

GANS' ORIGINAL ARTICLE CAN BE FOUND AT:

<http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/julyaugust02/fn10.html>

What follows is by MURRAY HAUSKNECHT

Models of Public Sociology

The July/August *Footnotes* reported that Michael Burawoy was the new President-Elect and by coincidence carried an article by Past-President, Herbert J. Gans, on the role of “public sociologist.” The coincidence was that Burawoy in his Personal Statement in the Association’s election brochure promised to promote “public sociology—a sociology that transcends the academy.” Gans and Burawoy share a vision of sociologist bringing sociological knowledge and perspective to bear in the public arena, but the similarity ends there. These are two different models of a public role for sociologists, and I want to argue that Gans’s model is preferable to Burawoy’s.

Gans defines a public sociologist as “a public intellectual who applies sociological ideas and findings to social (defined broadly) issues about which sociology (also defined broadly) has something to say.” *Public sociologists* are different from the garden variety of *public intellectuals* in that the latter “comment on whatever matters show up on the public agenda; public sociologists do so only on issues to which they apply their sociological insights and findings.” For example, we are knowledgeable about social problems and we can be “particularly useful in debunking the conventional wisdom and popular myths (e.g., that teenage pregnancy is a popular cause of poverty).” All in all, it is a modest but useful proposal that essentially is an extension of our role as teachers.

By contrast, Burawoy’s model is quite grandiose. “As mirror and conscience of society,” Burawoy maintains, “sociology must define, promote and inform public debate about deepening class and racial inequalities, new gender regimes, environmental degradation, market fundamentalism, state and non-state violence.” An immediately noticeable difference between Gans and Burawoy is that the latter’s public sociologist is less teacher than “activist;” sociology “must define, promote, and inform public debate” about the issues he lists and, in addition, “stimulate debate” in “local, global, and national contexts.”

This, however, is not the crucial difference, for Burawoy has added another dimension to the meaning of sociology itself—it is no longer merely a scientific or scholarly body of knowledge but “the mirror and conscience of society.” *Conscience* implies a continuous moral evaluation of action, and Burawoy’s assertion apparently means that it is a defining characteristic of our discipline. Leaving alone the question of who elected sociology to this office, Burawoy also seems to be declaring that our contributions to public debate “must” consist of moral judgments; that is, those who choose not to make such judgments and, for example, merely contribute factual knowledge or recommend one policy rather than another, cannot practice Burawoy’s public sociology.

“Finally,” Burawoy concludes, “the critical imagination, exposing the gap between what is and what could be, infuses values into public sociology to remind us that the world could be different.” This strongly suggests that public sociology should not only be in the business of distinguishing right from wrong but also pointing society in the direction of some ideal reality. Indeed, it is clear, if we remember the issues that Burawoy believes should be of most concern to public sociology, the mirror his public sociology holds up to society would reflect only the portrait in the closet.

The last point reveals a fundamental flaw of Burawoy’s activist notion of public sociology compared to Gans’s public sociologist. The latter applies the discipline’s knowledge and perspectives in the public

arena, hoping to clarify issues and help people find their way among the ideological voices filling the air. I fear that Burawoy's sociologist would be publicly perceived, and justifiably so, as another ideologue pushing his or her vision of what is best for the rest of us because, after all, sociology is "the conscience of society." That perception would immediately devalue public sociologists' claims that their views merit attention and consideration because of their professional knowledge.

The preference for the more modest role of public sociologist should not be taken to mean that sociologists possess "value-free" knowledge; have no right to pass moral judgments; or have no ideological commitments of their own. It does mean that when sociologists enter the public square to make moral judgments or support a particular vision of a better world, they speak or write as responsible citizens or as garden variety public intellectuals—they cannot claim that their morality or visions of worlds that "could be different" are more deserving of attention because of their professional knowledge.

In short, a more modest conception of public sociology may even result in sociologist actually influencing public discussions and policies!

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#43039 (1,350 words)

Public Sociologies: Response To Hausknecht.

In the December 2002 *Footnotes* Public Forum [page 6], Murray Hausknecht correctly identifies me with a critical, activist form of public sociology, but he is wrong to suggest that this excludes Herbert Gans's "expert" public sociology. As I said, sociology is *both* mirror and conscience of society. By *mirror* I mean sociology captures patterns, develops diagnoses, corrects misconceptions, so as to better tackle social problems. The task of public sociology here is Gans's project of dissemination. By *conscience* I mean sociology's interrogation of society's values that stimulates discussion about their meaning, multiplicity, relevance and realization. The task of this more critical public sociology is to promote public dialogue. In a nutshell, I argue that we need both expert *and* critical public sociologies and they need each other.

In harnessing expertise, the wider context is easily bracketed as the spotlight turns on specific problems. Take Kristin Luker's *Dubious Conceptions*, which dispels the myth of the epidemic of teen pregnancies, showing that teens make up a declining proportion of unwed mothers and that poverty has a more powerful effect on teen pregnancy than vice versa. It was well received in the press, she appeared on radio shows and gave many talks but, according to her, no one changed their mind about the issue. In fact the tide flowed in the other direction as conservative think tanks effectively linked teenage pregnancy with welfare. Asking why she was so ineffectual, Luker writes that academics are ill-equipped to promote their ideas, when competing with swift, flexible, advocacy groups.¹ Think tanks not only control a polished machinery of dissemination but, in this case, their message resonated deeply with the powerful social movement of the Christian Right.

Perhaps Luker is too ambitious, perhaps she is too modest about her accomplishments, but her message stands: if public sociology is going to coexist with powerful policy institutes we

may have to become more activist in promoting our findings. If we are going to “set sail,” we will need to navigate turbulent seas. Hausknecht is suspicious of this “activist” public sociology, preferring a “teaching” model. But teaching too can take many forms. Just as passively transmitting knowledge is rarely effective without a receptive and already convinced audience, so pouring knowledge into students -- as though they were empty vessels -- rarely moves them. Indeed, it generally induces passivity. Dialogical teaching activates student minds, incites them to think critically about the world around them. It starts from where they are and elaborates (educates) their experiences, -- to be sure aided and stimulated by texts, data, and theory. In activating the student, the teacher too begins to learn! The important distinction, therefore, is not between teaching and activism, but between one-way and two-way teaching. It is the model of dialogical teaching that underlies my notion of critical public sociology. In other words, just as effective learning requires expertise *and* engagement, so the same is true of public sociology.

Hausknecht is concerned not just with the mode of interaction between sociologists and their publics but also with its content. He asks whether *as sociologists* we can engage in moral critique without moralizing. In other words, can we be the conscience of society without privileging certain values? I think we can and in the following ways.

- In modern society bureaucratic rationality and market efficiency often eclipse moral values altogether. Merely insisting on explicit examination of society’s values becomes a critique of the exclusivity of formal, or instrumental, rationality.
- Commentators may have a particular conception of values, for example of “democracy,” without acknowledging alternative ones. Public currency may assume democracy is electoral democracy, but sociologists may point to other “deeper” notions of democracy such as participatory democracy. Society’s values are multiple and multi-valent. Critique often takes the form of explicating already existing alternatives.
- We can expose the gap between society’s professed values and its practices, how society betrays the values it espouses -- as Robert Bellah, for example, does in *The Broken Covenant*. This is what we call *immanent critique*.
- We may enter public debate in our capacity to discern the consequences and conditions of institutionalizing values as when Jencks or Coleman discovers that equality of opportunity in schooling does not produce equality of outcomes. Here, too, there is critique, this time of the presumed harmony of society’s values.
- As we do our research we may uncover, elaborate and even propagate the values of particular groups or social movements that challenge dominant values. Here we find, for example, Alain Touraine’s action sociology, Dorothy Smith’s sociology for women, or many of W.E.B. Du Bois’s writings.
- Finally, some indeed have claimed – from Emile Durkheim to Edward Shils and Amitai Etzioni – that sociology embodies values of community and responsiveness that we all share. Depending on the meaning of “we,” this can come close to moralising or ideology.

In all these ways we can act as the conscience of society, and in each case critique depends upon our expertise as sociologists.

If we *can* act as conscience of society, *should* we do so? Hausknecht argues that interrogating public values will brand us as ideologues and bring sociology into disrepute. In his view critique will undermine rather than bolster expertise. Of course, there are risks in activating one’s conscience. To remain silent, however, is to endorse the view that public values are private

property, leaving moral entrepreneurs, politicians, and other pundits with a monopoly of the interpretation of society's values. A critical public sociology would mobilize our expertise to reappropriate public values for public discussion. If we are responsive to the common sense, the popular culture, and the subterranean dissent of the people we typically study we may find an audience more receptive to our messages than the one ensconced in the tribunals of power. When considering the relation of expertise and critique we should not forget that there are publics and publics!

It is one thing to speak *as* a sociologist. It is quite another thing to speak *for* sociology. When it comes to the collectivity, a critical public sociology has to be true to itself --- dialogue must begin at home before it can be taken abroad. Sociologists should debate how and what to speak publicly. Thus, there was much collective discussion about the ASA's statement on race that insists on its continuing importance in American society. The discussion continues over the Amicus Brief that the ASA will soon submit to the Supreme Court as the court revisits the Bakke decision in *Grutter v. Bollinger*. Discussion in the Association is also under way around California's Racial Privacy Initiative that would prohibit the state from using racial classifications. The ASA Council believes that, with our expertise, we can and should take a public and critical stance on the causes and consequences of racial and other forms of discrimination. In short, as I have argued throughout, expertise and critique can play a mutually supportive role.

Public sociologies, both expert and critical, are enjoying a renaissance – marked by increasing numbers of students, the launching of the magazine *Contexts*, the recently introduced Award for the Public Understanding of Sociology, and the ASA's involvement with affirmative action and racial profiling. This ascendancy may reflect sociologists' common concern about the state of the world as the political environment has become more hostile, and not just to sociology. The public sphere itself is under assault from both state regulation and market privatization. Thus, more than ever, all public sociologies need to collaborate in protecting the basis of their existence –, which lies not just in a strong discipline of sociology but also in a resilient public. Public debate stimulates the sociological imagination just as it is necessary for a vibrant democracy. Publics are the lifeblood of both sociology and society. We don't all have to become a public sociologist by any means, but we do have a collective interest in cultivating, defending, collaborating with and responding to publics. In this regard Gans, Hausknecht and myself share a common cause, along with many other sociologists.

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ⁱ Luker, K. (1999). "Is Academic Sociology Politically Obsolete?" *Contemporary Sociology*, 28, no.1, pp.5-10.