

Can Burawoy Make Everybody Happy? Comments on Public Sociology

BEHROOZ GHAMARI-TABRIZI

(Georgia State University)

Recently, Michael Burawoy has launched a campaign to make a case for a public sociology. When the President of the American Sociological Association (ASA) speaks out on behalf of an engaged and critical public sociology and declares passionately *hic Rhodus, hic salta*, sociologists listen. Burawoy's move is bold and courageous and, at least according to one critic (Nielsen 2004), it threatens the integrity of ASA. Those of us who share the belief that sociology means something more than a technocratic, self-referential, and instrumental discipline need to add our voices to this debate in support of Burawoy's project. That said, I write this commentary as a critique of Burawoy's conception of public sociology as an integrated part of a differentiated discipline with complementary divisions.

In his address to Polson Institute for Global Development at Cornell University, Burawoy (2003) divided sociology into four distinct but inter-related ideal types: professional, policy, critical, and public. The first two types, professional and policy, according to Burawoy, form a cluster which, in its production of knowledge and socio-political interventions, does not fundamentally problematize the existing social order. The latter two, critical and public, form a *thesis eleven* kind of reflexive and transformative type of sociology engaged in social change. We also know that the first cluster enjoys a dominant position in the discipline as the bearer of the tradition of academic excellence and scholarly integrity. Its proponents are good citizens of academia in rigorous pursuit of unbiased and objective knowledge. In contrast, the critical public sociologists have an agenda – they unashamedly connect the *is* to their own perceived *ought*. The first cluster accuse the second of undermining the authority

and legitimacy of their profession because they argue that their *is* inevitably is informed, and thus tainted, by their *ought*. In plain English, whereas for the first group, values and moral commitments have no place in sociological knowledge, the second group insists on the inseparability of morality from sociological imagination. This debate is as old as sociology, almost. As Burawoy rightly points out, the first generation of sociologists openly advocated different commitments and moral convictions.

Burawoy's Disciplinary Matrix

	Academic Audience	Extra-Academic Audience
Instrumental Knowledge	Professional	Policy
Reflexive Knowledge	Critical	Public

In his disciplinary matrix, Burawoy distinguishes the two clusters by the forms of knowledge through which each establishes credibility in and outside of academia. Professional and policy types rely on instrumental knowledge, a Weberian technical rationality, while critical and public sociology hinges on a reflexive knowledge – a Habermasian communicative action, which emerges from and is conditioned by collective and democratic deliberations.

Although many might object to this crude model for neglecting the many intricacies of each position and their sectional overlapping, as a pure type, this tabulation captures the main division between the two clusters. The idea of public sociology is by no means new. What is novel about the way Burawoy has demarcated the internal disciplinary divisions in sociology is that he intends to persuade others to recognize public sociology as a legitimate part of the discipline. Through this legitimacy, he would like to institutionalize public sociology in promotion and tenure decisions, and to expand its organizational influence in ASA and its publications. The controversy therefore does not lie in Burawoy's praise of public sociology, but in his project to *institutionalize* it.

Contrary to the objections of the defenders of “professional sociology” (Nielsen 2004; Tittle 2004), my critique of Burawoy's mission does not stem from my skepticism about the merits and legitimacy of public sociology. But rather, that in his effort to construct a complementary model among the different types of sociology, Burawoy compromises the real possibilities of an effective public sociology.

The Taxonomy of Four Types of Sociology

In his recent publications and talks Burawoy directs his campaign to legitimate public sociology to professional sociologists who are wary of the consequences of the success of his project. Burawoy assures his colleagues that not only does public sociology increase the discipline's real and symbolic capital, it will also strengthen its institutional powers. As sociologists, we learn and teach how to respect and appreciate diversity, not as a fact to reckon with, but as something to strive for. Indeed, that was the core of ASA's 2003 brief submitted to the Supreme Court in defense of affirmative action in the Michigan Law School case.

It is superfluous to say that all sociologists do not share the same moral commitments, thus their diversity. But what does define the "unity" of sociologists? Does Burawoy have the institution of ASA in mind? Or is he thinking of a reified notion of the discipline? In either case, I do not believe that there exists such unity that could be enriched and strengthened by any diversity. The presupposition of unity inevitably creates an "unmarked" category of the discipline with its subsequent hegemonic influence. In Burawoy's matrix, the unmarked category of sociology out of which all other varieties spring is the professional sociology. "There can be neither public nor policy sociology," Burawoy assures his critics, "without a professional sociology that develops a body of theoretical knowledge and empirical findings, put to the test of peer review. Professional sociology provides the ammunition, the expertise, the knowledge, the insight, and the legitimacy for sociologists to present themselves to publics or to powers. *Professional sociology is the sine qua non of all sociologies*" (2004a:105; my italic).

The idea of professional sociology as the *sine qua non* of all sociologies leads to a perception that there exists an organic and functional division of labor between different types of sociology – from the development of theoretical knowledge and empirical findings to putting those concepts and findings to use in public. This model became more hierarchical and functional when in his detailed rendition of public sociology in *Social Forces*, Burawoy (2004b) renamed the chart of sociology's disciplinary matrix the table to "Division of Sociological Labor."

In order to maintain the peace and to emphasize the complementary character of different types of sociology, Burawoy falls into a positivist trap. In Burawoy's sociological division of labor, there are those who, in a heroic fiction of the lone scientist, produce knowledge by gathering empirical findings and creating classifications. And then there are those of us who appropriate this "peer-reviewed" knowledge in order to put it into public use and to change society. The praxis of public sociology

cannot be based on concepts and classifications produced in professional sociology.

Positivism creates a world without ambiguity. “Things” are certain in the world of numbers, and in their certainty they become effective in the domain of policy. Professional sociology does not produce types of knowledge conducive and inviting to public sociology. Instrumental knowledge, as Burawoy calls it, *negates* reflexivity, the foundation of public sociology. As Burawoy acknowledges, public sociology conveys a communicative knowledge. But, this communicative core in Burawoy’s scheme is fashioned more after Habermas’ famous coffee houses than Gramsci’s organic articulations.

I am not against intellectualism, I think with the present resident in the White House who revels in his below C average mind, there is even more urgency to defend intellectuals and their work. But when intellectuals become public in order to give voice to the concerns of citizens, they ought not to play the role of the expert. As we well know, the expert often muffles the voice, obscures the integrity, and curtails the involvement of the subaltern. Therefore, reflexive knowledge does not form communicatively outside of public engagement; rather it emerges as the result of it. We know important examples of such dynamics in movements against environmental racism spearheaded by Robert Bullard and his colleagues.

My chagrin in reading Burawoy’s functionalist chart of the “division of sociological labor,” and his conception of professional sociology as the *sine qua non* of all sociology, comes from the fact that they contradict his theories of knowledge production, as I understand it. The only way I can fathom his position is that Burawoy believes in the political and institutional utility of a united ASA. But his disciplinary loyalty might prove to be detrimental to the efficacy of public sociology.

Disciplinary Loyalties

Does public sociology need to be sociological in a disciplinary sense? Although I support the public engagement of sociologists, I do believe that in order to be public they need to abandon the exclusivity of their disciplinary boundaries. As much as we feel possessive about our disciplinary boundaries, for the public, these boundaries are meaningless at best and at worst, prohibiting. I am sure with every new hire in any department of sociology there is a debate about whether the department should consider candidates with a PhD in disciplines other than sociology. Most often, the answer is ‘No’! The integrity of the institution depends on its

disciplinary continuity, despite the fact that many of us teach the works of philosophers, anthropologists, literary critics, political economists, and historians in our classrooms. There are good reasons to care for the institutional continuity of the discipline – maintaining a space for critical studies of society, funding, and let us face it, our own bread and butter. But why should we care to call what some of us do outside academia “public sociology”?

By calling the work of public intellectuals, who happened to be sociologists, public sociology, Burawoy sets up a strategy of institutional politics to compel the gate-keepers (presumably the advocates of professional sociology) to acknowledge and credit that work in promotion and tenure decisions. That is just and admirable, especially coming from the pulpit of ASA’s president. But while Burawoy’s institutional decision to defend public sociology is sound and ought to be supported, it creates confusion about what exactly he means when he speaks of public sociology.

There are two important distinctions in Burawoy’s models of policy and public sociologies: First, whereas public sociology sets the agenda and the terms of its engagement, policy sociology adheres to an agenda set by a client and engages in an instrumental relation with a patron. Second, whereas public sociology “generates conversation or debate between sociologist and public on a terrain of *reciprocal engagement*” (2004b: 1608; my italics), policy sociology has nothing to do with conversation, the communication goes one way: expert testimony. But by offering *Contexts* as an example of doing public sociology, Burawoy undermines his own assertions and obfuscates important distinctions he articulated between policy and public sociology.

In its inaugural issue (Spring 2002), the executive editor of *Contexts*, Claude Fischer, noted that:

Crime, religion, poverty, teen sexuality, and education are all topics that receive extensive daily media coverage. The tragic events on September 11, 2001, have intensified interests in fundamentalism, cultural conflict and international politics. Unfortunately, much of the public discussion about these matters is distorted by anecdotes, stereotypes, and prejudices.

Social scientists have studied these topics extensively, and have much to contribute to the public debate. But their contributions are impeded by the wide moat that traditionally surrounds the ivory tower. What is missing is a bridge that makes the findings of social science accessible to the general public. *Contexts* will be that bridge.

I have nothing against the publication of a magazine such as *Contexts*, which could potentially help change the terrain and level of public discussion

of social problems. But rather than public I would call what it does, in a non-pejorative way, pop-sociology. Hopefully, *Contexts* would some day have the same wide readership as *Psychology Today*; that is not farfetched. *Contexts* might be a bridge, but it only resembles the upper deck of the Bay Bridge, one way out of Berkeley. There is no context in *Contexts* to allow a “reciprocal engagement” between the public and sociologists.

In their public activities, sociologists need to transcend their disciplinary loyalties. If they are compelled by a passion to engage with issues of social justice, they are well advised to belong to a larger community of public intellectuals (organic or traditional) with whom they have more in common than with those whose fetishism of their profession takes precedence over the substance of their ideas. Through giving significance to an engaged sociology, Burawoy aspires to transform ASA. But in this aspiration, he might not find many sympathetic ears. Even if he does, and public sociology becomes an accepted ideal type of the profession, I am afraid it would further strengthen the existing academic hierarchy in which the scholars of elite schools would remain the bearers of excellence in research, the authors of research programs and paradigms (and promoted as such) and sociologists of state university and colleges would remain as second class citizens of the discipline whose service and teaching, their “public sociology,” would define their contribution to the profession.

Global Divisions: Sociology as a Colonial Science

Theoretically, Burawoy defends public sociology because he believes that sociology and civil society “live and die together.” In his address to Polson Institute, he reiterated, “sociology was born with civil society at the end [sic] of the 19th century. It was born with the rise of mass education, mass parties, the expansion of media and transportation, the police and postal service, newspapers and new means of transportation, all of which linked populations to their nation-state. The topics of sociology – family, organizations, political parties, culture, deviance and social control, etc. – presume a space for society alongside but also intimately connected to market and state.”

By linking sociology to the advent of civil society, and moreover casting sociology as the conscience of civil society, Burawoy defines sociology as inherently public. That is to say that in the case of declining significance of civil society, we would face the irrelevance of sociology and the disappearance of its historical mission. Since the discipline breathes the air of civil society, it has a responsibility to defend and attend to it.

Although Burawoy delivered his address under the title “Public Sociologies in a Global Context,” his narrative of the rise of sociology is remarkably eurocentric. The big absent in Burawoy’s long list of events in response to which sociology emerged is colonialism. Indeed, colonial encounters were instrumental to the founding binaries of sociology; i.e., modern *versus* traditional, *Gesellschaft* *versus* *Gemeinschaft*, public *versus* private, etc. In the classical writings, progress, with its presupposition of movement toward a goal, or a better life in a “right” direction, was seen as the essence of historical change in Europe. Progress became an ideological device (or a “moral judgment” in Marshall Hodgson’s words) through which the internal historical dynamics of the non-European world was portrayed as a mere digression. The genius of social theory, however, was in the transposition of a temporal-chronological scheme (modern *versus* pre-modern) onto a spatial-ideological construct (Occident *versus* Orient). The non-Western thus became the pre-modern, and modernization implied Westernization. A simple case in point was Marx’s assertion in the first volume of *Das Kapital* that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed the image of its own future.” Although Marx’s claim corresponded with his progressive teleology, it simply, in the name of History, justified colonialism as the inevitable price of progress (as he did in his journalistic writings on British Imperialism in India).

In addition to commitments to a vibrant civil society, public sociology needs to address its colonial core. Public sociology cannot thrive without establishing a reciprocal, non-hierarchical relation between the core and periphery of sociological knowledge, both within the Global North and between North and South. Burawoy rightly identifies the parochialism of American sociology as one of the barriers for the emergence of a global sociology. The problem, however, remains when such a recognition would only have currency if it comes from Burawoy and other influential sociologists of the Global North. Who gets to define it and who practices it is as important as what public sociology is.

As one Muslim scholar, Dilnawaz Siddiqui (1992), once lamented in an address to the 21st Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, “[the universalist assumptions of] western modernity was opposed rigorously as soon as it started to take root in the older societies of India and part of the Muslim world.” Referring to the emergence of postmodernism, he continued, “but in the West, who would listen to such subdued cries from subjected nations? They had to wait for its decline under its own weight.”

While in anthropology and post-colonial theory, there has been a significant change in the relation between Global North and South, sociology lags in recognizing the parochialism of its Northern conception of society and its institutions. The global South remains rigorously excluded from participating in *defining* the agenda of all types of sociology. For example, although the next theory mini-conference at ASA's 2004 meeting is called "Theoretical Cultures," with the exception of Robert W. Connell, who speaks of the Global North and South and the conceptual dilemma of western universalism, there is not a single presentation on non-Euro-American conceptions of society. Not a single sociologist of the Global South was invited to participate in any of the sessions.

It is highly uncommon to see works of sociologists who study social issues of the Global South from non-eurocentric standpoints published in mainstream sociological journals. Often, as my own experience corroborates, the reviewers of these journals unashamedly ghettoize these works by encouraging the authors to send their contributions to journals of area studies. As one reviewer stated in a rejection letter to an article I submitted to ASR, "the journal publishes works that are more generalizable." The reviewer assured me that the article merited publication but only in a journal of Middle East studies (despite the fact the article was about Muslims' experiences of globalization in which I drew upon experiences of Muslims from Malaysia and Egypt to diasporic communities in North America). This is not a personal grievance, but rather an example of institutional exclusionary politics. Concepts do not magically become generalizable or universal because of some inherent value in their constitution. They are generalized or universalized by institutions that have the powers to *make* them universal. American sociology cannot remain oblivious to the fact that the concepts it generates in its sociological production enjoy universality precisely because it is American.

To become public and global, not only do we need to recognize and contest the hegemonic powers that American sociology exercises over the boundaries of the discipline, more importantly, we need to be willing to give up our own powers and allow those on behalf of whom we would like to speak, speak for themselves.

Although I wrote this commentary as a critique of Michael Burawoy's conception of public sociology, I need to emphasize in conclusion that he has inaugurated a project which has long been overdue. I wonder if any other scholar without credentials as impressive as Burawoy's could initiate this debate and make others listen. For that, Burawoy deserves the full support and encouragement of all sociologists who believe that the description of what exists and the prescription of how to change it are the two sides of the same sociological coin. Burawoy might be mistaken

that he can secure the institutional blessing of the ASA, but his is absolutely right in his mission to give voice and legitimacy to public sociology.

References

- BURAWOY, MICHAEL
2003 "Public Sociologies in Global Context." Address to Polson Institute for Global Development. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
- 2004a "Public Sociologies: Symposium from Boston College," *Social Problems* 51(1): 103-130.
- 2004b "Public Sociologies: Contradictions, Dilemmas, and Possibilities," *Social Forces* 82(4): 1603-18.
- NIELSEN, FRANÇOIS
2004 "The Vacant 'We': Remarks on Public Sociology," *Social Forces* 82(4): 1619-28.
- TITTLE, CHARLES
2004 "The Arrogance of Public Sociology," *Social Forces* 82(4): 1939-44.