

S SHORT REMARKS ABOUT CERTAIN STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN SOCIOLOGY

Nikolay Mitrokhin

1. Michael Burawoy distinguishes between professional, critical, policy, and public sociology, based on the main tasks and publics of sociological knowledge. Is this typology helpful in understanding the current state of Russian sociology? How are these four types correlated in Russia?

I concur with the South African sociologists whom Michael Burawoy cites as disagreeing with him. The South African and US models are not really contradictory. Sociology is a public science which, like any science, is based on a critical assessment of data. There is no doubt that it exerts an influence on society, but it must be practiced by professionals. Amateurism in science is a possibility, but it senselessly squanders public and individual capital. The social sciences can, of course, be used to change society, and it would be odd to argue that they (and, in particular, sociology) are not intended to do so by the very fact of their existence. The social sciences are inherently critical, and the subjects of their research may be more or less sensitive to critique. The existence of policy-oriented social studies is equally indisputable. Yet for broad reaches of social research, the definitions given are vague. A study on the distribution of refrigerators among a certain social group may be of interest to a company that manufactures refrigerators as well as to people who attempt to describe that group as a social phenomenon, past or present. Thus I fail to see the point of Michael Burawoy's scheme. The tone in which he offers his systematization makes me think that what we are faced with here is a phenomenon typical of the academic *milieu* of the 1960s: the (very) left-wing intellectual who is dissatisfied with his attempts to turn the university lectern into a political tribune.

2. What encourages and what hinders the development of sociology and, more broadly, the social sciences in Russia? Are these factors peculiarly Russian?

The same factors that inhibit the development of science in Russia as a whole:

A) On the one hand, the relatively low social status of researchers and university teachers, which manifests itself (until recently) in extremely low salaries; and on the other hand, the pressures of the market, where young academics are in demand as educated generalists (in public administration, journalism, advertising, PR, non-profit organizations, and punditry). This has several substantive consequences:

- Real competition for academic jobs is low.
- The leading positions (department or sub-department heads or directors of research institutes) are occupied by the "perestroika generation"—researchers and teachers who ousted the previous directors at the turn of the 1990s and have been holding on to their positions for the past twenty years.

Address for correspondence: Nikolay Mitrokhin, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Klagenfurter Straße 3, 28359 Bremen, Germany. mitrokhin@uni-bremen.de.

- People trained in doctoral programs leave for business and public administration.
- The most promising undergraduate and graduate students and young scholars migrate from the periphery to the center or emigrate.
 - There is a generational gap at university or institute departments. On the one hand, typically, we have a department head aged 55 to 65, supported by the majority of staff, who are themselves of pre- or post-retirement age. On the other hand we have researchers fresh out of doctoral training, who are being pushed to perform the most difficult, least rewarding, and least well-paid part of the work.
 - Department heads at state institutions tightly control foreign travel, grant money, and contacts with foreign colleagues. Young scholars are placed in a position where they are permanently indebted to their superiors: they are denied letters of recommendation for fellowships and grants, and asked to share grants they have obtained independently.
 - The situation in many “international” projects carried out by various independent scholarly and non-profit institutions is similar: while in these cases project leaders may be more qualified, they also keep an even tighter grip on the finances.
 - Another problem emerged in the 2000s, at least in the big cities: the labor market’s high demand for educated young people and the near-total lack of financial aid means that most students start to work as early as the second year of their undergraduate studies, and have no time to become interested in research. This has a strong impact on departments’ ability to use students as a free pool of low-skill research labor, as they have traditionally done (sociology, especially quantitative sociology, is particularly hard-hit by this problem). It completely keeps students out of research, dramatically lessens their level of qualifications since they are prepared to read only what they absolutely need for their course, and as a result deprives them of any desire for post-graduate education. The bigger and more prestigious the university, the more noticeable is this phenomenon.

B) The quality of language training is low, which prevents researchers from reading the latest (non-translated) literature, establishing their own international contacts, or traveling to participate in conferences or take up visiting fellowships.

C) Many recent sociological works are being translated, but print runs are low, and there is no national distribution network. Research libraries buy few new books. As a result, a Moscow-based researcher needs to buy (or else will never get his hands on) and read approximately twenty volumes merely to keep up with newly published theoretical works by Western authors (many of which will sit in his bookcase unopened). Every such book will be published in 2,000 copies, which makes it virtually impossible for a researcher in Smolensk to obtain even three or four such books per year. Two years later, even if not all copies have been sold, it will be difficult to buy the book, because bookstores, which are filled with new publications, will refuse to display “that old stuff.” At the same time there is no venue where one might find intelligent reviews of new books.

D) Publications from the periphery (pre-prints or dissertation abstracts) are rarely circulated to Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

E) The quality of teaching is extremely low at many universities, including the sociology department at Moscow State University.

All these factors are specifically Russian or at least post-Soviet. On the whole, Russia and most post-Soviet states have not seen the revolution in higher education that took place in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc in the second half of the 1990s. Instead of a substantial rejuvenation of faculty, an adoption of West European teaching methods and up-to-date literature, and visiting fellowships for foreign scholars, Russian higher education has largely remained “Soviet.” Left to their own devices, the former teachers of Marxism-

Leninism have restyled themselves as sociologists and anthropologists and begun to teach their students based on accidentally obtained and arbitrarily interpreted books by Russian philosophers from the first third of the 20th century. Because the country is so large and the scholarly community is relatively sizeable, comparatively promising groups of researchers with a modern education have sprung up around good (or rather, active) sociologists with international connections, not only in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, but also in a number of regions (Kazan, Ulyanovsk, Irkutsk). Of course, the European University and the Smolny College in Saint Petersburg and certain sociological departments at the Higher School of Economics and the Russian University for the Humanities in Moscow play a significant role.

F) A peculiarly post-Soviet phenomenon in sociology is the “project mindset” that I have encountered in my dealings with the most varied sociological teams (or their individual representatives). Here is what it looks like in its most widespread form. The head of a research group, who has contacts with foreign or Moscow-based foundations, obtains funding for his group to perform research—a “project” on a topic that fits the foundation’s current priorities. These funds usually cover the group’s expenses for six months to a year; during that time, it carries out a survey (or focus groups), writes a final report and, in some cases, publishes it as a separate booklet. The problem is that, usually, sociologists working in such groups do not specialize in the topic for which they have obtained funding, and so their research and, in particular, the level of analysis of the data so collected do not yield any new insights on the topic researched. The data are usually trivial from the point of view of a specialist, and no efforts are made to make them compatible with similar research carried out previously or in other regions. Groups that have adopted the “project mindset” do not usually view their lack of professionalism as a problem; on the contrary, “professionalism” to them is the willingness and ability to tackle absolutely any topic. They do not even pursue the objective of disseminating their research results to the scholarly community. This accounts for peculiarities such as the low quantity of publications that come out of such projects, or their relative lack of interest in publishing results in widely read journals. Most people with a “project mindset” also seem to realize that they simply have nothing to say to a large audience, and in particular to specialists, and therefore do not even try to interest them in the results of their work. The foundations themselves are partly to blame for constantly changing their priorities and supporting projects not because they are interesting, but because they fit this year’s program. Serious organizations and researchers find it difficult to conform to these constant changes (let alone to fit in what they consider truly interesting or important), whereas petty sociological contractors with a “project mindset” are prepared to write a research proposal on any topic advertised.

3. Based on your view of the main professional tasks of sociologists in present-day Russian society, how do you see the tasks and limits of public sociology in Russia today? How do these tasks correlate with the “public” versions of neighboring disciplines such as political science, economics, anthropology, or history?

I do not think that there is a public sociology in Russia that is distinct from general sociology. There are several sociologists who are in greater demand by the mass media (for example, the news sites *gazeta.ru* and *polit.ru* regularly publish the results of sociological research). There are some sociologists who lobby the interests of certain social or professional groups or corporations. But science stops where lobbying begins. In my opinion, scientists (including sociologists) should carry out research in order to try and establish the truth or at least attempt to approximate it. This should not prevent them from publicly expressing themselves on socially relevant issues, but if they become people who constantly advocate certain interests, they turn into politicians. Vladimir Ryzhkov started out as a historian and co-founder of Memorial in the Altai region. But he did not call himself a “public historian” when he became a member of parliament. Valery Tishkov was not a “public ethnologist” when he became minister. He simply proved his membership in the professional community by writing many scholarly articles and a good study of Chechnya.

4. *Some scholars explain the lack of public sociology in Russia by pointing to the inadequate institutionalization and professionalization of social science. Do you agree?*

There are many well-trained professional sociologists in Russia.

5. *Could you name any Russian sociologists or organizations who vividly personify each of the types of sociology that Michael Burawoy identifies, or perhaps several types at once? What kind of sociology does your own work represent, and if it belongs to several types, how do you combine these types in your work?*

My research is on the sociology of religion. It can be interpreted from any of the perspectives suggested by Michael Burawoy.

6. *Are there any lessons to be learned for public sociology from the closure of the old VTsIOM (the Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion) in 2003, the student revolt at Moscow State University's sociology department in 2007–8, or the closure of the European University at Saint Petersburg in February–March 2008?*

You are confusing events of two different types: the internal conflict at Moscow State University and state pressure on essentially non-state, oppositional institutions. I do not see that these events have made these institutions any more oppositional, or led to the establishment of any links with the organized political opposition. Only once the situation on the labor market changes to produce unemployed sociologists (or students with a lot of free time on their hands) will any protest-based attempts to change the situation become possible.

7. *Do you believe that the current state of Russian sociology differs radically from configurations in other countries—not just global centers such as the United States or France, but also countries of the Global South or other post-Soviet states? Can sociology remain national at a time when both academia and society are becoming increasingly globalized, and many Russian sociologists participate in comparative research projects and/or publish their work abroad?*

Compared to most of the post-Soviet region (Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus), sociology in Russia is doing well. Compared to Ukraine, it is not (at least in the fields I am familiar with—electoral analysis and sociology of religion). In Georgia there is no modern sociological discipline, but the educational reform that is currently underway there will inevitably lead to its emergence. Compared to Germany or the United States, both of which I know a little, Russian sociology is seriously lagging behind. However, the twenty or thirty leading Russian specialists in my own field—the sociology of religion—can hold their own in global comparison.

The problem, however, is that in all of Russia, there are twenty or thirty good “globalized” sociologists of religion (who, for variety’s sake, may also be called anthropologists or scholars of religion) who actively publish their work in important Russian and foreign journals; about fifty who—with more or less success—try to emulate them (mostly their own doctoral students), and another fifty who are close to the “globalized” scholars in terms of their level of understanding of the problem and empirical data collected, but are unwilling and unable to learn English and write grant proposals, and therefore have no real outlets. Then there are between one and one a half thousand “national” sociologists of religion whose greatest ambition is to become the main expert in a regional administration’s department for relations with non-profit and religious organizations. The first group influences the second group through their own example, and has some impact on the third and fourth group through their texts. But it is these one thousand specialists (who are only moderately influenced by the “globalized” sociologists) who lecture to the bulk of Russian students interested in this topic, work as

experts with the executive and judiciary, occasionally go to provincial conferences, and publish useless conference proceedings read by extremely few, but which are nevertheless part of Russian scholarly life (and, in terms of sheer quantity, even the dominant part).

Authorized translation from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch