

Interrogating Connections: From Public Criticisms to Critical Publics in Burawoy's Public Sociology

GIANPAOLO BAIOCCHI
University of Massachusetts

As an ethnographer one always learns fascinating things that have little to do with your research goals, and that do not make their way to articles or books. One of the most striking events during my fieldwork among community activists in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, was a debate that one of my “informants” drew me into in the middle of an interview. He was explaining to me the differing visions of political party-movement relationships that guided activists in Brazil in the early 1980s telling me it all boiled down to fierce debate between advocates of a gramscian vision and a those who favored a foucauldian vision, proceeding to ask me which I would have favored. How did, I wonder, someone who did not graduate from high school develop this vocabulary? After much discussion – and promising I’d go back to *Discipline and Punish* to brush up on Foucault – I learned that this theoretical diffusion had come via outside “advisors” from NGOs who did work in neighborhoods since the 1980s. Very many of these advisors were (and continue to be) sociologists, who often with an undergraduate degree in the discipline, made a livelihood out of this sort of community work through one of the many NGOs that were so important to Brazil’s transition to democracy. It is hard to imagine a more stark contrast to the way that sociology is practiced as a profession in the United States.

Indeed, whether or not the United States is exceptional, its academy is distinct from that of many very many nations to the South as well as from many European ones as well. In the humdrum of our busy lives

as graduate students and professors (and I would venture we are comparatively very busy), we often forget this. But it is not only in South Africa that the very idea of a “public sociology” would find bemusement and, like in Brazil, often elicit the question of “As opposed to what?”¹ In my travels and in my collaborations with colleagues in the academy and in civil society I am often reminded of how different a meaning being a social scientist carries in places like Brazil, South Africa, or India. Brazil is of course famous in this regard. Not only has it recently had a sociologist in its presidency, it currently has a national party in power that, if nothing else, has for two decades defended civil society and today counts with many sociologists among its theorists.² At a conference recently, the well-known Brazilian sociologist Renato Ortiz passed me a note asking me what I thought was the impact of the absence of a *political project* on progressive scholars in the USA. For scholars like him the question of the moment was how to position themselves vis a vis the Workers’ Party, or PT, a party whose growth and development is largely connected to the universities where professors and students helped actively shape its direction and ideology over the years. Many of the main thinkers associated with the PT have been sociologists, and in cities and towns where the PT has influence or is in power, sociology departments invariably count with party activists, advisors and consultants, as well as detractors. PT administrations invariably count with sociologists among their staff. It is not that in Brazil all sociologists have role in the PT, but to be a sociologist implies taking a position vis a vis this transformative political project in a way that would be essentially unthinkable in the USA today.

Because of what I would argue is an essentially defining political neutrality, we lack as sociologists in the USA a language or much experience with the critical connections with civil society that Burawoy calls for in his recent piece on the critical turn to public sociology.³ There

¹ See Michael Burawoy, “South Africanizing U.S. Sociology,” forthcoming in *From the Left*, Newsletter of the Marxist Section of the ASA.

² Neither is unique, however. Intellectuals in Latin America and the Caribbean have often been so connected to progressive and/or nationalist struggles and have occasionally found themselves in chief executive position. These range from Domingo Sarmiento in Argentina in the 1860s, to Eric Williams, in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1950s to Juan Bosch in the Dominican Republic in the 1960s. Likewise, throughout the region progressive administrations and political parties have counted with sociologists in their ranks.

³ I am referring to “The Critical Turn in Public Sociology,” forthcoming in Blau, ed. The original position is laid out in “Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas, and Possibilities” in *Social Forces* 82(4), 2004.

he combines, or calls for a combination of, two of the cells of his original schema: a combination of commitments, target publics, and kind of knowledge among critical sociology and public sociology. Whereas critical sociology has been largely confined to internal theoretical debate, public sociology can lack a critical edge. This combination, which I'll refer to here as a critical-public sociology calls for radicals to quit their navel-gazing and engage directly with and *foster* publics such "as the poor, the delinquent, the incarcerated, women with breast cancer, women with AIDS, single women, gays, and so on not to control them but to expand their powers of self-determination."⁴ One assumes, then, that unlike the broader category of public sociology, which encompasses many forms of public debate and discussion, critical-public sociology is more specifically normative, and its publics counter-hegemonic. Its work is, in other words, more political and harkens back more to Paulo Freire and Gramsci than to David Riesman or Robert Bellah.

As history would have it, and as Burawoy admits, we have not many working models in sociology for what this would look like. The generation before us spent more time engaging the enemy within the academy than outside. So, does having a connection mean going to social movement meetings and interpreting reality for them, or teaching them Karl Marx? Does it mean representing that social movement in a positive light, or perhaps writing its literature? Does it mean doing research for or with them (as opposed to on them)? Whereas the call to public sociology in today's climate less threatening and possible to couch in terms that are hard to oppose (since no one is against "public debate" or "participation"), the call for a critical-public sociology is both normatively valenced and much more likely to meet with opposition. Connections with civil society do not take place in a vacuum – not only are there power relations that shape the relationship between sociologist and civil society, but also pressures from a discipline that, I would argue, while indeed borne of civil society and morally driven by a reformist spirit, paradoxically also defines itself by political neutrality. My thesis in this brief essay is that connecting sociology's public and critical facets may be more challenging than just answering a call to arms, and critical sociologists who wish to develop a more public practice will need to analyze the conditions under which such a connection is possible and will have to challenge the barriers against "political work" within the university. I wholeheartedly endorse the call for a public sociology, and moreover, think it is high time for critical sociologists to bridge the gap between their practice and that of

⁴ Burawoy, "The Critical," op. cit. 9.

public sociology, seeking to democratize and radicalize existing spaces of connections between civil society and the academy. But until we face both the question of conditions under which we can do this work and ask of ourselves what it means to do work that is explicitly political, we will have a tough time translating this vision into reality.

A quick caveat before I proceed: I write this essay from a double perspective. I borrow freely from the experiences of activist scholars in Brazil and elsewhere, but I also write as someone who studied sociology with Michael Burawoy as an undergraduate, and who was not only completely endeared to his vision of the discipline, but for whom a critical-public sociology and connections with civil society then seemed like a completely natural extension of the discipline. It was because of student activism and community involvement that I was propelled to further sociological studies, seeing a mutual synergy among them. It is the disappointment with the latter in graduate school in the USA, and later, the surprises with public sociology in Brazil that make up a fulcrum from which to call these connections into question.

Civic but not Political: Pressures against Connections in the Academy in the USA

Universities, by and large, are not hospitable to critical publics or to the sociologists who would work to foster them. Where they are tolerated is the result of previous struggles that have resulted in institutionalized “free spaces” that are often on the verge of extinction. We ought to consider the institutional pressures against establishing critical connections with civil society, and ought to consider ways to counteract those pressures. Sociological careers at research universities mitigate against public sociology in general, and critical-public sociology in myriad ways: time and publishing pressures, tenure and promotion standards that privilege publications in specific journals, pressure to raise grant-money from federal agencies, which subtly pushes research agendas away from critical work. Administrations pressed for funds in subtle ways discourage the types of work and reputations that scare away corporate donors.

But there is something else at work. I would venture that there is a longstanding tolerance for public sociology that is not seen as “political” and is ingrained in a long tradition of civic orientation for universities. For example, land-grant universities usually have public missions, and it is not uncommon for “community service” to count, at least marginally, at most of those toward tenure and promotion. The University of Minnesota statement of mission is not unusual in that it states that its

mission is to “[e]xtend, apply, and exchange knowledge between the University and society,” to “apply scholarly expertise to community problems,” and to “help organizations and individuals respond to their changing environments.”⁵ This is a vision of the university as a kindly patron standing above society, a producer and repository of specialized knowledge engaged in all manner of assistance to individuals and communities facing social problems. This is a vision that does not call into question scholarly expertise, but more importantly, has little to say about social change, and neutral enough to be palatable to mainstream liberals and conservatives. This civic orientation is compatible with much of what can go by public sociology.

And as a matter of survival, public sociology faces pressures to distance itself from critical sociology and remain politically neutral. There is an old distinction in Liberal political theory between civil society and political society that continues to exert influence in US political culture. The United States is exceptional in its history of associations, as Burawoy asserts, but part of this legacy is a also vision that separates “civic life” – which is seen as virtuous, consensual, and communally oriented, from “politics” – the realm of instrumental logic, conflict, ideology, and private interests. This disavowal of politics is evident in every day talk, where “politics” often is used derisively to refer to back-room dealing and conflict (“there are a lot of politics involved at my job”), as well as in political contest itself, when for example, presidential contestants make claims about being less political than their opponents. Contemporary US Americans, as Nina Eliasoph has so eloquently documented, do not like “politics.”⁶ Common sense in the United States, for example, dictates that divisiveness, and by extension, political contestation, is bad.

In universities, these are the dominant terms of debate. Professional sociology is partially defined by its disconnection from civil society as well as by its instrumental knowledge, and it, to a large extent, sets the standards for our discipline. Public sociology’s concession to these standards is to abide by a political neutrality, but its opponents consistently attempt to tar it with political and biased motives. One can imagine this in terms of a symbolic contestation in which actors try to link opponents with “profane” motivations.⁷ As public sociology struggles for survival it

⁵ “The University of Minnesota Mission Statement”, available at http://www1.umn.edu/twincities/01_abt_gen_hist.php. Last accessed July 1st, 2004.

⁶ Nina Eliasoph. 2003. *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ See Jeff Alexander’s “*The Sacred and Profane Information Machine: Discourse about the Computer as Ideology*,” *Hermes* V., 8-9, 1990: 297-320.

attempts to link its practice with civic and non-political motivations. In this context, the pressure is for public sociology to try to distance itself from critical sociology and jettison its critical-public connections. It is possible to witness these strategies of distinction deployed in the relationship between sociology departments and ethnic studies, American studies, African-American studies, Chicano studies, and women's studies departments in many universities. In internal fights for funding, against activist, community-oriented, normatively driven departments, sociology departments present themselves as detached, rigorous, objective, and ultimately, more academic.

Sociology departments, competing with other departments for resources deploy strategies of distinction against "activist" or "less scholarly" departments, like ethnic studies departments. It is telling that the best extant examples of departments that have institutionalized something like a critical-public sociology are not sociology departments at all, and it is also telling that most of them have traditionally faced hostility from administrations and sociology departments alike. Many such examples exist. A generation of departments in the ethnic studies model – challenging Eurocentric teaching and pedagogy founded in the 1970s sought to make community connection and social change a central part of their mission. Sociologists were often central figures in their founding, and their programs often include a heavy dose of sociology as part of their programs. The first Chicano studies department in the United States, at UC Santa Barbara, is modeled after the *Plán de Santa Barbara*, a manifesto for Chicano liberation that states that the "self-determination of our community is now the only acceptable mandate for social and political action" and "we do not come to work for the university, but to demand that the university work for our people." The document lays out a number of principles to guide university-community relationships, including soliciting community input into academic programs.

The colleges and universities in the past have existed in an aura of omnipotence and infallibility. It is time that they be made responsible and responsive to the communities in which they are located or whose member they serve. As has already been mentioned, community members should serve on all program related to Chicano interests. In addition to this, all attempts must be made to take the college and university to the barrio, whether it be in form of classes giving college credit or community centers financed by the school for the use of community organizations and groups. Also, the barrio must be brought to the campus, whether it be for special programs or ongoing services which the school provides for the people of the barrio. The idea

must be made clear to the people of the barrio that they own the schools and the schools and all their resources are at their disposal.⁸

This stands in sharp contrast to the mission statement of the University of Minnesota, written a hundred years earlier. It explicitly calls into question the “infallibility” of the university, it challenges academic expertise, and puts social change at the front and center of its program. Instead of helping people with their problems by mobilizing academic expertise, the university is challenged to create something useful of itself and to foster the kinds of critical publics that Burawoy calls for. This is a project that is explicitly political, that engages counter-hegemonic publics, and calls for social change.

The work of such departments has not been easy. Ethnic studies departments have faced strong pressures in the interim years to move away from these radical roots. According to Bob Wing, whereas in the early 1970s many of these departments were involved in “innovative community organizing projects like cooperative garment factories, farm worker organizing, and fights for low-income housing” as well as struggles against the Vietnam War and for Puerto Rican independence.⁹ But in recent times, according to Manning Marable, “there is a chasm between the most influential scholarship produced by ethnic studies and the social movements and ethnic constituencies which gave rise to such programs.”¹⁰

In my current university, one of the departments that comes closest to having institutionalized a vision of a critical public sociology is the labor studies department. There, in not a dissimilar spirit as laid out in the *Plan*, not only are faculty encouraged to engage in critical and engaged work, but the department as a whole serves a research function for labor unions, while its training program turns out organizers at the MS level. Not surprisingly, the department is a focal point for student activism and for labor organizing on campus. And also not surprisingly, the department is constantly under fire from the administration, and is under constant threat of dissolution, despite already surviving on meager resources. Under the last round of budget cuts in 2003, the department came within a hair’s breadth of being summarily dissolved. Were it not for faculty and student mobilization on campus, and to crucial outside

⁸ *Él Plan de Aztlan*. http://www.panam.edu/orgs/mecha/st_barbara.html. Last accessed July 1st, 2004.

⁹ Bob Wing, “Educate to Liberate!: Multiculturalism and the Struggle for Ethnic Studies,” in *Colorlines*, Summer 1999. http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLArchive/story2_2_01.html. Last accessed October 1st, 2004.

¹⁰ Cited in Wing, op. cit.

intervention in the form of legislators with connections to labor unions, the department would not exist today.

Looking Far and Near for Models: The Case of Brazilian Sociology

In Brazil, like many of Latin American countries, is probably correctly classified as a place where sociology essentially *is* public sociology, or where social sciences have traditionally played a comparatively prominent role in public life and in activities of nation-making. Despite the open repression of the dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists have played important roles in public life, and critical-public sociology exists in larger proportion to the discipline as a whole. Sociologists are by, and large, not expected to be politically neutral, and the whole “profession” is understood differently, and as a consequence, has a much more important role in societal affairs. Former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso closed the ASA proceedings in 2004 with a consideration of what it meant to be a sociologist in power, and idea that certainly seems more shocking in the United States than in Brazil.¹¹ What can we learn about putting our professional practices side by side?

First, and of course, that not all of this public sociology in Brazil has historically been benign, or even deserves to be categorized as public sociology in the way that Burawoy intends, even if its public is civil society. Sociologists have often had a public orientation and had goals of advocating social reform and social change, but this has almost always taken place in close quarters with the state. The founding of social science departments coincided with the creation of ethnological museums and were involved in the forms of national myth-making – the racial democracy thesis, for example, which became codified into official state ideology during the Vargas dictatorship in the 1930s and which became an extremely powerful impediment against organizing for racial justice for the following decades, was the authorship of a social scientist, formally an anthropologist, but the author of one of one of the first sociology textbooks in Brazil. After World War II and through the 1950s, social scientists in general were involved as planners and ideologues in state developmentalism in a number of ways. Sergio Miceli, author of influential texts about Brazilian intelligentsia, goes so far as to say that

¹¹ There is much written about F.H. Cardoso. I would refer readers to this recent interview to Heinz Sonntag, published in *States and Societies*. <http://www.asanet.org/sectionpolitic/newslet/interview.html>.

the defining feature of Brazilian intellectual life is cooptation by the state. Throughout the twentieth century academics, and sociologists among them, found themselves “seduced” and “co-opted” by the national state during periods of dictatorship and formal democracy alike.¹² It is this public sociology?

To return to the anecdote with which I opened the essay, it is clear that in the case of Brazil, much of what goes by a critical-public sociology takes place not in universities but in NGOs, a tradition that dates to the institutes founded during the dark years of the dictatorship to house censored scholars. The military coup of 1964 marks an important rupture – the then embryonic critical generation of sociologists, mostly around the University of São Paulo was forced into retirement or exile. As a response, an autonomous non-profit institute, the now-famous instituto CEBRAP, the Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento, or Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning was founded to house these scholars and to allow them to continue academic work. Some of the most important work in the history of Brazilian social sciences would emerge out of CEBRAP, and institute that combined theoretical reflection, political engagement, and empirical research. One of the most important essays in the history of Brazilian sociology was written at the time by Chico de Oliveira, on the “critique of dualist reason,” which laid the foundations for the investigation of capitalism in Brazil and became a sort of Brazilian version of “The Sociological Imagination” as a required text for sociology courses. Unlike C. Wright Mill’s piece, however, it had more currency in social movements and its themes would make their way to internal debates about political strategy. Chico de Oliveira would later become one of the founders of the Workers’ Party and eventually one of its most vocal defectors, writing a follow-up essay that justifies his leaving the PT.¹³

Extremely important in the resistance to the dictatorship, producing critical work that challenged the dictatorship’s views and data about itself, as well as for the social movements that heralded the dictatorship’s end and in causes and movements since, CEBRAP scholarship at any one point in time stands on its own as social science but also reflects political concerns of the time. One of its first important productions was a book on the state of the city of São Paulo that served as a direct subsidy

¹² Sergio Miceli. *Intelectuais à Brasileira*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001. See also his interview. <http://veja.abril.com.br/250701/entrevista.html>. Last accessed April 3rd, 2003.

¹³ Francisco de Oliveira. *Crítica à razão dualista; e o Ornitórrinco*. 2003. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial.

to social movements engaged in struggles for urban services at the time.¹⁴ Centers like CEDEC, Centro de Estudos da Cultura Contemporânea, or Center for the Study of Contemporary Culture, and others that would soon follow, connected with social movements as part of their mission:

These independent research centers served as a bridge between the academy and grassroots initiatives. They combined theoretical research on the dynamics of poor communities with political involvement in the struggle of social movements. They gave visibility and legitimacy to new forms of popular participation and to the emergence of new social actors.¹⁵

Some of these centers eventually developed near-mythical reputations – by virtue of international funding, visible scholarship, and prominent and influential works. In the post dictatorship period some of these centers have had much influence on the way that sociology is practiced in university departments, legitimating critical sociology and critical-public sociology as accepted modes of engagement. The fact that these centers and these scholars resisted the dictatorship at sometimes great personal risks helped mythologize them as a generation of “heroic sociologists.”

And sociology has another face as well. In the 1970s, with the expansion of universities and university enrollments, the numbers of sociology graduates continued to increase. Many went on to work in NGOs and carried on the critical-public sociology that I’ve described: as movement advisors and supporters for what would become the nascent democratization movement in Brazil. The number of high school sociology courses increased, but sociologists also started to join the private sector and civil service jobs as sociologists, not only as researchers but also in areas vaguely calling for “sociological knowledge” such as human resource departments, administration, and planning.

In time sociology became recognized as a profession, much like psychology or economics. Sociology has been recognized as a liberal profession since the 1980s. There are some 40,000 sociologists in Brazil today, 10,000 of which are registered with the labor ministry as exerting the profession. Only a small fraction of them have graduate degrees, and even fewer work in one of the country’s sixty university sociology departments. The remaining work in NGOs, civil service, and in the

¹⁴ Comissão Justiça e Paz de São Paulo. *São Paulo: Crescimento e Pobreza*. São Paulo, Loyola, 1975.

¹⁵ Ruth Cardoso. “Civil society and democratization: The Brazilian experience,” manuscript, presented at Brown University seminar on civil society and democratization, October 13th, 2004.

private sector as “researchers, consultants, and advisors.”¹⁶ As employees in the government or the private sectors, sociologists have a narrower scope to engage in public sociology. But as collectives of professionals they have been engaged. The first organizations of sociologists appeared in the early 1970s as professional organizations, and the first congresses took place in the early 1980s. A glance at the congress themes show that the theme of public engagement was very much on the agenda for sociologists at the time of transition to democracy. The 1981 congress was organized around “Professional Action and the Political Practice of the Sociologist,” while the theme of the 1984 congress was “The Sociologist and the Construction of Democracy in Brazil,” among many others.

Sociologists are today organized in eighteen regional labor and civil society organizations under a national umbrella federation formed in 1989, the FNBS, the Federação Brasileira de Sociólogos, the Brazilian Federation of Sociologists, which is the labor counter-weight to the scientific national organization, the SBS, the Sociedade Brasileira de Sociologia, the Brazilian Sociological Society. As professionals, sociologists are bound by a code of ethics approved by its national federation, that lays out as ethical principles the commitment with “the interpretation of facts through the application of scientific methods” (article 3), as well as to “fight for the exercise of national sovereignty” (article 5), and oppose “authoritarianism and oppression” and “defend the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (article 6), while “combating corruption and the manipulation of information” (article 8).¹⁷ President Fernando Henrique Cardoso was even once brought under charges of having violated this code around the repression of protesters at a private party that he had sponsored in the state of Bahia in 2000.¹⁸ This national federation has been involved in supporting political activity since its founding, being involved in causes as diverse as the pro-impeachment movement and the World Social Forum, as well as in actively defending its professional interests (such as the legislation expanding sociology in the high school curriculum).

¹⁶ Salvatore Santagada. “Sociólogos: 20 Anos de Profissão.” <http://www.sociologos.org.br/textos/sociol/20anos.htm>.

¹⁷ FNSB. Código de Ética do Sociólogo. 1997.

¹⁸ FNSB. Nota Oficial 05/02/2000. Available at <http://www.sociologos.org.br/boletins/aseb/ntofl1.htm>.

De-Provincializing Critical-Public Sociology

The call to expand our horizons and become more cosmopolitan in our conception of what sociology is, or can be, has to involve thinking about different national experiences. The Sociology in Brazil in all its guises – in university departments, in NGOs, as an organized profession – has a clearly much more public orientation than sociology in the USA; and it is also much more often openly political in the sense that a critical-public sociology I think demands. It is not only tolerated for sociologists in university departments to take openly political positions, it is well within what sociologists normally do. Public sociology is much less likely to have to shy from critical sociology for legitimacy as it is difficult to find sociologists in university departments who are neutral in the way that professional sociology demands of us in the USA.

But the comparison does not yield only advantages to Brazilian style sociology. Leaving aside the fact that not many US sociologists would find the scarcity of resources and limited pay of their Brazilian counterparts appealing, or perhaps even tolerable, some would no doubt also find fault with the looser professional standards occasioned by the relatively weak position of professional sociology. Most importantly, though, is the related question that Sociology in the United States in comparison also appears to be more autonomous from the state. The thesis that Brazilian intellectuals are constantly seduced by the state finds confirmation in spite of prominent intellectuals who now work for the PT administration. US Sociology's professional facet may indeed be private and apolitical, and the ASA's historic stances have been mild in comparison to Brazilian counterparts. This professionalism, however, is the price paid for autonomy from the colonizing influences of the state.

Two lessons emerge from the Brazilian story. The first is that we ought to think about the institutional conditions for a critical public-sociology in today's political context, perhaps being more creative about where this might take place. As we go on to carry *critical-* public sociology we ought to look to scholars and disciplines in the USA and abroad who have advanced on these questions, such as feminist scholars, those in the critical education tradition, and critical race scholars in the USA. As we do, we will have to recognize that the reflexivity they call for is still at odds with our reigning disciplinary standards and the political stances such work implies is at odds with universities in the current climate. I think we have to recognize that today US universities are by and large not hospitable to sociology that is both critical and public. During the dictatorship in Brazil scholars sought to form independent centers to carry out this work. While not abandoning our struggles for inclusion to

the university and our fights to increase access to it, we should not limit our horizons for the institutional homes for our work to our departments and universities. An added benefit of imagining and creating new homes for ourselves is that these can be egalitarian and prefigurative experiments as we flee the institutional hierarchies to which everyone eventually succumbs. When was the last time you collaborated with someone of a different kind of institution? There are initiatives out there, such as the Rockridge Institute, or the Radical Scholars' conference, but they have not yet reached as broad scope as they can. The second lesson is that engaging in work that is openly political does not mean compromising in terms of intellectual standards or somehow compromising "real" sociological work. Engaging in public sociology that is critical will eventually call for political positions, and to really engage to foster those publics we value will be considered political whether we like it or not. The records of the generation of scholars who resisted the dictatorship in Brazil point to a sociology that had no option but to be political, and its essays and books stand up to any other texts as wonderful sociology. We should follow their cue and engage in work that is too, in its own way, a little heroic.