

# The Good News and the Bad News

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There is much that is attractive about Michael Burawoy's examination of the critical turn to a public sociology. I find plausible his account of the academic nature of 1970s radical sociology especially that mobilized notions such as Althusser's "theoretical practice." I also was cheered to read the account of the positive developments currently in train in the USA and especially with how social movements have got inside American sociology and are changing it from within. And I was with his advocacy of sociology developing new forms of engaging with and responding to multiple publics and modes of participation, to bring the public *and* sociology into intimate juxtaposition.

But from the other side of the pond Burawoy's argument seems at the same time rather strange. The paper is unambiguously written from *within* American sociology (as a footnote acknowledges). Sociologists from nowhere else could treat their sociology as nationally bounded and unrelated to global processes that in all other fields are transforming the social world (as brilliantly revealed in Burawoy's *Global Ethnography*). This means first that the stories of other sociologies are necessarily different from that of the USA, but second that much about the story of any sociology cannot be understood without situating it within wider globalizing processes that sociology everywhere struggles to engage with. And indeed of course part of contemporary globalisation is the power of the "American empire" and its domination of many fields including the social sciences. This American domination of sociology is achieved through exclusionary mechanisms, funding regimes, hierarchical publishing arrangements, and huge resources that swamp the sociologies, public or otherwise, of any other society. American sociology thus deploys an array of McDonald-ising

processes that render much of the rest of the world as subjects of the empire including even its sociology. This “small” absence is not noted in Burawoy’s paper.

One interesting way in which American sociology has been different is that it is so disciplined, so full of closure mechanisms against outsiders. It is a self-regulating and expanding system that has taken its object, American society, for granted. And because of its dominance and disciplining power it has been able to produce a general sociology that presumed American society to be the “natural” home for its analyses. This is most clearly shown in the case of Talcott Parsons whose theories of society take post-war American society as its case-study from which to generalise to all other societies (a “general theory of action”), even though post-war USA is probably less like any other society certainly in its astonishing degree of relative autonomy.

One way in which sociology outside the USA developed has been to produce analyses of its own society and its global situatedness through a “great escape”, through seeking to break free of American models of society and its autonomy. Hence critical sociology in Europe in the 1970s was all about developing schools of non-American sociology especially through a recovery of scholarship and theorising that was not at all so disciplined and bounded. This was true of critical theory, Marxism, certain feminisms, and later of post-structuralism, the cultural turn, post-modernism, theories of risk society and so on. These writings were inflected by politics and the cultural expressiveness of the time and hence were less resolutely academic than Burawoy describes in the case of the USA. Indeed sociology in Europe was always much more intertwined with politics, with the interests of various social movements that swept into the social sciences and left little standing in their wake. And of course the roots of European sociology had been the conflicts of social class, of capital and wage-labour during the development and heyday of “organized capitalism.”

And from the 1970s a huge array of social movements entered into and substantially took over sociology in many other countries, partly because they were far less disciplined and policed than was American sociology. Indeed much of the strength of European debates in the 1970s and 1980s stemmed from an unstable environment that fed new energies into sociology, albeit in complex and unexpected ways. Elsewhere I described sociology in Britain as something of a “parasite,” collecting and feeding off developments elsewhere including the “social” modes of analysis that were being extruded from neighbouring social sciences. The American model of the time, of a bounded and policed autonomous dis-

cipline was rarely seen elsewhere, except where it was self-consciously mimicked in US client states such as Taiwan.

Burawoy nicely documents the crises engendered within American sociology as these trends of invasion, politics, parasitism, then took root in the USA in the later 1980s and 1990s. The result he says has been democratic decentralization, minority group representation, deepening participation and alternative sociologies in the heartlands of American sociology. As a result he provocatively argues that the “world lags behind sociology” and that the world needs to catch up!

This though seems far too simple since much more significant than the progressive organisation of the ASA and so on is the way that modes of sociological thinking have become increasingly ingrained within public life (partly because of the large number of social science graduates). Except maybe amongst the neo-conservatives in the White House[!] there is a widespread sociological way of thinking present in much debate about the nature of computing, science, politics, gender, the environment, the economy, ethnicity and so on. These categories are already partly sociological and involve a strong sense that human life is socially patterned. This is especially marked within the European Union, many of whose policies are based upon challenging “social exclusion.” Social justice as a core value is seen as needing development through politics and policies to enhance *social* inclusion.

So in a way the world is *already* sociological in a broad sense. But as a result the world may not know that it needs sociology as such since these modes of thinking are present in very many spheres, many of which are better funded and more centred than even the ASA and American sociology. This is true of the state, of many private corporations and even of many NGOs within civil society. They are already sociological in a broad sense – there is a public sociology although it may travel under various names. And it may not need or indeed think it needs the organisations of sociology per se.

And if we are seeking to link sociology with civil society then the most striking characteristic is the internationalisation of the latter, as many scholars have documented. So in this way too Burawoy *cannot* discuss civil society without recognising that it is internationalizing and that much of its significance is in speaking for and through symbols and modes of address that are always in part go beyond national boundaries. Many such NGOs, including of course the anti-globalisation movement itself, speak for and represent the globe as a whole (as in the impressive anti-globalisation manifesto *We Are Everywhere* based on complexity analyses). There may be something we can denote as American civil society but

in no other country would this be possible. The societies outside the American empire are forming civil society relationships that simply are international, and they deploy the terms and notions of the sociology of the global (what I call *Global Complexity*).

So when Burawoy advocates “fostering public sociologies to bolster the organs of civil society,” these public sociologies are both already formed and working away even if they travel under different names and that the organs of civil society stretch out in complex networks of relationships travelling across societal borders in strikingly uneven and far flung patterns. But when Burawoy’s paper ends with a vision of socialism that places “human society” at its centre then this too seems to harken back to the golden age of American sociology, of that post-war period when all was right with the world outside the Soviet empire since the USA had achieved remarkable levels of social or human autonomy vis-à-vis its environment. Yet such a conceit of the human is unsustainable. Humans cannot now simply be at the centre since in a post-human environment we need not just a parliament of people but also of things, as Bruno Latour argues. Especially significant are analyses of those hybrid entities that roam the world that pick up and throw away peoples and places as they move through, in and under societies. In *Global Complexity* I examine a range of such global hybrids, the Internet, global disease, automobility, global terrorism, brands and so on, and how they exhibit complex, adaptive and co-evolving properties.

So the good news is that there is a great deal of sociology present within all sorts of organisations and that an advocacy of a public sociology is progressive; the bad news is that the entities that we now have to grapple in order to analyse global inequalities are hugely complex hybrids with awesome power and effects that cannot be shoehorned into even the boundaries of the American empire, let alone the categories of American sociology. Global processes have both brought sociology more centre-stage in contemporary debates and help to render a stronger public sociology; and yet they also have massively raised the difficulty of doing analysis that will have significant purchase on unutterably intractable and complex interdependent processes.

And surely Marx himself was well aware of much of this; for him there are forces as well as social relations of production, that such forces and relations “smash down Chinese walls,” and that socialism is never simply a matter of human characteristics or to be attainable within a single society.