



# 'Make Way for Professional Sociology!'

## *Public Sociology in the Russian Context*

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**abstract:** This article presents the context of the current debate on the status of sociology in Russia, maps the controversy between professional and public sociology and locates the public sociology agenda in the context of a fight for professional sociology using the case of sociological education. To test the thesis of sociological internationalism, it is necessary to take into account local contexts, especially three aspects: the political opportunities for the public sociology manifesto; the situation with respect to civil society (as 'a natural location of sociology'); and the level of institutionalization of sociology. All three contexts frame the cultural translation of the public sociology manifesto to the Russian sociological scene.

**keywords:** education ♦ institutionalization ♦ professionalization ♦ Russia ♦ sociology

## Introduction

The question 'What is to be done?' has always to be answered contextually. Sociology is a scholarly exercise *sans frontières* but the situation in national sociological institutions opens different perspectives. Thus the idea of public sociology evokes different responses in different scholarly settings. 'Cultural translation' may give public sociology a meaning that had never been intended by its adherents. Remember how Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach was reflected in Soviet ideology.

In this article, I examine the ongoing discussion about public sociology in the Russian scene. First, I present the context of the current debate about the status of sociology in Russia. Then, I map the controversy between

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professional and public sociology. Finally, I propose my reading of the public sociology agenda in the context of a fight for professional sociology using the case of sociological education.

In his article, Burawoy (this issue, pp. 351–9) has formulated a clear chain of arguments: global threats of third-wave marketization–global civil society–global sociology. This chain, although appealing to my personal and professional view, is in my mind still a utopian and subjective construction of wishful thinking. It unifies entities that are not holistic but split and controversial. In order to test the thesis of sociological internationalism we have to take into account local contexts. More precisely, we have to take into account three aspects of these contexts: the political opportunities for the public sociology manifesto; the situation of civil society (as ‘a natural location of sociology’); and the level of institutionalization of sociology. All three contexts frame the cultural translation of the public sociology manifesto to the Russian sociological scene.

Let us have a look at the political context and public sociology claims. The political influence on the development of sociology and its critical enthusiasm is well known. The public self-consciousness of sociology comes to the fore and fades into the background in a cyclical way. Public enthusiasm by Russian sociologists was obvious in the political thaw of the 1960s and in the late 1980s, during the democratic mobilization and enthusiasm of *perestroika*. It was at this time that sociologists were active in democratization, contributing to the cognitive work of social movements, civic initiatives and political parties. At that time, Russian sociologists became conscious of the intertwining of their professional and civic commitments; they discussed the issues of sociological intervention (Alain Touraine) and action research (Andrej Alekseev) as well as the moral (civic) code of the sociologist (Yadov, Zaslavskaya). The reformist political elite officially rehabilitated sociology at the very end of the 1980s and recognized publicly its role in the democratic reforms of *perestroika*. At this time, public sociology was at the heart of the professionalization project of Russian sociology. In December 1987, the All-Union Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VTSIOM), headed by Yuri Levada, was established by a special decision of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. Other research institutions were established as independent structures, new educational projects in the social sciences were launched, sociological departments in the state universities were established. New research institutions claimed their autonomy from the Academy of Sciences and state universities. Sociologists were offering their services not to the totalitarian party-state but to the reformist politicians, believing that their expertise was needed for social policy decisions or for mirroring (reflecting and informing on) public opinion.

An important aspect of the professional identity of Russian sociologists since the 1960s has been the liberal idea of optimization of state policies. Sociologists saw it as their professional task to help the power elite 'to rule the people' (*narod*).

Later, during the decline of political mobilization in the 1990s, the democratic voluntarism of President Yeltsin's rule, the contradictions of market reforms and huge economic crises had a strong impact on Russian sociology. Due to the financial crisis of scientific institutions, academic sociology made little progress, and any new developments were very much due to the support of international agencies. Market research and political polls became very popular. For lay people, public sociology became identified with mass surveys (opinion polls on political events) or marketing research (helping to buy or to sell certain products). For the public, it is apparent that sociologists provide data that can be used by those who have power. Sociological servility is oriented either to the state or to market agencies. The main purpose of either type of survey is orientation to the clients who order the research.

The sociological community has expressed strong discontent with such a vision. Its ambitions are different. Most sociologists agree that their professional prestige is low, that they are manipulated and thus insecure (e.g. Filippov, 2003; Gudkov, 2006; Ryvkina, 1997). During the 2000s, in the context of President Putin's authoritarian rule over a 'governable democracy', as it is labelled by the Russian officials, sociologists have split. Now the majority is working for either the market or the state, while a minority keeps itself oriented towards civil society and its demands.

Civil society itself is very weak and underdeveloped. It is also diversified. The declared state strategy of social partnership aims at cooperation between state, market and civil society in solving vital social problems (e.g. the Civic Forum of 2000 and the Public Chamber set up in 2005). This strategy could open the window for public sociology as a source of expert knowledge helping to ground certain decisions and national programmes. However, one of the consequences of this state strategy is a selectionist approach of the state towards civic initiatives and attempts to build up civil society from above. The state decides which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) receive support and which become public scapegoats, accused of robbery and national treason.

Michael Burawoy claims that sociologists take the standpoint neither of the economy nor of the state but of civil society. They explore and defend the strength of the social. But if civil society is really weak, then what happens to sociology? Russian researcher Boris Gudkov sees one of the major problems of the development of Russian sociology today as being precisely the weakness of civil society and the degeneration of public space

(Gudkov, 2006). Many would claim that Russia's civil society currently has no need of the theories and concepts of self-reflection. Weak civil society–insecure sociology: this is the chain more relevant to the Russian scene.

Now let us turn to the context of institutionalization. In 1974, Eisenstadt published a conciliatory article about the then ongoing debate on the crisis of sociology. S. Eisenstadt argued that the tension between public engagement and professional autonomy of sociology is embedded in the development of this discipline. He also noted that the configuration of the role conflict in sociology depends upon institutional forces working within the sociological community.

The level of the institutionalization of sociology is crucial for the framing of its public role on the Russian scene. Since the 1990s, researchers have constantly discussed the status and the prospects for Russian sociology in the Russian professional journals and tried to discover 'whom to blame', 'what is to be done' and where to begin the reforms.

Sociology is still rather a new discipline in the Russian academy. Twenty years ago there was sociological research but no sociological departments in the universities. Fifteen years have passed since sociology was included into the curriculum of higher education. In the last 15 years, more than 20,000 sociological diplomas have been defended, most of them in the last seven years. The number of postgraduates in the social sciences has grown fourfold in the last 12 years or so, in political science, sevenfold. There are about 15–20 journals that present themselves as sociological (Gudkov, 2006).

In the 1990s, we observed a rapid transformation of sociological institutions. Researchers indicate changes in the system of cultural production of sociological knowledge. Its structural affiliation and funding schemes changed. De facto, the sociological profession came close to freelancing. The field is split politically, ideologically and intellectually (Pogorelov and Sokolov, 2005). Recently, Russian sociologists have subjected themselves to sociological investigation. I believe that this is a sign of a growing institutionalization, of an increased visibility of certain artefacts recognized as sociological products, of a greater visibility of institutions and so forth. However, this scrutiny reveals the deficits of institutionalization and the effects of fake institutionalization. For instance, the journals exist but the level of debate is not sufficiently deep, there are very few peer-reviewed articles; there are four national sociological associations but their existence is hardly visible to the professional community; and the level of sociological education has been criticized.

There is a general consensus that sociology in Russia as a profession is not sufficiently institutionalized. Russian sociologists are critical of their own competence and professionalism. Their goal is to meet the criteria of professionalism as a means of attaining autonomy. The lack of institutional

autonomy and low density of contacts inside the community, the low level of self-organization, the dependence on the state and markets are all seen as barriers to institutionalization. Sociologists claim that such mechanisms as immanent theoretical and methodological critique are underdeveloped or suppressed, and there is a lack of intra-scientific gratification of the scholarly authority of researchers.

Sociology is recognized neither by the state nor society. There is no demand for sociology in Russian society, although there are a lot of sociological problems. 'Liberation resulted in a society, a power and an economy that wash sociology away' (Ryvkina, 1997). Pessimist observers claim that the 1990s was the period of the professional involution of Russian sociology. They say that the Russian transformation did not in fact promote an increase in the prestige of sociology.

Power has privatized sociology. Now every branch of state power has its own analytical centre and public opinion service. There are a lot of numbers but no analysis. The people in power are not interested in social problems; they are interested in the ratings of political leaders and public support of national programmes. They have privatized various sociological centres and use them as their analytical brains. Figures are important instruments in politicking. (Ryvkina, 1997)

Sociologist Alexander Filippov (2003) has examined the public image of sociology. He and other researchers claim that sociological data are looked upon as information inputs or pretexts for political analysis. 'Sociologists calculated . . .', 'sociological research shows that . . .' – this is how sociology is quoted in media, reflecting a superficial interest in polls that has permeated television and newspapers and this is all that the public thinks of the sociological endeavour.

The self-scrutiny of Russian sociology has revealed several ideological, institutional and paradigmatic divides in sociology that can thus not be looked upon as a unitary academic field. One divide is between those who orient themselves towards international sociological institutions and those who limit their activities to the 'domestic academic market', with its very different criteria. Until recently, there was no conflict between these two sectors – they preferred not to communicate, they organized different sociological associations, they have different paradigmatic preferences (see Pogorelov and Sokolov, 2005).

Another split is the political one. While both sides share the idea of the public role of sociology, they view it in opposite ways. These are real antagonists: we see their conflicts and observe the tensions. Lev Gudkov called the first group the *Chekist*<sup>1</sup> trend in Russian sociology (Gudkov, 2006). This group believes that the public role of sociology is to define the contours of state policies; to construct a national idea that could mobilize

society. This view of sociologists as state ideologists has a Soviet legacy. For example, the academician G. Osipov has argued that in the last 10 years the Russian state has devalORIZED sociology, and this is one of the reasons for the ongoing societal crisis in Russia. 'If scholarly knowledge is not integrated in the system of power relations this means that power holders govern on the basis of social mythologies' (Osipov, 2004: 13). Another example is Professor V. Kuznetsov whose article on the relevant topic was titled 'National Purpose as a Fundamental Sociological Problem' (Kuznetsov, 2005). Both authors have administrative positions, which partly explain their standpoint.

The second, *reformist* group has a different understanding of the public role of sociology. The reformists argue that professional sociological consciousness is inherently critically oriented. They believe that this criticism should be democratically reformist, that sociologists should uncover social problems and thus help to establish social balance and diminish social strains. The founders of Soviet sociology belong to this group – among them we can count Yadov, Zaslavskaya, Levada, Zdravomyslov, Ryvkina and others.

The third divide lies between those who believe that public demand is the core of the sociological profession and those who state that the academic professionalism of sociology should be grounded on political disengagement.

The first position here is presented by Professor Gorshkov, director of the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Trying to justify the status of sociology, he openly raises the banner of public sociology. He argues that 'Public politics is currently giving place to public sociologists . . . public sociology is a driving force for public politics' (Gorshkov, 2006). He claims that public sociologists speak a language that is understandable to lay people, who together constitute civil society. The social significance of sociology is based on trust in research data: 'Russian citizens today reveal a low trust in [political] declarations. They show more trust in sociology because sociologists operate with figures and not with slogans or mythology. Public sociology becomes a mirror in which society looks at itself every day before going to work' (Gorshkov, 2006). Gorshkov identifies sociology with information drawn from concrete figures in opinion polls. His position is that of a traditional public sociologist addressing a 'thin' public easily manipulated by authorities (see Burawoy).

The second position, the idea of professional sociology per se, is clearly formulated by the younger generation of researchers, who distance themselves from the public role of their profession. They argue that sociology is not limited to polls and marketing research. Its purpose is to provide society with knowledge about itself, with theories and concepts that could become resources of reflexivity that persist

and maintain a distance from the empirical data (Filippov, 2003; Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002). They criticize the current ideological character of the profession and want to distance themselves from it as much as possible. Public sociologists, they believe, undermine the professional stance of distancing and taking a 'cool' attitude; public engagement results in a poverty of analysis. One of my colleagues sharing this position even claims that public activism is counterproductive for sociological professionalism (M. Sokolov, pers. comm.). Discussing sociological professionalism, this group refers to Bourdieu's understanding of academic autonomy based on the criteria of self-government and self-censorship, which should not be subordinated to political or market principles (Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002: 547).

Political references as a zone of sociological reflexivity are deconstructed in their analysis. These researchers criticize both the 'Chekists' and the 'reformists' of the previous generation because both share the belief that sociology has a public commitment. This group challenges the common claim that social problems constitute the main justification for sociological autonomy from political and administrative control (Bikbov and Gavrilenko, 2002: 72).

## Discussion

Since the 1960s, the debate on reflexive, critical or public sociology has been periodically revived in the sociological community. It has ebbed and flowed and now, thanks to Burawoy and his colleagues, is again being articulated as part of their intellectual anti-globalism. It was in 1974 that Eisenstadt made his supposedly conciliatory comments on the debate on reflexive or critical sociology, which was quite heated at the time. He claimed that controversies about political involvement or neutrality of sociology are part of the profession. Growing institutionalization reinforces this debate, which focuses, among other things, on the 'possibilities, limits, and problems of a "value-free" sociology' (Eisenstadt, 1974).

The self-perception of the sociological community and its role crisis are related to its sense of internal security (Eisenstadt, 1974). Russian sociology feels insecure – the market devalorizes it, state and politicians manipulate it; sociologists are described as possible spies undermining national security or servile instruments of public policies. In the Russian context, 'public sociology', has been closely associated not only with civic activism but with ideological functions and dependence on the state. The younger generation of sociologists want autonomy to be the yardstick of professionalism.

The debate about the limits of a value-free sociology in the Russian scholarly community is peripheral. Some feminists and neo-Marxists share the belief that the researcher's standpoint in an important way defines research strategies and results. This type of controversy embedded in the development of the discipline is not articulated in the Russian case because sociology has not established a secure professional position for itself on the Russian intellectual scene.

I think that this radical position – the rejection of public sociology – is valid in the Russian context. I have attempted to describe the meanings of public sociology in this context. Sociological administrators see it as an ideology that could help to recover the prestige of sociology in the eyes of the authorities and media. For others, it is an international intellectual fashion that will help them to survive. Still others see public sociology as a real threat to a weak sociological community. In all these interpretations, there is not much concern about the link between sociology and civil society.

However, I believe there is yet another way to look at public sociology in the Russian context. Civic involvement in the professionalization project could be an alternative interpretation of our public sociology agenda. Sociology belongs to the cultural tradition of the Russian intelligentsia looking for answers to the old questions: 'who is responsible?', 'what is to be done?'. The answer is: 'start with yourself', make decisions in the concrete situation, help to make sociological education better and do not forget that Russia can become a democratic society.

It should come as no surprise that those Russian sociologists who fight for professional autonomy are actively engaged in direct advocacy and political activism aimed at the improvement of sociological education and sociological conscious-raising in civic initiatives and NGOs. Their publics are NGOs and students. Their understanding of politics includes improvement of sociological education in Russia and working for the professionalization of the sociological community.

Russian public sociologists are involved in protests when sociologists are persecuted as spies, when sociologists are beaten up by the police, as in the March of the Discontented (27 April 2007), and when professionals do not have a voice in the improvement of sociological education.

For the Russian sociological community, spring 2007 was marked by the crisis in the Department of Sociology of Moscow State University. A student initiative 'OD group' demanded radical changes in education in the department as well as in attitudes towards students. In their petition, the students demanded that the department's administration:

improve the quality of teaching, stop force-feeding us with ultranationalist propaganda, and ensure acceptable conditions of life and study. . . . We demand that the curricula be changed, competent teachers be invited, students

be informed about foreign exchange programs, the rude security guards be dismissed, the rigid gating system be abolished, and a minimum of basic amenities be provided. We are seeking a public meeting with the dean and rector. Our main objective is to improve the level of teaching and obtain acceptable working conditions for students, but also for the department's faculty, some of whom have expressed their support for us. ([www.od-group.org](http://www.od-group.org))

In an attempt to resolve the conflict, the Public Chamber set up an independent commission, in which 13 sociologists participate. Members of the sociological community support the student protest. 'Reformists' as well as those whose slogan is 'for professional sociology' have come together to work in the commission. Academician Tatyana Zaslavskaya, addressing the Moscow State University rector, commented that: 'it is a positive sign that students are voicing their problems today: they are growing up into true citizens'. Other members of the sociological community wrote letters of support and gave interviews on the crisis facing the department. However, this campaign has not touched the Chekists or traditional public sociologists.

Hopefully, the commission will help to raise the standards of sociological education in Russia. Professionalization will give public sociological expertise a chance to build trust in sociological knowledge. Organic public sociologists are involved in the dialogue with their publics, trying to prevent a formal bureaucratic solution to the conflict. Members of the sociological community fighting for professionalization are in dialogue with the sociology students, and this is a true example of public sociology helping professionalization.

## Notes

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1. Refers to a member of the CHEKA, a forerunner of the KGB; the secret police in Soviet Russia were responsible, among other things, for state ideology.

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