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Making Public Sociology: Its Pitfalls and its Possibilities

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Introduction

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As I read these three splendid articles on the public sociology of labor – articles solicited for presentation to the labour movements research committee (RC44) at the ISA in Gothenburg – I am reminded of another piece by the great American public sociologist, Robert Lynd, ‘Can Labor and intellectuals Work Together?’¹

Written in 1951 Lynd begins by endorsing labor’s skepticism toward academics, who, being devoted to their own professional careers, pursue safe, often policy-related research increasingly driven by market forces. In a world of corporate capitalism, Lynd continues, labor desperately needs the research capacities of the few courageous and unconventional academics who are ready to buck convention and even sacrifice their academic careers in order to engage real-world challenges of the day. But can labor leaders work with these unconventional academics? Lynd warns labor leaders they cannot expect these critical academics to become policy hacks at their beck and call. Labor leaders will have to recognize the autonomy of science, and be willing to listen to the bigger issues intellectuals are likely to raise. In particular, he argues (donning the hat of one of those critical-public intellectuals), labor leaders will have to recognize the threat to democracy (that they perceived at the time). They had a choice between two roads: ‘big-business-controlled state’ or ‘democratic socialism’ with private business replaced by democratic planning. If Lynd begins by asking whether intellectuals ‘can take it’, i.e. are they prepared to put their careers on the line, he ends by asking, ‘Can labor take it?’, that is, suspend their narrow horizons and immediate concerns for the major issues of the day, issues raised by public intellectuals.

Lynd was interested in how labor might benefit from intellectuals, but he does not consider how engagement with labor benefits intellectuals. Indeed, such engagement has transformed sociology, and not just labor sociology. In Brazil and South Africa, for example, sociology was almost synonymous with labor sociology. The militancy and politicization of the labor movements flowed into the concept of social movement unionism, giving new direction to theories of collective behavior. In Britain, as Huw Beynon shows, the sociology of labor redefined industrial sociology in opposition to economism, human relations, and neoliberalism, and industrial sociology in turn infected and inflected the whole of sociology, generating interest in conflict models of society. In Mexico, Enrique de la Garza shows how the ebb and flow of the labor movement led to new research projects that brought together

structure and agency, that sought to understand different models of accumulation. Most generally sociologists' engagement with labor has led directly and indirectly to the reconstruction of the meaning of class, authority, conflict, and democracy.

Still, Lynd does capture many of the tensions between sociologists, driven by the logic of professionalism, and labor leaders, driven by the logic of corporate capitalism, tensions that in the US, until recently, have kept the two apart. In fact, it is the only the crisis of union decline and the leadership succession it prompted, that have slightly opened labor's doors to academics, sociologists of labor in particular, who carried their interest in the labor process to the study of the labor movement, a shift that had occurred earlier in other countries such as South Africa and Brazil, but also in two of the countries represented in this symposium, Britain and Mexico.

Enrique de La Garza graphically describes his own trajectory, the trials of maintaining a commitment to both serious scholarship and public engagement, and how the latter often landed him up in prison. Prison or no prison, public sociology is not for sissies. It requires courage, patience and persistence. It is often a life-time commitment. Huw Beynon, writing from Britain, bore the brunt of corporate and collegial hostility when Penguin published his classic of public sociology of labor, *Working for Ford* – a book that inspired generations of students, trade unionists, and engaged academics in South Africa, Brazil and many other places. Mihai Varga suggests that sociologists in postcommunist countries become traitors to their own class, as well as being impecunious, if they were to seriously engage with labor. Still, there are always brave souls – Robert Lynd like C Wright Mills are famous examples in the US – who are undeterred by sanctions for their deviant ways of going about sociology.

While public sociologists may buck the tide of professional conformity, they do so under very different conditions. In Britain, Huw Beynon's account of labor sociology in the 1960s and 1970s traces the close links to the labor movement to the confluence of an emergent critical sociology on the one side, and the legacy of policy sociology tied to the welfare state on the other. Indeed, with the expansion of the universities, the new discipline of sociology burst not only onto the academic scene but, from there, into the public arena, with new outlets such as the magazine *New Society*. Brimming with optimism this young industrial sociology entered the factories to join forces with shop stewards movements, epitomized again by *Working for Ford*. Whatever the tensions, this organic public sociology was contagious. It gained local media coverage as well as young enthusiasts within the university, ready to celebrate shop floor militancy.

Capital's reaction was not long in coming in the shape of Margaret Thatcher and the frontal assault on labor, targeting, in particular, the National Union of Mineworkers. Labor sociologists took up the cause of the mineworkers, developing an often tense and brittle partnership with the union against the state. As the market struck and plant closures were the order of the day, so academics joined with shop stewards to develop plans for the abandoned factories, plans for socially useful production, plans that would restore jobs to redundant workers. This experiment in workers' control, however, was short lived. Once the

mineworkers were defeated – and they after all represent the most determined and militant workers – the entire labor movement was in retreat.

It was then the turn of academia to suffer the offensive temper of the state with the introduction of new regulatory mechanisms, the notorious research assessment exercise – a softening up process that would prepare universities for the market assault a decade later. Sociology suffered setbacks, especially industrial sociology that was sent scurrying into the business schools for cover. Its public persona discredited, sociology turned inward. The sociology of work turned back to the labor process, to the restructuring of work, and the rising significance of the public sector. The old public sociology of labor had taken a beating and sociology retreated into the academy.

That's the account from Britain. But, as Enrique de la Garza recounts, there were parallel developments in Mexico. As in Britain during the late 1960s and the 1970s, the labor movement expanded under the auspices of import substitution, finding its echo in radical student movements. The assault against labor began in the 1980s and as in Britain it was met with strikes that were ultimately defeated, giving way to the restructuring of production, consonant with an export oriented development strategy. A new labor studies was invented that paid attention to the way changes in work organization, patterns of accumulation, and flexible specialization affected the formation of the working class and its struggles. This new labor studies that took root in the universities was conducted in conjunction with shop floor militants as well as union representatives, and flowed into the labor studies programs that were emerging all over Latin America during the 1990s. The neoliberal offensive of the 1990s, as in the US, created a fervent interest in the linkages between labor process and labor movement. The universities were in a state of expansion, they had not yet received the hammer blow of Thatcherism. Today, as the pink revolution spreads across Latin America, labor sociology has not suffered the decline it faced in Britain.

All this is very different from the post-communist orders of Central and Eastern Europe. Mihai Varga asks why sociologists in Ukraine and Romania exhibit such little interest in labor. He argues against the conventional view according to which the Soviet era so discredited the idea of labor, even the very idea of class, that sociologists had to turn to other topics. Nor is it that labor has simply disappeared from the political scene. While this might be so in the Ukraine, it is not true in Romania where visible labor strife has continued through the last two decades. Rather, Varga argues, the lack of interest in labor is due to the class interest of sociologists that have come to identify with the new elites, and thus a disparaging of labor.

This returns us to Robert Lynd and the tensions between sociologists and their publics, but with a difference. Lynd chastised his US colleagues for their professionalism, for hiding behind their careers, for their narrowness of vision. You might say they suffered from hyper-professionalism. In the post-communist world academics face the opposite problem. They inherit a deficit of professionalism from the Soviet era – although one should recognize that the situation was very different in Hungary and Poland where there was greater autonomy and a more vital sociology as compared to the Soviet Union or Romania. The postcommunist transformation left academics defenseless against the ravages of shock

therapy and market fundamentalism, so academics quickly became beholden to the most powerful forces in society, and labor did not count among them. It takes brave and independent souls – and they do exist – to resist the pressures to sell oneself to the highest bidder. Lynd pointed to the pathologies of professionalism that would lead academics away from labor, Varga points to the weakness of professionalism that has similar consequences. As Elena Zdravomyslova once said, the struggle for public sociology in Russia today, and she could have been equally talking about Ukraine and Romania, is for the public defense of academic autonomy, a necessary condition for any critical sociology.

But this is no time for complacency in the West. The postcommunist world is pioneering the neoliberal university, prefiguring what may be in store for all of us as the university loses its public character and its public funding, and as it succumbs to short term market pressures. As all three articles show, neoliberalism, having taken the offensive against labor, has turned to the university. The question we must now ask is whether this provides academics with new possibilities for defensive or even innovative collaboration with labor. The coincident crises of labor and university may provide fertile soil for a new public sociology. Indeed, there was evidence of this in the exciting program of RC44 in Gothenburg where sociologists, vitalized by international connections, explored novel forms of organizing among the growing armies of precarious and informal labor in so many countries. The very launching of the *Global Labour Journal* expresses a renewed desire of intellectuals to enter a conversation with labor.

NOTES

1. Lynd, R. (1951) 'Can Labor and Intellectuals Work Together?' in J.B.S. Hardman and M. Neufeld (eds) *The House of Labor: Internal Operations of American Unions* (pp. 511-515). New York: Prentice-Hall.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Michael Burawoy is Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, USA. He is the author of *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (University of Chicago Press, 1979) and *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition* (University of California Press, 2009).