

# Comments on Burawoy: A View From the Bottom-up

WALDA KATZ-FISHMAN and JEROME SCOTT  
(Howard University and Project South)

Burawoy's call for a critical and transformative "public sociology," whose goal is realizing the "real utopia" of democratic socialism, is welcome. We especially value and appreciate his call at this time because Burawoy has offered it during his presidency of the ASA – and thus from inside the profession and a key center of power in defining sociology as both theory and practice. We also value and appreciate it because it comes at a crucial moment in bottom-up movement building – another powerful process in defining social theory, social struggle and their dynamic relationship in social transformation.

Our brief comments are informed by our work in Project South as "organic public sociologists" – in the trenches as well as the academy for 35+ years. They are also informed by a long and rich tradition of radical and Marxist sociology that teaches us many lessons. Two of the most essential are that "*Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point however is to change it.*" For us this change is fundamental, qualitative, systemic, transformative, and is central to our historic struggle for human liberation in the broadest, deepest and most inclusive sense. And, second, that theory and practice are two aspects of a powerful, dialectical unity born out of and continuously tested in our social struggle to end all forms of exploitation and oppression. Neither can exist without the other.

Burawoy argues – and we agree – that change flows from outside the university in. The movements of the 1960s and 1970s – black liberation, national liberation and anti-imperialist/anti-colonial struggles, women's equality, sexual equality, environmental justice struggles, etc. – created the conditions for a radical sociology. Social struggles outside the university

found their way inside through radical and activist scholars and students. New departments, programs, theory, research and curricula followed, as did new forms of relationships between campus and community – though the academy certainly still dominated.

Burawoy also speaks clearly to the “failure” of the radical sociology of the 1970s. When it moved into the academy it became detached, isolated and abstract – looking inward to the profession, rather than outward to the movement. The mission of the university to reproduce social inequality and the *status quo* – even if reformed – rather than to fundamentally transform society was hegemonic and too much to counter on a sustained basis. The continuing post-World War II economic expansion, welfare state reforms, increasing political and social inclusion, and the economic and social bribe, in general, further disoriented radical, feminist and Marxist sociologists. In too many instances foundation, government or other funding drove and limited the agenda of progressive scholars and their relationships to their various publics. Most lost their connection to social struggle, or simply believed that social struggle no longer existed.

But even as radical sociology was turning inward and away from its publics and the movement, movement formations were doing “organic public sociology.” An examination of the history of scholar activism and activist scholars and intellectuals suggests there has always been a stream of what Burawoy calls “public sociology” – individuals connected to organizations and movements who are analytical in their perspective and engaged in a process of social change and social transformation.

For many of us Karl Marx was the first “public sociologist.” And there have been many more – Goyathlay “Geronimo,” Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Ida Wells-Barnett, Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, V.I. Lenin, Emma Goldman, Ella Baker, Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Kuame Nkrumah, Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, Cesar Chavez, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Walter Rodney, Audre Lorde, Elizabeth Martinez, Leonard Peltier and Winona LaDuke – to name a few. There have also been powerful organizations, networks and collectives such as the Industrial Workers of the World – “Wobblies” (IWW), Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Black Panther Party, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, American Indian Movement, Combahee River Collective, Up & Out of Poverty Now Campaign, Economic Human Rights Campaign, Zapatistas, etc. that have combined theory and practice from the bottom up.

This makes clear that there are at least two paths to “public sociology” and that social location is a decisive factor. One path comes from social

struggle and the need and desire to understand root systemic causes of the human degradation and destruction experienced by the women, men and youth of exploited and oppressed peoples, classes and communities; to articulate a vision of what a world of equality, justice, peace and popular democracy would look like; and to develop a strategy to guide the process of change. The other path comes from the academy and the canons of sociology – professional, critical, policy, clinical, etc. – in search of relevance and audiences.

The first path brings activists, organizations and movements to social analysis and social theory out of their social practice and as a necessity for social transformation. This means that the analytical and methodological tools of social analysis are not the “private property” of academics and the academy, though they would like to make it so and do all in their power to mystify and fetishize knowledge of the social world and disconnect it from social struggle. The second path comes to social analysis and social theory as a career choice and strives to connect to various publics – many of which are not in social struggle – to move beyond a narrow “professional” sociology for a variety of personal, political or ideological reasons.

While Burawoy acknowledges that there are many and diverse “public sociologies” – we believe that the location of public sociology organically within social struggles and social movements for fundamental and systemic change is essential in this moment. So, if scholars come through the academy they must eventually immerse themselves and their analysis in a social practice that embraces struggle and movements.

In our view from the bottom up, what is driving this conversation and rediscovery of radicalism and “publics” are the objective economic and political conditions of crisis in global society – expressed daily in our local communities and national politics world over. In the first decade of the 21st century we find ourselves in another period of growing social motion; and radical sociologists are seeking once more to connect to the movement that is arising in local, national and global civil society. Again the impulse is from the outside in.

What does naming “public sociology” do to the process of doing it? This naming process comes from within the academy as a way to distinguish between public and professional sociology. And it is happening in a moment of intensifying motion and struggle – which is no surprise. “Professional” and “public” sociology, in their polar opposite expressions, are antagonistic processes of theory and practice. The first pole represents political oppression and ideological repression in support of today’s global capitalist neoliberal regime. The opposite pole represents the revolutionary transformation of society – socialism and communism. Both

are profoundly political, though the former absurdly asserts its “objectivity” and “value-neutrality” even as it collaborates with the oppressive forces of power and domination. In naming public sociology and locating it within the revolutionary pole of practice, we can deepen our struggle within the discipline and profession to unify theory and practice in today’s historical process of the transformation of society.

Once again we have an opportunity to be part of movements for fundamental social change. This time it can and must be different than the 1970s because the objective historical processes of global capitalism are qualitatively different. A truly new world is possible because of the abundance of electronic production and distribution – using computers, robots, etc. Industrial age machine production was labor enhancing – productivity increased but working people had jobs. In today’s global electronic age automated production is labor replacing. We produce more and more goods and services with fewer and fewer workers – creating an absolute abundance of everything. But without good jobs and livable wages we cannot buy the necessities of life – food, housing, clothing, health care, education, transportation, culture, etc. So this vast abundance can and must be distributed based on human need rather than ability to pay in the market. Scarcity is thus created by global capitalism – not by limitations of productive capacity. The electronic technology of production, distribution, transportation and communication is outstripping market capacity to consume, destroying the wages system, and at the same time creating the material conditions for justice, equality and popular democracy. This is the context in which the struggle for survival on a daily basis forms the foundation of our rising movement.

The question and challenge for today’s generation of public sociologists and scholar activists is can we stay connected for the long haul and become one with today’s bottom-up movement? Are we willing to come to the table as equals with those most adversely affected by the exploitation and multiple oppressions of global capitalism and US empire and to celebrate our diversity?

Will we use the popular communication and popular education necessary for building a broad and deep popular movement? Can we develop the consciousness, the bold vision and the long term strategy needed to win? It this moment vision is the key – we have for the first time in human history the productive capacity – because of electronics – to end poverty, scarcity, hunger, etc. We can truly build a cooperative, just and equal society. Finally, can we “walk the talk” – can we unite theory and practice in the dialectics of our historic struggle for human life and human rights, human spirit and human liberation and for the very survival of our planet?

Make it happen!