

Response to Michael Buroway's Commentary: "The Critical Turn to Public Sociology"

ROSE M. BREWER

(University of Minnesota-Twin Cities)

Rather than beginning with Michael Buroway's remarks, I'd like to use an insight from Chandra Mohanty, South Asian and US feminist activist intellectual. She evokes in her latest work, *Feminism Without Boundaries* the following significant observation:

The very practice of remembering against the grain of "public" hegemonic history, of locating the silence and the struggle to assert knowledge that is outside the parameters of the dominant, suggests a rethinking of sociality itself. (2004:83)

The argument for a critical sociology, a critically engaged public sociology is so generally rendered, as proposed by Buroway that I must take Mohanty seriously – standing back and deeply interrogating his perspective. For a moment we must remember against the grain – beginning with his rendering of sociological "left history" from those "days of rage."

The (Re)membering of that History

It is quite true that white male left was deeply located in a Marxism of the chair. The white men (and women) had not interrogated their own positionality, its deep enmeshing in a set of white supremacist tropes and privileges: patriarchal and class entangled. These unnamed positionalities still haunt any attempt to make sociology public, and indeed, untenable

to proceed without naming and rendering visible the unstated history within Buroway's articulated history. His key point in this first section is focused on "the academic character of "radical sociology" of the 1970s – its analytic style and its substantive remoteness. It mirrored the world it sought to conquer. For all its radicalism its immediate object was the transformation of sociology not of society." (Buroway 2004:1).

What Buroway's left history elides is the activist intellectual impact of Africana Studies, Ethnic Studies, Black studies all the fields that emerged in struggle with the idea and practice that there is an inextricable link, an inseparable connection between community and academy. It was understood among these scholar/radicals that there are multiple ways of knowing and that the academy addresses only a very narrow range of that knowledge. And even that was deeply racialized reflecting the colonizing impact of sociological thought. Left white academics were caught in a discursive snare that reproduced many of the same assumptions of the hegemonic sociological analyses in the field they were attempting to dismantle. And, while there is an uneasy or maybe, unhappy, marriage between postmodernist thinking and Marxist sociology: the postmodernist turn is right: the universals professed by the white male left were too often particularities. Whose knowledge was it anyway?

As transformative corrective, for example, Africana Studies embraced the legacy of peoples who were treated as the "people without history." Of course, Black scholars asserted, Africa was steeped in an incredible and glorious history. It had been erased/made invisible. Young Black, Chicano, Asian and indigenous radicals people tapped into the struggles of the era, building on the work and possibilities of historical transformation, often in deep connection with people on the ground. Theorists were not simply those in the academy trying to transform a field. The point was to remake the world, in the world, with the world. The student rebels who demanded Black studies, Native studies, Asian and Chicano Studies understood that their invisibility was real, palpable and not mooted by the presence of a few within the academy. These histories and knowledges were not included in the curriculum. They demanded a reconstitution of the social sciences – with the utmost urgency.

Sociology had damned itself with its colonizing gaze and practices (Ladner 1973). But the field also occupied a contradictory space. While the field had to be deeply be interrogated, it offered a portal into the structural, the systemic, the social constructedness of reality. Sociology must be examined in its particularity and the fact that, it too, is a social production. So the field was put on the line any a different way. Disrupt those discursive practices that were terribly damaging – always articu-

lating the so-called pathologies of Black life – depicting Black families as matriarchal cesspools – the colonizer gaze passing as the knowledge of the field.

Second Point in (Re)membering

Another silence around feminism in Buroway's history cannot be allowed to stand without intervention. Michael notes in his point about the academic character of radical sociology of the 1970s that "the grand exception was feminism. He quotes Catherine MacKinnon (1989) as she wrote "it was the first theory to emerge from those whose interests it affirms." It was? Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Barbara Christian, Black feminists activists/intellectuals who have now all joined the ancestors are not resting easily with this assertion. This white feminism did not see race or class. Indeed, it essentialized gender. Black feminists and other feminists of color who go unnamed and rendered invisible in Buroway's history spoke to the "triple jeopardies" of race, class, and gender, and of the inseparability of activism and resistances, within and outside the academy. Struggle was not only at the level of the university and community. The Combahee River Collective (reprinted in *For Some of Us Are Brave*, 1982) out of which Barbara Smith forged her Black radical feminist critique set the tone for the period. By the early 1970s The Collective was being built and issued the now foundational Combahee River Collective statement which asserted that as Black feminist lesbian activists that oppressions were inextricably linked in the lives of Black women. The intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality. Murder in Boston infused them with the imperative of action. Thirteen Black women had been killed in Boston and little was being done. Their lives were rendered invisible by Black male activists and white feminists. The Combahee River Collective organized, demanded action and reshaped the academy from without by generating a foundational document coming out of struggle and reshaping a field such as sociology. Brought into the academy through the portals of struggle and the theorizing of Black feminist sociologists such as Deborah King.

King (1988) in an article appearing in the journal *Signs* illustrated how theory related to practice in her work. She argued that Black women's struggles reflect multiple strategies for change not neatly captured in the Marxisms white feminisms, or national racial struggles. Black women's struggles are often community based reflecting the crosscutting tensions of African American women's lives. This is certainly the life that Ella Baker lived – college educated but cutting her teeth on labor struggles

in Harlem in the 1930s. She readily conceded that she was a sponge reading every radical tract, organizing, and observing the rich activist life the New York. She is best remembered as the founding force behind SNCC. Indeed, she brought together students at Shaw College to form the most radical organization coming out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (see Ransby 2002).

Indeed by theorizing from the bottom up, that is through the everyday lives of African American women and from the top down by analyzing social structure and political economy, the explication of the interplay between agency and social structure is mapable in Black feminist theory and practice. So let's not render this history invisible.

Point 3: Raising the Bigger Question: Whose Knowledge Informs a Public Sociology?

Unaddressed in Buroway's rendering of Public Sociology is the issue of whose knowledge in a public sociology? Uninterrogated in the Buroway piece is the dominant discourse and assumptions built into left and liberal sociology. I presume these will be the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of a public sociology. As noted earlier, the problematics of sociological knowledge was articulated in the decolonizing discourses of the subaltern and organic intellectuals of the 1960s. They questioned sociological knowledge as did white left thinkers. The difference is: What about indigenous knowledges – of marginalized peoples. How does the subaltern speak and act given Buroway's renderings of Public Sociology? Assumed is a unidimensionality that seamlessly runs through – from public sociology to publics. There is a danger in this kind of rendering of knowledge. What of oppositional histories, the challenges to disciplinary hegemony? We need more clarity from Buroway on these issues. As referenced earlier, the questions asked by Ethnic Studies in its formative period – on the deep and complicated relationships between fields and publics. The call to decolonize the field echoed then is as needed now in the era of globalized hegemony with new imperial accounts of the word and the world. Without this serious attentiveness to whose knowledge as well as the question of “for whom?” there is the strong possibility of slippage – slipping into normative sociology even as the call for a critical public sociology is articulated.

In the 100th year of DuBois' *Souls of Black Folks* (2004), the problematic of the dominant discourses of the social sciences on Black life in the USA: ala the DuBosian assertion, “What does it mean to be defined as

a problem?" is as alive as ever. There is a persistence of racist scholarship and discourses, and more than ever the need to put front and center the inversion of othering – defining the lived experience through the lives of those experiences. It requires shifting the lens of civil society toward resistance, people in struggle, rendered in all that complexity. People in struggle all over the world defining self for self: agency, rebellion, resistance, cultural creativity. In struggle, the subaltern speaks. Indeed it is the deep refusal to be defined from without, even in the context of highly determinative structural inequalities. It is a complicated space. It is not a seamless web of resistance – cross cut by and rife with contradictions. Black neoconservatives, masculinist left discourses, consumer conditioned, mass mania to buy, acquire, get more. These are spaces where not all people of color contest the status quo nor are all feminists oppositional. So there can be slippage in a public sociology if its articulators don't ask hard questions about the contradictions of a so-called public sociology. The emergence of the neoliberal voice that fuses liberal and conservative ideologies in support of privatization, individualism, and the centrality of capital and the market – the neoliberal world of the 21st century – lurks.

Final Point: Consciousness, Vision, Strategy

There are some emerging and older models of the interconnectionality of study and struggle, theory and practice, scholars and activist in struggle together. The work of Project South: The Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide, located in Atlanta, Georgia and Washington DC, has worked for newly two decades in helping to forge a bottom up struggle to build a movement for fundamental social change (<http://www.projectsouth.org>). Here sociology isn't "brought" to the public ala the assumption of Buroway's Public Sociology but new societies are co-creations. Scholarship and activism operates deep relationality to form the bottom up struggle for social transformation. At the center of this work is the subversion of all oppressions in their most murderous form. Globally this is the measure. In Mumbai, India, in January 2004, 125,000 activists from around the globe gathered to articulate a radical 21st century vision and set of practices for global social change. Scholars and activists must walk in the same space, working in deep relationality with one another (<http://www.wsfindia.org/anotherworld.php>). Without this deep interconnectivity, a public sociology will be largely an unruly (dangerous?) articulation of the particular liberal/left discourses that rule the day. There must be deep dialogue and struggle with the public a

public sociology professes to address. Sociology is not ahead of the game. It is still too enmeshed in the dominant discourses and policy practices of the day. And, it is deeply behind the struggles that are now bubbling up and reaching a new level of consolidation on the ground (again note the World Social forums of Cuba, Mumbai, India and Porte Alegre, Brazil) of the past few years and the aforementioned work of Project South. There are a credible number of other examples. The subaltern is centered in these struggles, asserting the knowledges and practices that will remake the dominant discourses of the day. There is no confusion in these civil spaces that neoliberalism and global capitalism and empire much be fought. Indeed, to understand and struggle, knowing that “another world” is possible means operating within the spaces of dialogue, consciousness, vision and strategy, the Project South mantra.

In closing I return to Mohanty. She articulates that the practice and pedagogy of consent and transformation means dialogue, working in struggle together across difference and power. It means visioning a new world and working collectively, strategically and committedly to make it possible. I believe no less can be expected of a sociology of critical transformation.

References

- BUROWAY, MICHAEL
 2004 “The Critical Turn to Public Sociology.” In: Rhonda Levine (ed.), *Enriching the Sociological Imagination: How Radical Sociology Changed the Discipline*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Press.
 “Combahee River Collective Statement.”
 1982 In: *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of us are Brave*. Hull, Gloria, Patricia Scott Bell and Barbara Smith. (eds.), New York: The Feminist Press.
- DUBOIS, W.E.B.
 2004 *The Souls of Black Folk: 100th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Signet Classic.
- KING, DEBORAH
 1988 “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14(1): 42-72.
- LADNER, JOYCE
 1973 *The Death of White Sociology*. New York: Random House.
- MACKINNON, CATHARINE
 1989 *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

MOHANTY, CHANDRA TALPADE

2004 *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p. 83.

Project South. <http://www.projectsouth.org>.

RANSBY, BARBARA

2002 *Ella Baker*. Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

World Social Forum. <http://www.wsfindia.org/anotherworld.php>.