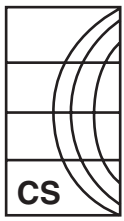

What is to be Done?

Theses on the Degradation of Social Existence in a Globalizing World

Michael Burawoy
University of California at Berkeley

abstract: This article asks three questions. How does the sociologist understand the common sense of subaltern groups, whether subjugated on the basis of gender, class, race, ethnicity or nationality? What could be the political practice of the sociologist with regard to such groups? Finally, through what form of public discourse can sociology articulate the interests of subaltern groups? These broad questions have general answers, even if their specifics are shaped by national and local contexts. The argument is organized into eight theses relating to third-wave marketization, the special role of sociology, the rationale for public sociology, traditional vs organic public sociology, common sense in nature's commodification, political practice on a global scale, the public discourse of human rights and the end of the ivory tower.

keywords: commodification ✦ human rights ✦ organic intellectuals ✦ political practice ✦ public sociology ✦ social degradation ✦ subaltern groups

Introduction

Rather than speak of the 'quality' of social existence in a globalizing world – the theme for the 2006 ISA World Congress – I reflect here on its 'degradation'. I ask how such degradation affects common sense, political practice and public discourse – the themes set by President Sztompka for the last session of the Congress.

Whether by design or accident, these three themes are at the heart of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's famous and now calumniated treatise, *What is to be Done?* Lenin, you recall, viewed the working class as unable to achieve more

Current Sociology ✦ May 2008 ✦ Vol. 56(3): 351–359

SAGE (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore)
DOI: 10.1177/0011392107088228

than a 'trade union consciousness', and that a disciplined 'vanguard political party' would be required to bring 'revolutionary truth' to the Russian proletariat. Here, in a nutshell, is Lenin's analysis of common sense (trade union consciousness), political practice (the vanguard party) and public discourse (intellectuals bringing their 'truths' to workers)! One should remember, however, that Lenin's diagnosis was colored not just by Marxism but also by the political and social context in which he wrote – a diminutive but militant working class, recently torn from and engulfed by a sea of peasantry. It was a working class that was forged under an absolutist state, itself competing with European states built on far more advanced capitalist economies. The public sphere of Czarist Russia was restricted and under surveillance, threaded through by repressive state power. It was as precarious as the foundations upon which it was built, a civil society, as Antonio Gramsci once said, that was gelatinous and primordial.

In the changed circumstances of today, we must ask again, *What is to be Done?* Instead of focusing on Marxism, I dwell on sociology and ask three questions. How does the sociologist understand the common sense of subaltern groups, whether subjugated on the basis of gender, class, race, ethnicity or nationality? What could be the political practice of the sociologist with regard to such groups? Finally, through what form of public discourse can sociology articulate the interests of subaltern groups? These broad questions have general answers, even if their specifics are shaped by national and local contexts. I have organized my argument into eight theses.

I. Third-Wave Marketization

Lenin's understanding of common sense, political practice and public discourse reflected not only the political conditions of Czarist Russia but also a particular phase of capitalist development, caught between first- and second-wave marketization. He correctly envisaged the protectionist reaction of states – imperialism of monopoly and finance capital – which allowed capitalism to survive the crises of first-wave 19th-century marketization. Still, he erred, like Marx before him, in underestimating the durability and flexibility of capitalism. If Marx was wrong to think that first-wave marketization would bring about the demise of capitalism, then Lenin was equally mistaken in thinking second-wave marketization would usher in the new socialist order. Indeed, we are in the midst of a third wave of marketization, which was inaugurated by the economic crises of the mid-1970s.

Third-wave marketization leaves its imprint everywhere. We can begin in South Africa, where the end of Apartheid has brought informalization of the economy, the retreat of trade unions, the privatization of basic

resources (water, electricity, security and telecommunications) and the rise of a new multiracial national bourgeoisie. In part, South Africa's plight stems from its insertion into a world market that is destroying home-grown industry, such as the textile and footwear industries in and around Durban itself. It faces competition from Chinese capitalism that has built its own apartheid on the backs of cheap, desperate outlawed migrant labor from rural areas, whose super-exploitation is secured by the party-state. Chinese state capitalism has brought unprecedented poverty and class polarization, and not just in China, fueling consumerism and undermining industrial working classes across the globe.

Turning to a very different market transition, Russia's postsocialist economic decline has been as phenomenal as China's economic accumulation. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought economic involution rather than the anticipated revolution or evolution. Rather than use the party-state to nurture capitalism, all efforts were directed at destroying the party-state, hoping that markets would spontaneously spring from the socialist rubble; but instead, the first 10 years witnessed what we might call primitive disaccumulation. Studying falling life expectancy, demographers tell us that as many Russians have died from capitalism as from the atrocities of Stalinist collectivization. Traversing the world to advanced capitalism, we find that organized capitalism – the levees thrown up against second-wave marketization – is everywhere in retreat. Nowhere more so than in the US, whose cocktail of militarism and markets substitutes homeland (in)security for social security, bringing terrorism abroad and misery to ever greater numbers at home.

Samuel Huntington was right, we are living through a third wave of democracy, but this liberal democracy, while displacing the blatant despotisms of colonialism and communism, hides its collusion with and promotion of a third-wave marketization that is destroying human society across the planet. So what is to be done?

II. The Special Role of Sociology

Where do sociologists stand in relation to third-wave marketization? The configuration of the field of the social sciences mirrors the world beyond. Economics and political science have provided ideologies that justify third-wave marketization. The power of economics lies in its constitution of its own object – the market economy – about which it has a monopoly of knowledge. The value underpinning orthodox economic science is the expansion of the market, the commodification of everything just as the value underpinning political science is the stability of the political order and the strengthening of the state. Third-wave marketization is marked by the collusion of the two, of states and markets, reflected in the strange

ascendancy of economic models within political science. Sociology, too, is not impervious to the invasion of economics but so far utilitarian models of rational choice have failed to gain ground. This is not surprising since sociologists, at core, take the standpoint not of the economy nor of the state but of civil society. They explore and defend the strength of the social.

Of course, there are economists, indeed some of the most distinguished, who fear the market and political scientists who want to curtail the power of the state – they are the oppositional elements found in any discipline. Still, they only exist by virtue of the dominant trend in the opposite direction. Sociology is no less a field of power, where witting and unwitting proponents of the marketization or statization of society can find a place for their ideas; nonetheless the dominant perspective valorizes the social. Yet valorizing a relatively autonomous civil society is not unambiguous, it can mean the march of Christian fundamentalism or the development of terrorist cells as much as the development of trade unions and neighborhood associations. Civil society is marred by its own exclusions, subjugations, discriminations and exploitations. For all its problems, however, and there are many, civil society is still the best possible terrain for limiting colonization by state and market. From the history of fascism and communism, we know that sociology lives and dies with civil society, and so sociologists become the guardians of humanity, defending society against the tyranny of markets and the terrorism of states.

III. Why Public Sociology?

In the face of third-wave marketization, how should sociologists defend their interest in society as the interest of all? They have four alternatives. They can become *policy sociologists*, hoping to reign in markets through the intervention of the state; but in most places they would be deluding themselves as states have cast their lot with markets. It is true that the state is a contradictory entity, more here and less there, but overall the contradictions are narrowing. Thus, to be a policy sociologist increasingly means serving the market. Recognizing this, sociologists may bury their heads in the sand, retreat into the university and conscientiously further their science. *Professional sociologists* fear that any intervention beyond the academy against the prevailing powers will only bring us disrepute and threaten our fragile legitimacy. We are not equipped to intervene in society – we've only had 100 years to develop our science. Better to remain neutral and untainted by the struggle for civil society and just hope that this wave of marketization, like the previous ones, will wash over our heads. *Critical sociologists* recoil in horror at this stance. They target their firearms at the very possibility of scientific neutrality, revealing the domain assumptions, unstated value commitments of

professional sociology, recalling sociology's lost morality. Still they wail within the walls of the academy, incomprehensible to those beyond. To contest third-wave marketization, we need to step beyond our internal dialogues and debates, and turn outwards, not as servants of power but as *public sociologists*, interlocutors with diverse publics – publics that are being engulfed by third-wave marketization. Easier said than done. How can sociologists make common cause with publics and still retain their integrity?

IV. Traditional vs Organic Public Sociology

There are two types of public sociologist: *traditional* and *organic*. The traditional public sociologist *addresses* broad and anonymous publics that are thin (in terms of their members' interactions), invisible (in that the members cannot be identified), passive (in that they absorb messages as isolated individuals rather than forging a collective will) and mainstream (in that they hold values of the lowest common denominator). By contrast, the organic public sociologist directly *engages* publics that are narrower, local, visible, thick, active and often counter to the mainstream.

The traditional public sociologist believes that publics do not and even cannot understand the conditions of their own subjugation. According to them false consciousness is deeply inscribed in a bodily habitus. Common sense is bad sense and, therefore, intellectuals must monopolize knowledge. They must forge their own international, their own corporate universal. They remain aloof, speaking from the tribune, pursuing the good of all, uncorrupted by the bad sense of the people. There is a long tradition of the philosopher king. The organic public sociologist, on the other hand, believes that subjugated populations do have insight into their subjugation. Their common sense may be corrupted by dominant ideologies, but it retains a kernel of good sense that organic intellectuals elaborate through public dialogue. Between organic public sociologist and their publics, communication aims to be two-way and reciprocal. Traditional public sociologists consider this dangerous, because reciprocity conceals the manipulation of publics, on the one side, and leads to the corruption of science, on the other. Dogmatism and fadishism are indeed ever-present dangers in the pursuit of reciprocity. For their part, organic public sociologists regard the traditional public sociology as, at best, ineffectual, and at worst legitimating of and thus contributing to the subjugation of subaltern publics.

Which type of public sociologist is most relevant in a world ravaged by third-wave marketization? What is 'the common sense' – good or bad – that is produced by third-wave marketization? What are the political practice and public discourse to combat third-wave marketization?

V. Common Sense in Nature's Commodification

If the first wave of marketization is marked by the commodification of *labor* and reached its zenith in the middle of the 19th century, and if the second wave of marketization is marked by the commodification of *money*, and reached its zenith in the 1930s, then the third wave of marketization begins with the crisis of capitalism in the 1970s. It coincides with the dissolution of colonialism, the decline of the social democratic state, and accelerates with the collapse of communism. We are in its grip at the moment and we do not know when it will reach its zenith. Its distinctive trait is the commodification of *nature* (land, environment and body), although the commodification of labor and money also reasserts itself.

Commodifying labor entails expropriation of access to the means of subsistence, and so brings with it a strong subaltern understanding of the social forces at work. We see this in the ascendant labor movements of the 19th century. Here there is a place for organic intellectuals, sociologists in close connection to the working class. On the other hand, commodifying money in the second wave of marketization operates at a more remote level, difficult for subaltern publics to grasp as part of their lived experience. Commodification of money speaks to the capitalist class, which calls on the state to protect it from the volatility of exchange rates. Here capitalism requires the state to regulate markets, and thus there is a bigger role for policy social science (especially economics but also sociology) and for traditional public sociology that offers alternatives to the economist's vision of society.

Third-wave marketization involves expropriations or accumulation through dispossession, commodifying nature – land, natural resources, environment and body – and makes itself transparent to its victims. We see this in the indigenous peoples' movements in Bolivia and Mexico, in the Brazilian land occupations by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), in the struggles over dams and urban real estate dispossession in China, in the movements against water and electricity privatization in South Africa and the spread of the green movement across the planet. The lived experience of third-wave marketization, like first-wave marketization, favors an organic public sociology but what does the latter contribute to the subaltern?

VI. Political Practice on a Global Scale

The response to the commodification of labor in first-wave marketization was local. Communities arose to protect wage laborers from the satanic mills. Karl Polanyi describes the cooperatives, trade unions, factory movement and self-help organizations that sprung up spontaneously in defense

of society against the market. The response to the next round of marketization – the commodification of money – was national, first in the creation of national banks to regulate currencies, and then in the more extreme political reactions to the gold standard of second-wave marketization that swept the world in the 1920s. The rise of fascism, Stalinism as well as social democracy and the New Deal were diverse national responses to protect economies from second-wave marketization. Such were the horrors prompted by the reaction to second-wave marketization that Polanyi could not imagine a third round of marketization, and instead hoped for a socialism that would subordinate market and state to self-organized society.

A third wave has arrived that threatens to destroy the planet with the commodification of nature. The commodification of land and the environment is not new but third-wave marketization brings it to a head, affecting not just local communities or national societies but increasingly threatening the world. Third-wave marketization tears down the ramparts erected to protect society against the previous wave of marketization, while spreading the effects of ecological disasters. The responses to third-wave marketization cannot be confined to local or national arenas but have to assume a global scale. While third-wave marketization is experienced locally and gives rise to local reactions, its origins are global. So how can one scale up the response to the global? Here organic public sociologists find their niche as interpreters, communicators and intermediaries, tying together local movements across national boundaries. Their task is a war of position in which local movements find common cause in such venues as the World Social Forum or in confrontations with such multilateral organizations as the World Trade Organization. This knitting together calls for the development of universal discourse often cultivated by traditional public sociologists, more removed from the day-to-day struggles but no less important for that.

As with national civil society, so too global civil society is a contested terrain. As likely as not it is the means through which third-wave marketization secures its hegemony. The WTO, IMF, World Bank and United Nations set the terms of transnational civil society, providing the resources for which its organizations compete; but such hegemony is never monolithic, providing the space for contesting as well as endorsing the destructiveness of markets and the tyrannies of states. On rare occasions, global civil society can even provide the space for an alternative hegemony, a counter-hegemony that offers altogether different principles of economic organization, principles that challenge the market.

VII. The Public Discourse of Human Rights

What discourse might unite the struggles to defend planetary society against third-wave marketization, that is the collusion of states, international

agencies and corporate capital? The reaction to first-wave marketization was the defense of *labor rights*, which would be incorporated into state legislation as rights of union representation, and the regulation of industrial relations, working conditions and hours of employment. Second-wave marketization swept labor rights aside, only to subsequently stimulate a deeper reaction that went beyond labor rights to the protection of social rights. *Social rights* went along with state regulation of markets, defending people out of employment as well as in employment – rights to unemployment compensation, to pensions, to schooling, to health care as well as the reassertion of the rights of labor.

Third-wave marketization, marked by the commodification of nature as well as money and labor, has dismantled the social and labor rights won against second-wave marketization. We have already said that the defense of society against third-wave marketization will have to be scaled up to the global level, but it must also universalize its reactive discourse: it will have to embrace a discourse of *human rights*, which includes the restoration of labor and social rights. Human rights demand that humans treat each other as ends rather than means, that they potentially form a community of self-realization through symmetrical reciprocity and mutual recognition. It entails rights to dignified labor and rights to material comfort. Each wave of capitalist marketization destroys gains made in reaction to the previous wave before radicalizing the vision of what is necessary to reverse commodification.

The discourse of human rights has, of course, been appropriated and mobilized by states, capital and supranational entities to defend the expansion of markets and electoral democracy under the rubric of the individual's freedom of choice – choice of goods, jobs, electoral candidates, etc. The human rights I am defending is not the celebration of spurious choices, but concerns the forging of community that promotes human flourishing. The hegemonic notion of human rights masquerades as freedom while promoting third-wave marketization. The counter-hegemonic notion of human rights is an ideology that cements the struggles of organizations creating community against marketization. Hegemonic human rights has justified new colonizing projects, particularly those of the US, and so counter-hegemonic human rights attacks those projects as violations of human rights, whether those violations take place on US soil or on the soils it invades. Human rights is a terrain of ideological struggle, just as labor rights and social rights were for previous waves of marketization.

VIII. The End of the Ivory Tower

A century ago, the commodification of labor in Russia brought trade union consciousness that called for the intervention of the political party under

conditions of limited public discourse. Today, third-wave marketization has rolled back protection against the commodification of labor and money while destroying nature, the very source of human existence. Third-wave marketization calls for a new political practice that joins disparate and desperate local defenses in the creation of a global civil society, cemented in the struggle for human rights in the quite specific contexts of their violation. Public sociology, both organic and traditional, has a central role to play in this political project.

If Lenin faced a public sphere restricted by a dictatorial regime, third-wave marketization throws up very different obstacles to public dialogue. Most obviously, public sociology faces the commodification of communication, especially of the media not just in terms of who runs them but also in terms of their mode and structure of transmission. Third-wave marketization is hostile to the message of sociology, the standpoint of society. It is hostile to the defense of a public dialogue erected on the basis of a robust civil society. We cannot rely on others – we have to take up the task ourselves, developing unmediated relations to publics.

Even deeper, third-wave marketization invades the hidden abode of knowledge production, the university. The ivory tower – academic freedom and university autonomy – may have been a defense against second-wave marketization, but today its ramparts are falling to corporatization, privatization and profit considerations. From a public good, it becomes an economic good. We can no longer build a moat around the university, but instead we must venture out of the ivory tower, and join forces with other publics that face the tsunami.

Note

This article was originally presented in a debate on 'Sociology in Common Sense, Political Practice, and Public Discourse', at the Congress of the International Sociological Association held in Durban, South Africa, 29 July 2006.

Biographical Note: Michael Burawoy teaches sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He was an ethnographer of industrial work in different countries, and now he is aspiring to be an ethnographer of sociology.

Address: Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. [email: burawoy@berkeley.edu]