wisely leaves open. In this discourse, Burawoy retains radical sociology's critique of attempts to transform sociology into a series of policy studies which have pervaded economics and political science for decades. But he wants to find enough common ground to persuade professional and policy sociologists that the rads no longer mean to demean their contributions, only to redirect them. On one hand this is a program for "peaceful co-existence"; on the other for introducing a "positive" dimension to critical theory's passion for debunking. And, despite his critique of the transformation of radical sociology into a band of scholars, he seeks to restore its original interventionist perspective.

Absent in Burawoy's paper is an analysis of the context within which American sociology retreated both from social activism and from the obligation to direct its empirical researches to theory, an imperative that Merton never failed to invoke. Recall that in the early years of the century George Herbert Mead and Robert Park were engaged in social reform in Chicago, a tradition which influenced the activist/sociologist Saul Alinsky. And the Lynds were bold in their public critique of sociology for its refusal to commitment to social change. But the post-world war two period witnessed a political drift toward what Mills termed *The American Celebration*. Surely, the powerful influences must be noted of Merton and his program for incremental science, of the Rockefeller Foundation's funding of the formation and early operation of the Social Science Research Council which actively promoted sociology as a policy science, of the Federal and State governments which had plenty of room for sociologists who agreed to study, armed with ethnographic as well as statistical methods "social problems" as a means to inform, if not guide policymakers in social welfare, education and health and especially in criminal justice. This turn was profoundly influenced by the Cold War which invited intellectuals to choose the West or risk professional annihilation. Those who refused to serve the state in either form were condemned to marginalization or to performing scholarship for its own sake. And, as conservative conformity renewed its forward march in the 1970s the political and cultural unconscious of many critical sociologists shifted to teaching and varieties of studies whose reception was limited to their own kind. Both were compatible with the growing professionalization of the human sciences and the humanities.

My main concern with Burawoy's call is that I believe the human sciences need desperately to blur, if not abandon their disciplinary boundaries. For this reason I hold that the attempt to create a public sociology, although well intentioned is misdirected, or to be more exact, should be seen as a transitional measure, not for its public intent, but for its sociological/professional orientation. In order to promote the project of public intellectuals, sociology, as well as other disciplines must be willing to examine the shifting sands under their feet, to confront the intellectual limitations that are bound with largely surpassed traditions emanating from its key founders, for example, the concept of society as a social fact, the primacy of methodology, the fallacy of grounded theory which denies the elementary insight that all observation is theory-laden. We all know that, in the light of these and other shifts, sociological theory has transformed itself in its more advanced incarnations, into social theory. For example, as a theorist, in my writing and teaching I have drawn on sources well beyond the "classical" or contemporary sociological canons

for two reasons: I do not wish to deprive my students of the breadth and depth of social theoretical knowledge available beyond sociology; and, frankly, apart from Bourdieu, Giddens, Touraine and a few others, American sociology has all but abandoned theory. In my expanded canon here I need only mention Freud, Georg Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno, the philosophers Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, Louis Althusser, the historian Michel Foucault, the economist Karl Polanyi, philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Henri Lefebvre (who morphed into a sociologist), DeBeauvoir, Sartre, Judith Butler and Wendy Brown. In fact, intellectually the main problem with American sociology is that it has abandoned philosophy and, in a large measure, social psychology, although the latter is making a modest comeback in, among other areas, the sociology of emotions. And its political economy is descriptive rather than theoretical. When our theoretical canon shifts in the trail of feminist, critical marxist and post-kantian, post-hegelian thought, is it not time to reflect on the concept of discipline itself? Shouldn't we remember that Marx was a philosopher turned social theorist, Weber a historian and economist, Durkheim an ethnologist and Simmel a philosopher (we'll leave aside the neglected figures: Spencer and Tonnies, neither of whom was a "sociologist", but were, together with Simmel, highly influential on the founding of American sociology in the first third of the 20th century.)

Since philosophy has bifurcated into ethics and analytic philosophy of language and mind and all but renounced social and political studies, except in introductory courses and the token "continental philosopher" hired by only the leading departments, economics is a second rate branch of intermediate mathematics, and political science is, with some exceptions, a policy science, the time may be at hand for the creation of a human sciences project based upon critical sociology, the progressive wing of comparative and American politics and political theory, and the remnants of the critical, theoretical tradition that emerged in the 1960s within economics. And lest we forget: anthropology, perhaps the most reflective of all the social sciences, has suffered grievous losses in the wake of globalization and the emergence of urbanization and industrialization in the rapidly transformed "third world". Today, it is turning to social theory to help forge a new future.

Burawoy rightly defends the ASA's stand on Iraq, not so much for its substance as for the appropriateness of taking political positions. But his proposal for a public sociology is curiously lacking in the acknowledgement that the nation-state and the cultural and political problems associated with it desperately needs interrogation. Part of the project of public sociology would entail a searing reexamination of the discipline's tacit nationalism, Wallerstein, Scott, Mann and a few others notwithstanding. Surely, this

question needs to be raised if the publicness of sociology is not to lapse into parochialism.

In short, we urgently need a rebirth of the public intellectual. If organizations like Sociologists without Borders, *Contexts*, and one or more of the ASA sections adopt the tasks associated with this project, that's a good thing. Then there needs to be trans-disciplinary meetings and conferences that explore the public sphere, concepts and practical implications of the notion of civil society and a plan to intervene. That Burawoy has taken the first step is commendable. That it does not go far enough should not detain us from moving ahead.