



# Some Considerations after Reading Michael Burawoy's Article: 'What is to be Done? Theses on the Degradation of Social Existence in a Globalizing World'

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**abstract:** We are returning to the question: should researchers participate in public life and, if so, how? This question does not refer solely to the utility of the social sciences and their possibly emancipatory role but also raises the issue of how sociological knowledge is produced, tested and demonstrated. We need to consider the status of this knowledge and the conditions under which we may speak of 'science'. How researchers in social sciences conceive of their relationship with the public and the actors is linked with the way in which we validate our assertions as science. We cannot separate our conceptions of our relation to the public sphere and the theoretical and methodological conceptions of research that provide the basis of our scientific ability to provide rigorous proofs.

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## Introduction

The world is changing and the social sciences are being transformed. The paradigms, the approaches and the major orientations are evolving. Sometimes this takes place on the basis of traditional formulations that are losing momentum at this point, or on the contrary, are being reorganized and to some extent modified, sometimes breaking with the past in a more distinctly innovative fashion. As a result, a discussion that occurs periodically in the social sciences has opened up once again: should researchers participate in public life and, if so, how? Contrary to a highly simplified

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view, this question does not refer uniquely to questions concerning the utility of these disciplines and their possibly emancipatory role – the theme that is central to Michael Burawoy's text to which we are replying here. It also raises the issue, but not always explicitly, of the way in which sociological knowledge is produced and, further still, the way in which it is tested and demonstrated. It also forces us to consider the actual status of this knowledge and, more specifically, the proof that enables us to validate it and to speak of 'science'. The way in which we, researchers in social sciences, conceive of our relationship with the public and the actors is constantly directly linked with the way in which we intend to provide the validation of our assertions that have scientific value. We cannot make a distinction between our conceptions of our relation to the public sphere and those that found our theoretical and methodological conceptions of research and are the basis of our scientific ability to provide rigorous proofs.

### Types of Researcher

Some researchers claim to adhere to a strictly professional definition of themselves. Their strict intention is to belong to a relatively closed world within which they train their students and exchange views with their colleagues. They publish in specialized journals, participate in colloquia and congresses where they are among colleagues and are not concerned with intervening further in the public sphere, at least as researchers; nothing prevents them from doing so as, for example, citizens, members of an association, an NGO or a political party. Antonio Gramsci long since challenged this type of exteriority or apparent neutrality of intellectuals, suggesting that these in reality concealed an 'organic' role in the service of the reproduction of order or domination. But, when applied to the social sciences, Gramsci-type arguments are themselves subject to criticism. They cast an element of doubt on the activity of 'professional' researchers; they tend to reduce their contribution to the production and distribution of knowledge to the image of an ideological practice and challenge their scientific rigour, which is said to be an illusion. Ultimately, a conception that is based strictly on Gramsci can only consider 'professional' sociologists to be 'watch dogs'; the only thing to do is to excommunicate them in the name of the excluded and the dominated and cast them beyond the pale of intellectual respectability. For this reason, Michael Burawoy, while drawing his inspiration massively from the major Italian Marxist, wishes to avoid a head-on confrontation with 'professional' sociology and even renders homage to it. He considers it provides the methods and conceptual frameworks for the 'public' sociology that he is promoting; it provides 'legitimacy and expertise' (Burawoy, 2005). In short, 'professional sociology is not the enemy' of *public sociology*.

On the contrary, other researchers have every intention of participating in the life of the City; they wish to exchange views with interlocutors other than their colleagues alone, express themselves in the media as researchers and be in contact with other social, political and cultural actors. They in fact fall within several different rationales of intervention and are, in some respects, the heirs to traditions that have to some extent been transformed. The most outstanding examples here are two specific key figures. The first is that of the hypercritical intellectual. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Marxism in its various forms dominated research in the social sciences and when structuralism (sometimes, but not necessarily, with a veneer of Marxism) had a powerful influence, many researchers, in one way or another, combined political involvement and a research activity, convinced that in this way they were contributing to changing the world and building a better one. Then the real-world communism disintegrated in the downfall of the Soviet Union while, at the same time, the idea of the historical, liberating role of the working class lost all credibility. Having lost its utopias, its models and its reference to a redeeming working class, Marxism in the social sciences went under, except in a few select areas, in particular in some well-endowed North American and British universities, after the ultimate attempts in the 1970s to give it a new start based on the reference to Gramsci. Founder of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci was a major thinker, subtle and open, the discovery or rediscovery of whom accompanied the last attempts at *aggiornamento* of the communist and neo-communist intelligentsia, particularly in Europe. Furthermore, structuralism also declined, incapable of continuing to assert the death of the Subject or of pursuing it. Those aspects of Marxism and structuralism that survived, possibly combined, took on the appearance of hypercritical positions, pushing rationales of doubt and denunciation to the extreme; the work of Pierre Bourdieu was the last major expression of these. As a result, the involvement of those who adhered to this type of position took on the appearance of a new form of leftism, firmly established in positions of refusal or rejection, incapable of projecting themselves into the future.

The second key figure is particularly interesting and is that of the expert. As from the 1970s, the social sciences witnessed a rise in their numbers in the countries where they were already well established but also in many other societies, in particular in Asia and in Latin America. Researchers were increasingly mobilized for their competence and their know-how by political actors in power or in the opposition, by social and cultural actors who called on their expertise and also by the media, who sought their perspective on various specific aspects of current events. This contribution of researchers to the life of the City is not the monopoly of economists or political scientists, it also extends to sociologists, without

them always or necessarily becoming what Burawoy calls *policy sociologists*, for all that. This is not directly or automatically a political involvement; for the researcher, it consists in making learning and knowledge available to an authority or a counter-authority of which he or she is not a part. The expert contributes his or her perspective as such, nothing more. This is why, in some cases, expertise may lead to an advisory activity – in which case the researcher becomes a consultant who is paid.

The media may prove to be partial to these two types of researcher. The hypercritical stance, given its absolute nature, contributes radical and spectacular points of view, which the press likes much more than moderate opinions or careful explanations that attract much less public interest. The expertise provides a precise and documented perspective, a legitimate form of knowledge because it is 'scientific', and in appearance technical and neutral, which the editorial teams are not always capable of offering themselves.

There are obviously other figures of the involvement of the social science researcher in the life of the City: critical without being hypercritical, competent and rigorous without being confined to expertise, anxious to intervene in public debate, to contribute to constructing it without being cut off from the world of 'professional' academic activities. In my opinion, Michael Burawoy's *public sociology* claims to win back or occupy this space. But it would still have to make a distinct break with hypercritical stances instead of flirting with them. It has to differentiate itself from the expertise and not confine itself to reintroducing, in a new guise, an impoverished Marxism, despite its explicit or implicit references to Gramsci – impoverished because it is to all extents and purposes deprived of what was its strength in the past: communism as a utopia, with Leninism or Luxemburgism as a mode of action and the existence of powerful working-class movements.

It is also necessary to give more weight than Burawoy does to the idea of internal differences within this space of *public sociology*. Michael Burawoy will readily admit, I think, to the fact that in some cases the participation of the researcher in the life of the City is rooted in a single country, while in others it is more 'global' and part of transnational perspectives. He will also recognize that it also varies according to country. For example, in the US it is relatively rare for a sociologist to intervene in the major dailies or magazines, whereas in France it is an everyday occurrence. For two years, I myself personally created and directed a major monthly publication of ideas, *Le Monde des Débats*, which sold up to several tens of thousands of copies per month and which gave a platform to sociologists and other researchers in social sciences on a wide scale.

But while the image of involvement may be varied, this is not uniquely due to these types of difference, nor is it restricted to the two possibilities

that are advanced: that of a 'traditional' *public sociology* as opposed to another, described as 'organic'.

### **Demonstrating**

In Michael Burawoy's opinion, the researcher must prioritize the defence of society and its actors against states and markets; he or she must 'join forces with other publics'. The 'traditional public sociologist', whose books and articles target a large 'invisible' public and one with which he or she has almost no interaction, is distinct from the 'organic public sociologist', who is in close relation with his or her public and who works with trade unions, associations, religious communities, migrant groups, etc. But what exactly is at issue in this interaction of the 'public sociologist' and the public? Several hypotheses can be made here and several possible modalities of interaction can be envisaged. To be absolutely clear, it seems to be useful to group them into two subsets.

### **Discussion with the Public**

'Public' sociologists can indeed assign themselves the task of going out of the university and, on the basis of their position of knowledge, forming a relationship with various types of publics. I set out here three possible modalities among others that undoubtedly belong to the same family.

The first modality is the one I would call 'elitism'. The sociologist, if only because of his or her ease in handling language, concepts and arguments, is in fact going to suggest that the public follows him or her and accepts the cogency of his or her own perspectives, analyses or proposals. He or she behaves like a member of the elite, possibly a member of the avant-garde, endowed with learning (or some form of truth, philosophy or sense of history) that he or she is simply endeavouring to have accepted by presenting him- or herself as in possession of knowledge and reason. I presume that Michael Burawoy wishes to move away from this attitude, particularly if it borders on Leninism. Nevertheless, he refuses to distance himself from Lenin, as is seen at the beginning of his text: the position of Lenin in 'What is to be Done?' (which he invites us to contextualize) may, according to him, be legitimate in certain circumstances, beginning with those in which Lenin wrote this well-known text. I personally have difficulty in believing that there may be historical periods in which one should know how to be Leninist and, in formulating this idea, I am in particular thinking of the Latin America of the dark years of the military dictatorships. It was not the Leninist groups and other revolutionary parties, some of which drifted into terrorism, that enabled a way out of these difficult times, quite the contrary. But those who, like my predecessor at the head of the ISA, Fernando-Henrique Cardoso, fought

indefatigably for democratic ideas and who, countering avant-gardist thinking, prepared the way for the age of democracy.

A second possible modality is the one in which the sociologist endeavours to articulate the knowledge that he or she has produced or accumulated, his or her learning with the questions a public may pose. He or she may, for example, have carried out research on trade unionism or on human rights and come to discuss the findings with the trade unionist or human rights activists, in the first instance with those whom he or she interviewed or encountered during his or her survey. This is what researchers who do fieldwork often refer to as *restitution*. The idea is to go back to those who are concerned by the research and to restore to them the knowledge that they transmitted during the interviews, for example. In fact, this is a phase of the research that deserves to be more frequently and more systematically organized by researchers, each time they study actors or problems that directly concern their actors.

A third modality, distinct from the previous one, is set in the framework of *deliberative democracy*. The sociologist (with other researchers, if need be) has a discussion with a public that is not directly or necessarily involved or concerned about a problem that he himself, or she herself, knows well because he or she has studied it. He or she presents the state of the knowledge available, answers questions, shows where knowledge is sound and where it is less reliable, the cases open to doubt, or ignorance, which ultimately enables each individual to have a better understanding of the problem being discussed. Here the sociologist is an element in a democratic set-up/mechanism that is not part of representative democracy but which, if need be, can complement it.

In these first three models, the sociologist is defined in the main as a person in possession of knowledge that he or she has produced or accumulated elsewhere, by him- or herself. In *elitism*, *restitution* and *deliberative democracy*, the question of proof, that of the demonstration of his or her suggestions, is not really an issue even if people ask him or her where he or she acquired this knowledge. From this point of view, he or she is not fundamentally different from the 'professional' sociologist. The proof, the demonstration, the testing, the guarantees of the scientific nature of their work belong to their professional circle, their peers, the journals that will or will not accept their article, the editors of the university presses that will possibly publish their book, the colleagues who will invite them to a colloquium or a scientific congress, etc. It is not up to the public to intervene at the level of the establishment of the scientific nature or, at least, of the relevance of their remarks.

### **The Demonstration with the Public**

In other conceptions of the relationship between the sociologist and a 'public' what is at issue, very differently, is the relevance precisely of sociological

knowledge that is itself the outcome of processes of co-production. Here, in fact, two approaches deserve to be considered.

The first is often referred to by the term 'action-research'. The sociologist intervenes alongside a public that he or she studies, and the interactions that are at stake at the time of this intervention both produce knowledge and transform the situation and therefore the public involved. The sociologist is also transformed if he or she is willing to admit that one does not end a research in exactly the same state as one began it.

The second important approach is the one that Alain Touraine has named the *sociological intervention*. It consists in creating a relationship between the sociologist and the actor studied, a relationship in which each plays their role – the researcher does not pretend to be an actor nor does the actor present himself or herself as a sociologist. Here, in the last resort, it is a question of the researcher producing a sociological argument that the actor accepts or rejects; this constitutes the test, the demonstration of the research and the relevance of its hypotheses. The more the actors studied do something with a sociological argument, which concerns them, the more they appropriate it as their own, for example to improve their analysis of past struggles, the more the sociologist has the right to consider that his or her analysis makes sense. This type of approach maintains the sociologist, throughout his or her research, in a relationship of production of analysis and knowledge with the group or the actors being studied. It considers that knowledge raises the ability for action of the actors greatly, and also of society on itself. But at no point does the sociologist become a militant or an activist. There is nothing to prevent the sociologist thereafter, which is a totally different thing, from presenting his or her findings in books and articles intended, on one hand, for his or her professional circles and, on the other, for a wider 'traditional' public – to use Burawoy's words.

This brings us back to the different possible conceptions of our role as sociologists. Apparently, what 'professional' sociologists, experts, those who are hypercritical, etc. all share, the foundation that means that they all belong to the same whole, is primarily the fact that they produce knowledge and that they distribute it. Thereafter, in many respects they differ because of their theoretical orientations, their methods or yet again their modes of intervention or not in the life of the City. They can endeavour to intervene in a 'traditional' or an 'organic' manner. But the decisive dividing line between them is, in the last resort, one of an epistemological nature. Some consider that the scientific validation of their work can only come from their professional circle. Others, while not necessarily rejecting this point of view, consider that the best proofs of the validity of a sociological argument involves the testing of what they suggest. From this point of view, it is not a question of expecting a 'public' to content itself



with accepting or rejecting an analysis. The sociologist must implement the mechanisms that will enable to say how, and in what conditions, the analysis in question is acceptable from the point of view of society, or of a public of varying dimensions, to what extent it is meaningful, relevant – useful and usable.

I could have made similar remarks as far as the very choice of an object to be studied is at stake. Let me say it very generally: scientific problems and problems of involvement should therefore not be separated. Our conceptions of the demonstration of the validity of the knowledge we produce are not independent of our conceptions of our relationship to what is known as the public sphere. Indeed, we can assert that the question of the relationship of the researcher to the life of the City is also posed from the outset of the production of sociological knowledge, the choice of the object, the implementation of a theory, the use of a method, the recourse to tests and whenever it is a question of demonstrating the scientific validity of the findings put forward by the research.

### Note

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### Reference

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