

Rejoinder: Toward a Critical Public Sociology

MICHAEL BURAWOY

(University of California, Berkeley)

“The Critical Turn to Public Sociology,” was written as the conclusion to a collection of mainly 1970s classic essays from the *Insurgent Sociologist* with short reflections from their authors – Erik Wright, Fred Block, Edna Bonacich, Zillah Eisenstein, Goran Therborn, Harvey Molotch, Bill Domhoff, Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis, Val Burris, and Martha Gimenez. Mine was to be a new essay that considered their contemporary relevance. The essays, nearly all Marxist in inspiration, were familiar to me. As I read them again, as a whole, I was struck by their unrelenting academic focus. Critical though they were, they were turned toward the development of an academic Marxism, decked out to compete with professional sociology. Their radical conceit was scholastic. This was as true of my own work as it was of theirs. Today we don’t appear as insurgent as we did then! We take so much of their content for granted.

There are good reasons why we were so focused on the academic terrain. In those days, we regarded mainstream sociology as a species of bourgeois ideology, lagging behind a world erupting with social movements. Our “revolutionary” task was to either abolish sociology or at least sever its conservative roots. It should be said that these authors – together with many others of radical bent – have been surprisingly successful in pushing the discipline in a leftward direction over the last 30 years, which is why we have difficulty seeing what a radical departure they marked. At the same time that sociology has moved left the world beyond has, for the most part, moved right. This scissors movement, I argue, has prompted critical sociologists to shift away from the transformation of sociology to tackling the world – a more daunting enterprise that I call public sociology. It is a multivalent term and embraces

a variety of forms but, at minimum, it entails a dialogue between sociology and its publics.

All my critical critics start out from the premise that public sociology is a worthwhile project. Where we differ is in the relation of public sociology to professional sociology, to other disciplines and to academia more broadly, as well as to the publics we might engage. We differ also in assessing the possibilities and impediments these contexts pose for public sociology. The perspectives they and I adopt toward public sociology depend, I will argue, on our position in the division of sociological labor – the division into professional, policy, public and critical sociologies. So let me first outline this matrix of four sociologies.

My four-fold division of sociological labor stems from two questions, quite familiar to critical sociologists. The first question is: *Sociology for Whom?* Are we talking just to ourselves (academics) or also to others? Professional and critical sociology appeal to academic audiences while policy and public sociologies appeal to any number of extra-academic audiences. The second question is: *Sociology for What?* Is sociology concerned with goals, values, and ends of society or with the means, and techniques to reach those ends. This is the Weberian distinction between formal and substantive rationality, it is also at the heart of Frankfurt School critical theory. In our scheme professional and policy sociology focus on means toward given ends – in the case of professional sociology the focus is on puzzles generated by research programs and in the case of policy sociology the focus is on problems defined by clients. Critical and public sociology, on the other hand, interrogate and even call into question those very ends, the normative foundations of professional and policy sociology. Critical sociology is a normative dialogue, primarily among sociologists and conventionally directed to professional sociology, whereas public sociology is dialogue primarily between sociologists and publics about the normative foundations of society. The result is the following configuration.

Table 1. *The division of sociological labor*

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

One's location in this matrix, I claim, shapes one's disposition toward public sociology although not in any singular manner. Thus, my opponents in the *Social Forces* (June, 2004) exchange undertook their criticism from

within the instrumental perspective on knowledge, i.e., along the professional-policy continuum. They looked upon public sociology as threatening the legitimacy of sociology and thus its resource base, as being infeasible, as being elitist and condescending, and even as being a mask for Marxism. Public sociology, in short, represents a dangerous politicization of the discipline. Very different are the critical responses to public sociology contained in this journal, which take up a position from within reflexive knowledge along the critical-public dimension. Rather than opposing its existence, they contest or deepen the meaning I give to public sociology. They object to my *depoliticization* of public sociology brought about by hitching it to the disciplinary framework. For my critical critics I'm not radical enough.

In "The Critical Turn to Public Sociology," I argued that the focus of critical sociology should shift its emphasis from a critique of professional sociology to the infusion of critical perspectives into public sociology. Indeed, that's exactly what all my seven critics do. They each take up the challenge of radicalizing public sociology, from three different standpoints: international, historical and institutional. On the international front I am accused of parochialism: misrecognizing the specificity of US sociology and ignoring its domination throughout the world. On the historical front I stand accused of ignoring the contributions of critical race theory and the civil rights movements as well as the lessons of second wave feminism concerning the limitations of civil society. On the institutional front, my conception of public sociology is regarded at best as a stepping stone to something deeper and more radical, and at worst a self-defeating compromise with professionalization. Let me embrace my critics in pursuit of a common agenda for a critical public sociology.

On the International Front: Provincializing United States Sociology

John Urry is quite right to berate me for not problematizing the parochialism of US sociology, for not recognizing its closed self-regulating character, and for failing to consider the way it imposes itself, like a Leviathan around the world. Elsewhere I have been indefatigable in my indictment of US sociology's penchant for universalizing the particular. I have called for provincializing US sociology, recognizing its particularity. Still I omitted this critique from my assessment of 1970s sociology. Instead I focused on its parochialism in another sense, on its academic confinement.

Today, I believe, US sociology is less parochial both in its response to its immediate non-academic environment, but also in its responses to movements around the world. Indeed, as US world hegemony expands, so it encounters multiple forms of resistance, which sociology has begun to articulate whether through the lens of social movement theory, new strategies of development, international labor movements, state formation, religious mobilization, or the organization of regionalism. These are now the subject of empirical investigation and theorization under the broad rubric of what Peter Evans has called “counter-hegemonic” globalization, often connected to projects of *Sociologists without Frontiers* or the *World Social Forum*.

Of course, not all sociological responses to US world hegemony are radical. By no means. For example, the neo-institutional school of John Meyer and his collaborators, examine the diffusion of US institutions around the world – US models of democracy, education, justice, privatization, etc. They are uncritical exponents of US hegemony. They don’t explore the gap between models and reality, or the resistance to those models, or the back-flow of alternative models from East to West, from South to North, or the hybrid formations that have so captured the attention of Postcolonial Theory. They don’t examine the ideological, material and coercive mechanisms through which the US constitutes its hegemony – the mechanisms that Michael Mann, for example, examines in his recent book, *Incoherent Empire*.

American sociology’s imbrication in world hegemony is complex, but American sociology is less parochial than it was in the 1970s not to mention the 1950s, which seems to be Urry’s point of reference. To say it is less parochial than it was, however, is not to say a great deal, and there’s much more work to be done, both in the study of globalization itself and in examining how globalization is affecting our discipline. With this I would be the first to agree, and Urry’s own work should figure prominently in such a project!

When considering sociology’s engagement with US hegemony, we need to pay attention to how differentiated sociology is on a world scale. Hegemony is never monolithic, but a hierarchical configuration of difference. It does not obliterate difference but works through difference. Or to move from Gramsci to Bourdieu, one might speak of sociology as a global field of power, with its distinctive logic, its rules of the game that govern dominant and subaltern players. And in this matter European sociology is not as innocent as John Urry paints it. While US sociology does indeed command enormous material resources, including research funding, and accounting for a considerable proportion of the PhDs in the world, still the continent of Europe has always monopolized cultural

capital. We should not forget that the theoretical foundations of American sociology are built, at least in part, on French traditions, starting with Comte, and proceeding through Durkheim to Bourdieu, and on German traditions, starting with Marx and proceeding through Weber and Simmel to the Frankfurt School. England, of course, had little by way of its own tradition, and became, as Urry himself has argued, parasitical on others – on continental traditions and on other disciplines, such as anthropology. Scandinavian countries have developed their own sociology, to be sure heavily influenced by US research techniques, but also in close connection with their own welfare states. Again we need a nuanced picture of the domination of US sociology, one that recognizes Europe as its handmaiden, a partner that supplies the necessary cultural ingredient of a global hegemony. Europe's claimed autonomy does not detract from its collaborative role and ideological function in propping up US domination.

Just as differences between US and European sociology should not be misinterpreted nor should they be exaggerated. We should not exaggerate, as I think Urry does, the uniqueness of the impact of European society on its sociology. No less than in Europe the influence of US social movements of the 1960s – the women's movement and the civil rights movement in particular – lay behind the revamping of sociology. As to Urry's reverse and universal claim that "the world is *already* sociological," perhaps it is true that European administrative apparatuses are more imbued with a sociological habitus, but I'm not at all convinced that sociology is increasingly "ingrained within public life." Indeed, this claim strikes me as strangely out of place, coming from a sociologist living in a country that, even after 8 years of Blairism, has still not recovered from 18 years of Thatcherism – a regime that prided itself in eradicating the very idea of society. After Conservative Rule, the Labour Party might have brought a shot in the arm for a symbolic recognition of sociology, signaled, for example, by Anthony Giddens's ascent into the House of Lords, but the continuities between the two regimes are remarkable. Whatever be the case in Europe, let it be said that in the United States public life is under constant bombardment from state, market and mass media and, what there is of it, is generally hostile to sociology's privileging of society over the individual. This, of course, is simultaneously the challenge and the mainspring of the current interest in public sociology!

Gianpaolo Baiocchi's fascinating discussion of public sociology in Brazil offers a more nuanced understanding of the distinctive terrain of US sociology, reflecting his own dual positioning in Brazil and the United States. The prospects for a critical-public sociology in the United States are quite dim, he argues, given the apolitical character of US civil society and conservatizing influence of professionalism. In Brazil, by contrast,

there are some 40,000 sociologists, most employed outside the university and unencumbered by postgraduate education. They have not only penetrated civil society but they have participated in a far more politicized civil society, one might call it a political society. Indeed, they themselves have helped forge that political society, whether through networks of independent research centers and NGOs or through their connections to the ruling Workers Party (PT). They have been a major force behind some of the most interesting experiments in participatory democracy, such as the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and other cities of Brazil. Significantly, Brazil hosts two national associations of sociologists – one a scientific-professional organization and the other explicitly connected to the organs of political society.

By comparison with Brazil the difference between the United States and Europe looks slight. Indeed, in this light Urry's account looks decidedly parochial and Eurocentric. But even in Brazil there are serious limitations to public sociology. The proliferation of a critical-public sociology in Brazil – and here the same thing may be said of South Africa with its parallel traditions of public sociology – has led to cooptation by state and party. This is a real concern, but one that reflects the advanced state of critical-public sociology. The comparison with Brazil shows just how far public sociology has yet to go in the United States. It offers up an image of what it could be, even if the conditions of its realization are not present. But all is not lost! One should not forget that vibrant critical-public sociologies were borne in opposition to authoritarian regimes – military dictatorship in Brazil and the apartheid state in South Africa. Is it wishful thinking that as the US state becomes daily more repressive, so sociology will become more public and more critical, i.e., more political? Will sociologists have the courage of their inherited moral convictions?

On the Historical Front: Revisiting the Radicalism of the Past

The second set of criticisms concern not my comparative myopia but my historical myopia. Again I'm guilty. With the exception of Edna Bonacich, Martha Gimenez and Zillah Eisenstein, the selected essays from *Insurgent Sociologist* overlooked issues of race and gender so central to the radical impetus of the time. In failing to consider African American Studies, Native American Studies, Chicano Studies, Ethnic Studies, I reproduced the narrowness of these essays. It's not simply that my picture was incomplete, which is bad enough, but what was left out holds important lessons for a critical public sociology.

Rose Brewer and Gianpaolo Baiocchi, are exactly right to draw attention to the formation of interdisciplinary programs whose mission was to create a two-lane highway between the university and African American communities. Still the creation of such programs underscores my original point that the driving energy was toward the transformation of the academy, trying to bring it into line with critical black intellectuals or with the boiling up of the ghetto. The disciplines could no longer shut their eyes to the insurgency of oppressed minorities for whom academic doors had been firmly shut.

If sociology was truly behind the times in the 1960s, can we then say it has caught up and even overtaken the world? Which are the publics, beyond the academy, whose politics are still *more* critical than sociology's? Can we identify the counter-publics of today? What has happened to the Combahee River Collective, what are the successors to SNCC? Incomplete, and partial though the transformation of sociology was, how many Project Souths are there today? And how can we continue to make their presence felt in the academy? Here Rose Brewer raises further questions about the viability of interdisciplinary programs such as African American Studies, Chicano Studies, Native American Studies. These programs necessarily have a hard time fitting into the academic world for a number of reasons.

First, interdisciplinary studies are always precarious in an academic world cordoned off into disciplines. But some programs fare better than others. In the natural sciences interdisciplinary programs have thrived. So why not in the social sciences and humanities? As Brewer emphasizes, the original impetus for such programs was to maintain connectivity, fluidity between academy and community, which, of course, threatens professional autonomy, challenges administrators' control over their programs. Still, there are lots of programs in business or engineering schools that sustain close ties to communities outside the university. No, the problem is to maintain a fluid interchange with stigmatized, impoverished communities that bring no prestige, money or power to the university, communities that bring only trouble to the ivory tower. These programs are lodged precariously in the periphery of universities, where they are left to scarp for the few resources that are thrown their way.

But can sociology be any more successful? Can sociology sustain critical public sociologies without turning itself into an academic pariah? Certainly ghettoizing critical public sociologies will condemn them to obscurity. Their only chance of survival would be to make them integral to the discipline, an essential part of the division of sociological labor. Certainly, a critical public sociology must also forge ties with interdisciplinary

programs such as African American Studies, Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies. These latter programs must not be isolated and sociology needs their radical imaginaries.

This is the point that Joan Acker makes, specifically with respect to feminism – a revitalized public sociology must not lose the insights of second wave feminism. One of those insights, she rightly emphasizes, illuminates the way civil society threatens to reproduce gender domination on its own terrain by secluding the private sphere, the source of women's subjugation. In taking the standpoint of civil society sociology cannot overlook the public-private distinction. Nor can it mean ceding the economy, the polity, and the psychological to other disciplines. Indeed it doesn't. Taking the standpoint of civil society means studying these other spheres in terms of their relation to civil society – the way the economy commodifies and the state regulates associational life, and the way associational life can repel and disrupt colonization by these other spheres, creating a potential space for collective self-regulation of society.

Feminism and critical race theory may not have revolutionized sociology in the way Acker and Brewer would desire but they have still pushed sociology to the left of most publics, which raises troubling questions for public sociology – how to engage with publics that see women's subordination as God-given or racial subordination as a function of cultural inferiority, how to engage with publics who think only in terms of individual life chances, and who don't find inequality problematic. On the one hand Brewer and Acker insist that public sociology be more radical while on the other hand they warn us not to impose our views on others! Here indeed is the dilemma, if sociology is already to the left of most publics, how should we conduct the dialogue with those publics? What models of "education" do we have that would permit such a two-way dialogue? How do we elaborate the kernel of good sense in the common sense, turn private troubles into public issues when the individual is king? Or should we just talk with the few who are already converted to the sociological message? If we have learnt to speak *about* the subaltern, can we now speak *to* them and can we ever speak *for* them? Our thinking about the relation of sociology to publics, and especially to subaltern publics, is still at a very primitive stage.

On the Institutional Front: The Limits of the Discipline

The third set of criticisms is that my vision of public sociology makes too many compromises with professional sociology. Even if sociology is more progressive than the publics it engages, according to Stanley

Aronowitz, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, and Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott, it is still too conservative to underwrite a critical public sociology. Professional sociology is inherently confining and could never bear the burden of a critical public sociology. Stanley Aronowitz, himself a renown public sociologist, argues that my conception of public sociology embedded in the division of sociological labor may be a point of departure but certainly not a point of conclusion, a transitional step toward a more radical vision that would require the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and the creation of a human science. In other words, he wishes to deepen the project of critical sociology on the academic front in order to be more effective on the public front.

He not only elides the question of what publics we might address and how, but also elides the danger of seeking a comprehensive human science that would absorb economics and political science. A unified social science, a project also advanced by Immanuel Wallerstein, would quickly drown out the critical moment of sociology. Unification is in the interests of the powerful. Thus, the unification of the social sciences would subjugate the *social* and its reflexivities to *science* and its instrumentalities. Considering who our neighbors are, dissolving disciplines would eradicate the critical and public sociologies that we have nurtured, as happened, for example, in area studies during the Cold War Era. In other words, we have an interest in disciplinary boundaries that support a protected neighborhood from which to forge counter-hegemonic alliances with fellow travelers in anthropology, geography and other social sciences, and, of course, with the various interdisciplines. In that way we can cultivate our connections to publics, unencumbered by the overweening power of the policy sciences. We may not be at the vanguard of publics but sociology can still become the nucleus of a critical public science.

If Stanley Aronowitz sees my formulation of public sociology as a first step toward something more radical, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi regards the project as irrevocably tainted. He regards professional sociology as inherently antithetical to public sociology. Rather than dominating reflexive knowledge, instrumental knowledge destroys it. There can be no meaningful public sociology that is connected to professional sociology. "The praxis of public sociology cannot be based on concepts and classifications produced in professional sociology." He, therefore, wishes to abandon sociology to critics from the opposite end of the political spectrum, who insist that the purity of the science of sociology must not be sullied by any engagement with the world. This is where positivists and anti-positivists join hands – they both agree that professional sociology is not equipped for a public role. The one wants to excise the public from the professional

and the other to excise the professional from the public but it comes to the same thing – mutual exclusion of professional and public.

I, of course, don't agree with either the positivists or the anti-positivists. Professional sociology neither occupies a desert island and nor is it bankrupt. It does have an emancipatory moment, a kernel of "good sense." That is not to say that professional sociology does not suffer from drawbacks and pathologies. Ghamari-Tabrizi, indeed, points to important limitations, such as the parochialism if not Orientalism of professional sociology which I alluded to earlier. Equally important is the danger he points to – that opposition to public sociology by those self-same scientific purists, who command the ramparts of the elite departments, will confine public sociology to the state universities and colleges, thereby stigmatizing its practitioners as second class citizens. Public sociology will be labeled second-rate sociology. Again I don't think it has to be that way. Indeed, I don't think it is that way. After all even the prestigious Ivy-League Universities are not private research institutes. Even the private university is still a public institution, it is still very much in the business of teaching, and students are still drawn to sociology on the basis of its public role. Sociology departments, elite or not, still have to justify themselves to the next generation by public engagement. I say "still" advisedly, since the crisis of higher education could strip the university of its public role if its professoriate keels over in the face of state regulation and market forces. But this is another reason for not dismissing the university as a political arena but instead making it a terrain of struggle.

While we bemoan the limitations of the university, others are burning the candle from the other end, immersing themselves in struggles for social justice beyond the university. This is the strategy advocated by Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott, represented by Project South. Engaging what they see as the rising tide of popular movements is important in its own right, but they hope that the tide will also flood back into the academy as it did in the 1970s, opening more spaces for public sociologies. I'd like to hear more concrete analysis of the successes and failure, limits and obstacles of the political engagements of Project South, how sociology may be of relevance to popular movements and how sociology may itself change as a result. We desperately need case studies of public sociology and in this regard Project South could become an important laboratory of organic public sociology.

For a Critical Public Sociology: Reaching Beyond the Contradictions

Public sociology is situated on the line of fault between professional sociology and its various publics. It lies in a contradictory position between on the one side professional sociology with its interest in the monopoly of abstract and inaccessible knowledge, evaluated by peers on the basis of its scientific standing and on the other side publics with their interest in concrete, accessible knowledge, evaluated by lay persons in terms of their relevance for public issues.

The contradiction can be resolved in different ways. One way is to absorb the public into the professional. Thus, *Contexts* magazine, seeks to make sociology accessible to wider audiences. It is not pop sociology, which would trivialize sociology, but the popularization of sociology. However, *Contexts*, so far at any rate, has made no attempt to engage in a dialogue with publics. It is, therefore, not public sociology but the public face of professional sociology.

The contradiction between professional-disciplinary interests and publics can also be managed by a severing from the other side. That is, publics might develop their own professional extensions in the form of sociological think tanks, beholden to their sponsors and cut off from academic sociology, or borrowing from academic sociology when convenient. However, the United States is no Brazil with its plethora of independent research centers, oriented to the grassroots, so it's not clear how practical such a solution might be. Moreover, such sociological extensions within the public sphere are easily captured, and so cut off the intellectual autonomy that would allow that genuine dialogue definitive of public sociology. Just like the academic severing of publics, the public severing of the academy destroys the foundations of public sociology.

The only way to sustain a flourishing public sociology is by subsuming both professional sociology and its publics under a higher interest – a higher interest that is revealed when we situate both sides of the antagonism in their determining environment. Thus, professional sociology is embedded in a field of disciplines within the university just as publics are connected to one another in a structured public sphere. Extending further we see that both university and public sphere are subject to the colonizing pressures of states and markets and it is at this level that the contradictions between publics and professions sublimate into a potentially common front. Public sociology should construct, express and organize that potential unity within civil society, an opposition unified against ever-encroaching state regulation and market tyranny. Moreover, that higher interest can be forged at local, regional, national or global levels.

It can be over toxic waste, public education, participatory budgets in Porto Alegre, the organizational culture of NASA, low paid service work on campus, international labor solidarity, or monitoring sweatshops.

In this assimilation of the contradiction to a higher interest, *critical sociology* has a crucial role to play, but it is a role that is Janus faced. On the one hand, critical sociology is turned toward professional sociology making it aware of its provincialism and the conditions confining it. These conditions include not only the limits of professionalization, that we are, as Alvin Gouldner once said, on our own side too, but also the denigration of the university's public role – corporatization of research, the commodification of undergraduate admissions, the turning to profit making from distance learning – and more broadly the place of the university in the global knowledge industry. We should be vigilant in maintaining a space for public sociology by repelling attacks on the liberal university, even as we recognize the limits of the latter.

On the other hand, critical sociology has its face turned toward public sociology itself, pushing it toward publics, encouraging the search for potential and actual counter-hegemonic publics, forging relations with social movements but not forgetting other publics that are less active, less organized, less articulate. In short, critical sociology is indispensable in forging public sociologies that rise above the immediate, local, parochial interests nurtured within the academy, that rise above the antagonism between the academy and its publics. A critical sociology, therefore, must inspire public sociology to connect the “good sense” of professional sociology to the “good sense” of publics.