



Reframing the public sociology debate: Towards collaborative and decolonial praxis

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Abstract

This article presents a critical analysis of Michael Burawoy's model of public sociology, discussing several of its epistemic and methodological limitations. First, the author focuses on the ambiguity of Burawoy's proposal, problematizing the absence of a clear delimitation of the concept of 'public sociology'. Second, the author links the academic success of the category of public sociology to the global division of sociological labour, emphasizing the 'geopolitics of knowledge' involved in Burawoy's work and calling for the decolonization of social science. Then, the author expounds his concerns regarding the hierarchy of the different types of sociology proposed by Burawoy, who privileges professional sociology over other types of sociological praxis. Reflecting upon these elements will provide a good opportunity to observe how our discipline works, advancing also suggestions for its transformation. Along these lines, in the last section of the article the author elaborates on the need to go beyond a dissemination model of public sociology – the unidirectional diffusion of 'expert knowledge' to extra-academic audiences – and towards a more collaborative understanding of knowledge production.

Keywords

Collaborative research, decolonization of social science, epistemic violence, geopolitics of knowledge, public sociology

Introduction

This article reflects on Michael Burawoy's model of public sociology, a proposal that for the last decade set the basis for a discussion within the academic community about the meaning, the possibilities and the challenges of public engagement.

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My aim is to point out some of the limitations of Burawoy's project. I will focus on three elements. First, I will highlight the lack of clarity in Burawoy's definition of public sociology, the ambiguity of his formulation. Second, I will problematize 'the politics of naming', pondering on who is entitled and what are the conditions of possibility to produce a concept, category or theorization, and make it circulate in the academic field at international level. Within the same framework, I will explore what the label of public sociology illuminates, but also what it blurs and/or renders invisible, acknowledging the 'geopolitics of knowledge' at play in such processes. Third, I will question the intra-disciplinary hierarchy of the different types of sociology advanced by Burawoy, who places professional sociology as the *sine qua non* of all sociological knowledge. Here the discussion will revolve around what types of knowledge are validated, why, how and by whom?

Each of these three elements has its own independent logic, its own rationale, but they are all connected. Burawoy translated/appropriated the set of ideas inspiring his reflection on public sociology from South Africa to the United States, from the Global South to the Global North, from the periphery to the centre of the discipline. The ideas travelled from being 'thought linked to praxis' to abstract theorization, from embodiment to detachment. And they moved from the local level – situated knowledge, embedded in specific contexts – to the global academic arena. I will show how this travelling among discursive and material worlds, the combination of these displacements, provoked a friction – an internal tension – within Burawoy's model that cuts across and informs the three criticisms that will be discussed in this article.

Public sociology, what definition?

In Michael Burawoy's model, public sociology is a matter of bringing sociological knowledge to extra-academic audiences, generating debates within or between publics about issues affecting a particular society. The sociologist operates as a catalyst of public dialogue and discussion. There are two complementary types of public sociology. Traditional public sociology, the more visible of the two, is the engagement with publics through both conventional media, writing op-ed pieces in newspapers, interviews on radio and television, etc.; and the use of social media, blogs, online magazines, and so forth. This type of sociological intervention is a mediated relationship in which the sociologist translates his/her expertise into readily understandable terms, instigating the discussion of public issues among audiences that are usually invisible, thin (with little interaction among their members), passive and national.

For its part, organic public sociology refers to a direct, unmediated relationship that carries sociological knowledge 'into the trenches of civil society' (Burawoy, 2004a: 104), working in close connection with publics that – in contrast to those of traditional public sociology – tend to be visible, local rather than national, thick (involving dense internal interaction), active rather than passive and often counter-publics rather than mainstream in their orientation. The organic public sociologist is intimately and directly connected to publics themselves, working in dialogue, in 'a process of mutual education' (Burawoy, 2005a: 8) with community groups, human rights organizations, the labour movement, environmental groups, immigrant rights groups, and the like.

By theorizing public sociology, Burawoy aimed at legitimizing practices that were hitherto subordinated, hidden or invisible. The challenge was to institutionalize public sociology as an integral part of the discipline, so that ‘those who were marginalized by their public engagement are suddenly recognized as doing meaningful sociology’ (Burawoy, 2015: 2). His proposal sparked a prolific debate, not without criticism. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins contested the assumption that affirming public sociology within the discipline will validate and elevate the status of its practitioners. She claimed that institutionalizing public sociology could instead provoke some sort of ‘sociological ghettoization’, leaving the centre of the discipline intact but installing ‘a permanent and recognizable underclass that now carries the stigmatized name of public sociology’ (Collins, 2007: 103).

That is but one of the many areas in which Burawoy’s account of public sociology is controversial. He has been accused of fostering the politicization of the discipline, and at the same time blamed for provoking the depoliticization of public sociology; he has been criticized by being too radical as well as by not being radical enough. This tension was nicely encapsulated in the title of Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi’s (2005) piece: ‘Can Burawoy make everybody happy? Comments on public sociology’. But the problem is that Burawoy’s formulations are in fact profoundly ambiguous.

After reading one or two articles on public sociology one gets the impression that it is a neat, straightforward proposal. However, a deeper engagement with the literature generates a different perception. The discourses articulated by Burawoy seem to vary substantially according to the audience he is addressing – he seems indeed to be trying to make everybody happy. As a consequence, the exact meaning of public sociology becomes unclear. Burawoy argued that, ‘As sociologists we not only invent new categories but also give them normative and political valence. To fail to do so is to give *carte blanche* to state and market to fill the vacuum with their own needs’ (2005b: 323). One could initially believe that public sociology, particularly the organic public sociologist, is committed to working with subaltern publics and to empower them by providing oppositional knowledges that can be used to (try to) change specific situations of domination. Along these lines, Burawoy (2007a) has depicted public sociology as aimed at ‘expanding the powers of self-determination’ of oppressed minorities, the poor, labour organizations, the incarcerated, social movements, etc.

He has also insisted on the fundamental role of public sociology being the ‘Gramscian and Herculean task of defending and transforming civil society’ (Burawoy, 2007b: 12). Hence, organic public sociology is a critical engagement with civil society, an alliance with communities, institutions, organizations and movements for the defence of social and labour rights, the defence of human life and dignity, the defence of society itself against ‘market tyranny and state despotism’ (Burawoy, 2007a: 55). That could be pointed out as the normative and political valence of Burawoy’s model: in a global context defined by neoliberal orthodoxy and third-wave marketization, the goal of public sociology is to stand opposed to and ‘thwart market fundamentalism’ (2007c: 257). Thus, the public sociologist is a *partisan* determined to defend civil society ‘against the war waged by the agents of the market economy against human existence’ (Burawoy, 2014a: 153), and for that purpose ‘engaging publics is no longer threatening but invigorating, not discrediting but ennobling, not a choice but a necessity’ (Burawoy, 2005c: 83).

Such characterization could prove Burawoy's strong politicization of the category of public sociology. Nevertheless, at the same time it is possible to find in his texts a very different approach where he – conversely – claims that there is no normative value attached to public sociology. Against this backdrop, public sociology can be done in support of monopolistic corporations as well as for progressive grassroots organizations, and to uphold and expand rather than to thwart market fundamentalism:

There is no specific value to public sociology – there is public sociology that engages with publics on behalf of subordinate groups just as there is public sociology that advances the interests and values of dominant groups. There is nothing in the definition of public sociology to say that it should defend values of equality and freedom – although empirically that has usually been the case. After all, in the 19th century the US sported a public sociology that defended slavery. The only value that public sociology should consistently cling to is the value of public discussion, the defense of the public sphere and its substratum of civil society. (Burawoy, 2015: 7)

I have no intention of underestimating the importance of a strong public sphere as a counterweight to the powers of the market and the state. During 2009–2011, I worked on the EU-funded project *Diversity and the European Public Sphere: Towards a Citizens' Europe*, which involved universities from 16 countries working together to identify the conditions that could enable or undermine the articulation of inclusive European Public Spheres, as well as their impact on democracy and cultural diversity. I am well aware of the effects that the absence of a strong trans-European (grassroots) civil society had in affording the neoliberal turn experienced by the EU institutions over the last two decades, with the consequences that we witness today.

This said, portraying public sociology as a tool aimed at thwarting social injustice and state and/or market fundamentalism through the engagement with subaltern groups; and portraying public sociology as a Habermasian space of plural dialogue for the defence and enhancement of the public sphere do not seem to be the same project. What is public sociology then? The second version – in which it is not the content of the discussion that matters but rather the possibility of the communicative act itself – is what allows Burawoy's model to be criticized for its marked depoliticization of the category of public sociology. The fact that both those blaming Burawoy for being too radical and those accusing him of not being radical enough happen to be right is problematic; this level of confusion, this inconsistency, needs to be clarified.

Writing from the 'southern windmill'

A brief genealogy might be useful to understand the nature of the limitations of Burawoy's proposal. As he has often explained, his friendship with the South African sociologist Edward Webster and his collaboration with the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP), which Webster had founded in the mid-1980s at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, inspired him in fundamental ways, laying the foundations for his conceptualization of public sociology. According to Burawoy (2010), what characterized SWOP since its creation was the balance between what he termed 'the four

blades of the southern windmill': scholarly research, public engagement, policy work and institution building within the university.

When Burawoy travelled in 1990 to address the South African Sociological Association, returning to the country after a 22-year absence, he witnessed the deep involvement of many South African social scientists in the anti-apartheid struggles; as he said, 'While in the United States we were theorizing social movements, in South Africa sociologists were making social movements!' (Burawoy, 2005a: 20). This allowed Burawoy to put the hyper-professionalized US sociology into perspective, and to discover the possibilities of an alternative type of scholarly work that informed his reflection and theorization around what he would later call 'public sociology'.

Interestingly, SWOP's founder Edward Webster has recently reflected upon two examples of 'public sociology' undertaken by SWOP in the 1980s, during the apartheid regime (Webster, 2017). The first project was 'an investigation into underground safety on the gold mines', the second 'a study of the potential impact of migrant labour on the spread of AIDS'. The first research was designed and developed in consultation with the National Union of Mineworkers, at that time a 'newly formed union of black mine workers struggling for recognition from deeply hostile employers and a repressive state'. The rationale behind the project was to produce new knowledge on the topic under study, while at the same time empowering the miners 'in their struggle for better working conditions and to provide them with an institutional voice through engaged research'. Webster termed this praxis 'critical engagement'. Critical, in the sense of trying to avoid the subordination of academic work to the immediate interests and demands of particular political organizations, retaining the independence needed for the proper development of scholarly reflection; engaged, in the sense of supporting the struggles of the workers and the consolidation of the democratic labour movement in South Africa. This tension between autonomy and engagement is a well-known dilemma for sociologists trying to advance what Edward Webster defined as 'a social science of liberation' (1982), a practice committed to 'the construction of a more egalitarian society', that in this case was immersed within the context of the anti-apartheid struggles but that resonated with similar proposals put forward at that particular time throughout the Global South (especially in Latin America, where it walked hand in hand with liberation theology and philosophy since the late 1960s and early 1970s). Today, living in a very different historical conjuncture, what could 'liberation sociology' mean? What would it look like?

The title of Webster's article is 'Choosing sides: The promise and pitfalls of public sociology in apartheid South Africa'. It is clear that Webster and Burawoy write from distinct geographic, epistemic and institutional locations. However, comparing both proposals is revealing. As described above, Burawoy seems to navigate the disciplinary field purposely avoiding *choosing sides*; that decision might be consistent with his attempt to institutionalize public sociology, and the corresponding need to 'make happy' different – sometimes even opposed – publics within the discipline. But however strategically wise it might be, that move is not without consequences. By failing to attach a more explicit normative value to the category of public sociology, Burawoy runs the risk of erasing its transformative potential. A notion of public sociology reduced to its lowest common denominator, the exercise of engaging audiences beyond the academia regardless of the content – the political valence – of such engagement, makes perfect sense in

analytical terms, but it does not live up to the spirit of the sociological praxis that inspired its formulation.

The politics of naming

The concept of public sociology is itself problematic. Burawoy (2005a) admitted that this term is an ‘American invention’ – I assume he meant a US invention – unnecessary in other contexts where it is taken for granted that intellectuals will engage their expertise in public debate beyond academic boundaries. That is precisely what is expected from them; there is no need to produce a specific name for such practice. He is aware of that, and acknowledges that when he speaks about public sociology outside the US – where the sociological field is dominated by a professional approach, reluctant to extra-academic engagement – the common reaction is that ‘my audiences look at me nonplussed. What else could sociology be, if not an engagement with diverse publics about public issues?’ (Burawoy, 2005a: 20). He insisted on this point recalling what happened when he presented his proposal in South Africa in subsequent visits to the country, ‘Even though South Africa was its inspiration, my audience looked at me whimsically: What is this public sociology – Isn’t all sociology public? Why do we need the qualifier “public”?’ (Burawoy, 2007b: 7).

Likewise, in Latin America the tradition of public engagement has been strong since the 1970s, and remains vibrant at many levels. As an example, under the title ‘Democratic transformations, social justice and peace processes’, the conference of the Latin American Social Science Council (CLACSO) held in November 2015 in Colombia gathered together for five days some 30,000 people, including academics and students, journalists and independent researchers, members of grassroots political movements and civil society organizers, human rights activists and labour and political leaders, including the former presidents of Uruguay and Brazil, and the vice-president of Bolivia (himself an academic). For decades now CLACSO has been seeking deliberately to make scholarly knowledge useful and accessible – thousands of texts produced by social scientists are freely available at the CLACSO webpage – understanding social science by definition as a platform for debate and practical engagement. What is the use of Burawoy’s concept of public sociology in such a context? How relevant is it? Let us imagine a meeting of South African and Colombian colleagues trying to answer those questions, what would the conversation look like?

Furthermore, the importance of public engagement is by no means exclusive to the Global South. In Europe there are different national traditions, as well as unequal levels of development of the discipline across the continent; however, the expectations regarding scholarly work generally diverge from those prevailing in the US context. Straddling between the United States and Europe, Loïc Wacquant elaborated an interesting reflection on this matter. Schematically, his argument is that the European tradition is mainly incarnated in the category of the ‘intellectual’, understood as ‘a cultural producer who by definition engages his specific competency in public debate. The intellectual is of necessity, by constitution, implicated in the City’ (2009: 124). In this sense, his/her connection to the civic and political sphere is taken for granted; to a great extent such is his/her duty. Whereas in the US academy the tradition is incarnated not by the ‘intellectual’

but by the ‘professional’, who is conceived of as ‘the bearer of a technical competency and expert knowledge which is a neutral knowledge, to be assessed only by peers, and who for that reason must keep out of public debate’ (2009: 124). Such differentiation helps us understand why the notion of ‘public sociology’ was articulated in the US and not anywhere else.

Within the EU context, beyond the widespread presence of social scientists in the public sphere through both traditional and social media, the ‘European Researcher’s Night’ can be considered as the single biggest institutionalized scheme of what Burawoy calls traditional public sociology, involving hundreds of cities, thousands of researchers and massive audiences (over a million attendees in the 2015 edition) across the continent. On top of that, the fluidity between academic spaces – mostly but not only the social sciences – and the ‘trenches’ of civil society organizations, social movements and NGOs is noteworthy. The same applies at the level of institutional politics: Anthony Giddens’ controversial collaboration with the Labour Party in the UK, or the formation in Spain of the movement-party Podemos by academics from the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at the Complutense University in Madrid – the faculty where I became a sociologist – are two examples of how public engagement is understood as one of the constitutive dimensions of what being a social scientist is about – the qualification of ‘public’ adds nothing.

Michael Burawoy knows that there is no need to qualify sociology as ‘public’ outside the United States. He also recognizes the hegemonic role of US sociology, and its enormous impact upon other national and regional traditions. This is the reason why he underlines the need to contest and remould ‘the global division of sociological labour’; this is also why he urges US scholars ‘to provincialize our own sociology, to bring it down from the pedestal of universality and recognize its distinctive character and national power’ (Burawoy, 2005a: 22). He is obviously aware of these problems, but I think that they continue to shape his own work; to a great extent, he reproduces what he criticizes by seeking to universalize a concept based on the particular experience of US sociology.

Public sociology and the geopolitics of knowledge

What turned a local category into a global concept was precisely Burawoy’s location within the academic field. This illustrates how structural factors crucially determine whose knowledge counts. Regardless of its intrinsic quality, theoretical production originating outside the disciplinary centres of power, even more so if elaborated in a language other than English, will likely pass unnoticed by high-prestige academic institutions and networks in the Global North, revealing the strong core–periphery pattern that defines how ideas circulate and achieve influence within academic circuits. Along these lines, Ghamari-Tabrizi affirmed that,

Concepts do not magically become generalizable or universal because of some inherent value in their constitution. They are generalized or universalized by institutions that have the powers to *make* them universal. American sociology cannot remain oblivious to the fact that the concepts it generates in its sociological production enjoy universality precisely because it is

American. To become public and global, not only do we need to recognize and contest the hegemonic powers that American sociology exercises over the boundaries of the discipline, more importantly, we need to be willing to give up our own powers and allow those on behalf of whom we would like to speak, speak for themselves. (2005: 368)

Does Burawoy's model let others speak for themselves? The practices that he has labelled and theorized as public sociology have in many places outside the US a long and well-established pre-existing tradition, with their own situated genealogy and, obviously, expressed under other names. So-called organic public sociology resonates with a heterogeneous cluster of epistemic, theoretical and methodological traditions of intellectual and engaged work extensively implemented during the last decades: participatory action research, indigenous methodologies, feminist research, decolonial approaches, activist or militant research and so forth. A wide set of scholarly practices which centrally address the politics of knowledge production, raising critical questions about what the purpose of research is, for whom it is relevant and useful, how it is conducted, and for whom we write and how. Within these approaches the dialogic engagement with the research subjects is underpinned by ethical and political considerations, and explicitly built upon a shared commitment to social transformation; in this sense, they embody what Burawoy envisions as the combination of sociological imagination and political imagination (Burawoy, 2010).

Nevertheless, such connection is largely unacknowledged, and those traditions ignored and rendered invisible in the literature on public sociology. Burawoy hardly ever recognizes those pre-existing intellectual projects. Beyond his references to South African sociology under the apartheid regime, I have only found one article where he mentioned – very briefly – participatory action research or feminist methodologies as threads of what he calls organic public sociology (Burawoy, 2009a). For the most part, such lineage gets erased, it disappears; why does Burawoy not emphasize such genealogy instead of hiding it? Rather than coining a new label for such a widespread practice, would not it be more sensible to make explicit reference to the large body of work – mostly produced in the Global South – in which US organic public sociology could insert itself?

Such lineage should be affirmed instead of appropriated; however, can we imagine this kind of exercise being implemented? It is hard to imagine, for here we are facing structural dynamics that go well beyond this particular example of public sociology. We are confronting the coloniality of power and knowledge within academia (Grosfoguel, 2013), and the hierarchies it informs regarding knowledge production and validation. It is an all too familiar situation for scholars in the South, who often see their own experiences – the ways in which they apprehend the world and theorize their own realities – expropriated/appropriated by Northern scholars; as Linda T Smith expressed, 'they came, they saw, they named, they claimed' (1999: 80).

In conversation with Edward Webster, he emphasized Michael Burawoy's long-term relationship with SWOP, and affirmed that this was not a case of appropriation but rather one of mutual learning, intellectual exchange and co-production of knowledge through the years. For Webster, this was definitely more a symbiotic relation than an exploitative one; and during my time at SWOP I have witnessed Burawoy's commitment with this

institute and with South African social sciences at large. However, what I am trying to stress is that beyond Burawoy's genuine will there are structural elements at play that cannot be overlooked. Ultimately, 'public sociology' is taken as Burawoy's creation; it is celebrated as one of his main contributions to contemporary sociological thought, a grand theoretical scheme 'created by an American-based white male full professor teaching in one of the leading sociology departments in the country', as Evelyn Nakano Glenn critically remarked (2007: 214). Burawoy gets all the credit for the 'public sociology' proposal, credit that translates into different types of capital within the academic field.

Burawoy's prominent position within the discipline – he is past president of the American Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association – allowed him to make a local (US) concept circulate and be discussed and adopted within global academic circuits. At the same time, for the same reasons, those in a subordinated position within the field – mostly Southern intellectuals – will eventually re-name their practices after that concept that is not 'local' anymore. That is very far from 'provincializing' US sociology.

The fact that Edward Webster's article is titled 'The promise and pitfalls of public sociology in apartheid South Africa', instead of 'The promise and pitfalls of critical engagement (or liberation sociology) in apartheid South Africa', as he named his own praxis back in time – the very same praxis that influenced Burawoy's theorization in the first place – illustrates the epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) embedded in this politics of naming; a violence that should be acknowledged and discussed if we aim at building a different sociology, a different relation with knowledge production and academic work. We must be attentive to these dynamics. There is a need to confront and decolonize the international division and stratification of sociological labour (Bhambra, 2014). Other social science traditions and practices have to be respected and engaged in horizontal dialogue. Many of the epistemic, theoretical and methodological projects that I mentioned before as precursors of Burawoy's organic public sociology, were explicitly aimed at the decolonization of knowledge production. Already in 1970, Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda published a strong critique of the Eurocentric geopolitics of knowledge, *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual* [Our Science and Intellectual Colonialism], calling for a sociology that takes seriously the knowledge produced from subaltern/colonial experiences and social realities beyond the categories and theories of dominant Western social science. Such spirit is missing in Burawoy's model of public sociology.

Intra-disciplinary hierarchy

As part of his theorization around public sociology, Michael Burawoy delimited the internal boundaries of the discipline through the answers given to the questions, 'sociology for whom?' and 'sociology for what?' The first question implied the distinction between academic audiences and publics beyond the university. The second discriminated between instrumental and reflexive knowledge. The result was a two-by-two table (as shown in Table 1) that differentiated four types of sociology: professional, critical, policy and public.

This framework allows us to map how sociology varies among countries, but also its variations over time within a given context. In Burawoy's model each of the four types

Table 1. The disciplinary field of sociology.

Audience/Knowledge	Academic	Extra-academic
Instrumental	Professional	Policy
Reflexive	Critical	Public

Source: Burawoy (2004b: 18).

of sociology had its own knowledge-practices and notion of truth, and subscribed to its own grounds of legitimation and mechanisms of accountability. These four sociologies were connected by a relationship of ‘antagonistic interdependence’ (Burawoy, 2015), and when isolated from – or too dominant over – the other types, each sociology suffered from its own pathology, ‘professional knowledge becomes self-referential, critical knowledge becomes dogmatic, policy knowledge becomes a captive of power and public knowledge becomes populist or faddish’ (Burawoy, 2014b: 136).

At some point, however, Burawoy changed the model from one of ‘antagonistic interdependence’ to one marked by a strong hierarchical configuration, in which professional sociology appeared as the *sine qua non* of all sociologies. In this sense, for Burawoy there can be no public sociology without a professional sociology that provides ‘the ammunition, the expertise, the knowledge, the insight, and the legitimacy for sociologists to present themselves to publics or to powers’ (2004a: 105). The logic that underpins this hierarchy, the reason why professional sociology predominates over the other types of sociological knowledge, remains unclear. Burawoy insists that only professional sociology offers the necessary ‘true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks’ (2005a: 10), but that claim seems hard to sustain.

On the one hand, the idea that there are some researchers that produce true knowledge, and others devoted to translating and disseminating such knowledge to different publics reinforces the image of first-class and second-class scientists that Patricia Hill Collins employed to question the benefits of institutionalizing public sociology. On the other hand, the constant dialogue, negotiation and confrontation between different perspectives that are constitutive of (organic) public engagement operate as a source of creativity and intellectual innovation, challenging academic knowledge and advancing social science in theoretical and methodological terms. New concepts, theory and questions emerge as a result of the close connection with our ‘publics’, grounded in empirical findings which must, of course, be put to the test of the academic community. Thus, public engagement cannot be understood simply as the dissemination of accumulated sociological expertise; rather, it is part of the process of knowledge creation itself.

Edward Webster explained in his article how it was precisely ‘the rootedness of the sociological endeavour in the struggles of working people’ that enabled the success of his research project on miners’ underground safety. That factor was essential: it made possible the production of new academic knowledge and scholarly publications that deepened our understanding of the topic under study; it empowered the workers and strengthened the union, facilitating its growth; it motivated the elaboration of pamphlets that translated the research findings into the various vernacular languages of the miners,

and that circulated widely among the workers; and it led to policy innovation, since one of the first reforms of Nelson Mandela's government was to amend the 'Mine Health and Safety Act' in correspondence with the research conclusions. In this sense, SWOP's tradition of critical engagement challenges Burawoy's subordination of all types of sociology to professional sociology. As happens with other traditions of activist scholarship, the practice of critical engagement combines public sociology, policy sociology and critical sociology in the process of forming, testing and improving sociological knowledge (Von Holdt, 2014).

By privileging professional sociology over other types of sociology Burawoy might be trying to pave the way for a smoother acceptance of the institutionalization of public sociology. Nevertheless, his positionality within the discipline may provide a better explanation. Burawoy has argued that in order to fully understand the objections to his proposal, the different analysts must be located within the division of the disciplinary field since 'each protagonist adopts a perspective tied to his or her place in the (di)vision of sociology' (2007c: 244). Being faithful to this logic, Burawoy's arguments – in this case, the intra-disciplinary hierarchy defining his model – can also be explained by situating him within that very same framework: he is located at the core of professional sociology, he theorizes and promotes public sociology but he does not practise public sociology, and he himself is also involved in the struggles of domination that characterize (and constitute) the disciplinary field in the United States and globally.

Beyond a dissemination model of public sociology

In his work on the 'extended case method', Burawoy claimed that as opposed to positive science, 'reflexive science elevates dialogue as its defining principle and intersubjectivity between participant and observer as its premise' (2009b: 39). He also affirmed that the reflexive model of science 'embraces not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge' (2009b: 20). In fact, it could be said that Burawoy's methodological contributions to a certain extent resemble – and speak to – some of the elements that I put forward for discussion in this article. However, there seems to be a divide between the methodological dimension of his own sociological work, formulated in the extended case method, and his theorization around public sociology.

A narrow notion of public sociology, taken primarily as the unidirectional flow of knowledge from the academic expert to extra-academic audiences, is based on a weak understanding of dialogue and intersubjectivity. Public sociology is genuinely concerned with the questions of 'knowledge for what and for whom' but it fails to problematize the politics of knowledge production, to take seriously other people's reflexivity and ways of knowing, and to transform the methodological dimension of research correspondingly. It fails to engage 'publics' as far more than audiences, moving beyond a dissemination model and towards more collaborative logics and practices of knowledge production.

That move would entail a displacement from hierarchical expert dominated processes, based on professional authority, to more dialogical in-fieldwork engagements. To some extent, that idea is embedded in Webster's reflection on his two case studies. He explains that the underground safety study was more successful mainly because it drew on workers' knowledge; it was relevant and useful for the miners in terms of collective empowerment

and policy change; and most importantly, ‘the research had the support from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) from its inception and it was defined as a cooperative inquiry by both the researchers and the researched’. The AIDS study, on the other hand, was conceived and commissioned by an international NGO, a completely different scenario that eventually became a source of conflict between the researchers and the union.

The shift towards knowledge co-production incorporates those usually targeted as subjects of study into the joint design and implementation of the project, a logic that should operate through every step of the research process. This will produce new insights and theorizations, can bring to light methodological innovations and challenging research questions, and can impact on policy and have direct relevance for the research subjects, blurring the boundaries between theory and practice. However, instead of embracing this opportunity Burawoy insists on fostering a weak version of engagement,

Let’s be clear what the public sociologist is up to. The purpose is to generate public debate about public issues, about the goals of society. In so doing the public sociologist is not a scientist producing knowledge but a publicist engendering debate and to that extent accountable to publics. (2015: 6)

At this point, there are some disciplinary considerations that need to be taken into account. In my PhD dissertation I explored the emerging logics and practices of collective action in Spain. I intended to develop a collaborative research, operating a shift from working *on* social movements to working and thinking together *with* social movement activists, advancing knowledge that might be meaningful for both social sciences and the ‘research subjects’. For that purpose, I enrolled and carried out my project within a department of social anthropology. I took this decision thinking that anthropology would be the best possible location for this type of undertaking: first, due to the specific configuration of the Spanish academic field, in which anthropology as a discipline occupies a peripheral location within social science, a position allowing for greater levels of experimentation, whereas sociology is more central and, in general, more rigid (a differentiation particularly prominent in the university in which I was based). But also, beyond this contextual reason, I took this decision because I consider that as a result of the complexities of its own history, anthropology tends to be more open than other disciplines to the substantive notion of collaboration that I wanted to put forward in my project. This does not mean that there have been no collaborative explorations in sociology, but those practices have been usually located at the margins of the discipline. Conversely, in anthropology collaboration has in the last years explicitly moved from the margins to the centre, becoming one of the key tropes – the fulcrum – to re-imagine and transform research.

This situation was the outcome of the combined effect of two profound critiques experienced by anthropology in the last decades, two fundamental crises that brought about the possibility for a multidimensional redefinition of the discipline. First, was the ‘rebellion’ of the research subjects themselves against the extractive character and the legacies of colonialism embedded in the discipline. Tired of being treated as objects, the populations traditionally studied by anthropologists, usually subaltern groups and communities, started to question ‘the rights and the intentions’ of those who wanted to gain access to them (Wolf, 2001: 79). They demanded a greater control over knowledge production and

circulation, and called for more reciprocal and negotiated relationships and practices, sometimes developing strict research protocols that obliged the scholar to take into consideration the needs and concerns of the groups studied.

Reflecting upon the case of Colombian anthropology, where these elements emerged through the connection between ethnography and the struggles of the indigenous movement during the 1970s, Vasco Uribe claimed that,

‘Being there,’ in the field, has been transformed by decolonization. The very basis of doing ethnography is eroded by the unprecedented question, ‘Who do we think we are to seek to describe them?’ The very possibility of being in the field is placed in doubt, and even when this is possible, it is no longer feasible to continue working under the conditions and according to the criteria and interests of the ethnographer. (2011: 47–48)

Together with this decolonial/decolonizing process, the second critique, the so-called ‘crisis of representation’, was a reflexive movement/moment generated within the discipline in the 1980s. It deconstructed the politics of ethnographic writing and its representational practices (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), problematizing the ways in which traditional anthropology had produced its ‘regimes of truth’, and questioning ethnographic authority. A reductionist understanding of this critique led in some cases to hyper-subjectivist forms of textual retreat, some sort of ‘solipsistic literary practice’ (Comaroff, 2010); others scholars, however, sought to move forward rethinking and transforming in-fieldwork encounters through methodological experimentation.

Collaboration, the reframing of the relationship between researcher and research subjects for the co-production of knowledge, is one way in which anthropology is re-inventing its epistemological and methodological coordinates, as well as its theoretical and empirical horizons. Not all anthropologists celebrate this collaborative turn; but as a matter of fact, collaborative logics and practices are taking up a more central position in the field, reshaping the relationships we establish with the research subjects by means of ‘an approach to ethnography that deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process’ (Lassiter, 2008: 74).

Towards collaborative praxis

It is possible to distinguish two models within this collaborative framework, articulated from different epistemic locations and distinct understandings of the purpose of academic work. First, we find those projects exploring sites of ‘expert’ knowledge production in which subjects – from scientists to artists, cultural elite actors, members of international institutions and corporations, etc. – operate as epistemic communities whose intellectual practices often resemble those of social science scholars. These highly reflexive communities consider research, broadly conceived, as a key element of their everyday tasks, exercising what Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2008) have termed ‘para-ethnography’, rich and critical registers, analysis, descriptions and explanations addressing their own practices and organizational cultures, their own worlds. Working with expert communities, ‘usually socially privileged, quasi-sovereign, often able to restrict ethnographic access’ (Boyer, 2008: 43), the classic conditions

of fieldwork engagement change drastically. Researchers are forced to treat research subjects as more than mere informants, and collaboration becomes the very condition of possibility for developing and sustaining research. The specific features of such undertakings might occasionally turn the anthropologist into a 'circumstantial activist' (Marcus, 2013) but activism is not the driving force behind these projects. Instead, the challenge is the re-functioning of ethnography, the accomplishment of theoretical and methodological innovation by working together with expert communities and cultures of expertise in which 'emergent social and cultural forms are being devised and enacted' (Holmes and Marcus, 2008: 82).

Then, we find the wide set of research practices that I mentioned before, defined by 'fostering collaboration simultaneously on the political level and at the level of ethnographic analysis' (Rappaport, 2008: 4). Within this context, the notion of expertise itself becomes a matter of dispute. Ethical and political considerations inform fieldwork collaboration for knowledge production; and the dialogic engagement with the research subjects is explicitly built upon a shared commitment to social transformation, as well as upon the alignment or solidarities with particular social movement organizations. Projects within this framework do not solely respond to disciplinary problems or academic debates; rather, the interests, needs, concerns and analyses of our research subjects-collaborators frame to a large extent the contours of every stage of the project, in an explicit effort to destabilize the traditional divides between theory and practice, and between 'informed expert' and 'informant'.

In both models, collaboration is today less a choice on the part of the researcher than a precondition for the ethnographic project/process to happen. Neither the 'elite' actors nor the subaltern subjects and communities in struggle will easily tolerate 'being studied'. Against this backdrop, academics must commit to the principles and guidelines defined by the research subjects regarding knowledge production, which set the terms of the research engagement. Our co-researchers negotiate and/or determine what knowledge should be produced, how and for what purposes, asserting a significant degree of control during the research project to ensure that it is a non-extractive process, that benefits the communities, that meets their ethical standards and protocols, and that it does not re-produce epistemic violence.

Both the anthropology of experts, which to some extent resembles the role and aspirations of professional sociology, and the anthropology merging research with activism, take the key elements of reflexive science – dialogue and intersubjectivity – much further than Burawoy's dissemination model of public sociology. Here, instead of thinking of the researcher as the only actor invested with the skills and authority for complex analysis and interpretation, the research subjects are considered as active agents of knowledge production, and their epistemic locations and knowledge practices are taken as a departure point for our projects.

According to Holmes and Marcus, when working with reflexive communities the point is 'to integrate fully our subjects' analytical acumen and insights to define the issues at stake in our projects as well as the means by which we explore them' (2008: 86). Again, such 'integration' will only be possible if the researcher devolves a significant share of control over the research process. For collaboration to happen, the position of the professional scholar needs to be decentred: we must question our conventional

practices, we must unlearn our academic authority and privilege, in order to be able to modify – and if necessary, subordinate – our own plans, goals and expectations to those of the co-researchers.

There is some friction between this proposal and Webster's notion of critical engagement. For collaborative approaches, the appropriation of the project on the part of the research subjects is a precondition for its success; anthropological research advances precisely 'by deferring to, absorbing, and being altered by found reflexive subjects – by risking collaborative encounters of uncertain outcomes for the production of ethnographic knowledge' (Holmes and Marcus, 2008: 84). In this sense, the nature of the in-fieldwork encounter gets deeply transformed, shifting from being a time-space of data production to being one of co-analysis, co-conceptualization and co-theorization (Rappaport, 2008), a process which could also include the joint writing of research outputs in different registers and for different publics.

Research cannot always be designed and/or developed collaboratively, and not all topics or actors are suited to this approach. To begin with, there must be a group of collaborators who can take the lead in the co-analysis, who are motivated to appropriate the project, and who engage in some sort of critical reflexivity and conceptual production upon their own practices – dimensions that are not always present in collective actors. Moreover, collaboration has its own pitfalls; it is usually tensed by multiple heterogeneous demands coming from both the academic field and the research subjects/collaborators, which have to be continuously addressed and renegotiated. However, what I want to emphasize is that collaboration – understood here as knowledge co-production – enables the direct engagement with publics in and through the research process itself, going well beyond a dissemination model of public sociology. Within this context, professional, critical and policy sociology can become collaborative and hence immediately public.

Thus, in order to rethink Burawoy's model and further reconsider sociological practice, we need to move beyond the questions of 'knowledge for whom and for what', to address also other central dimensions in research: How do we produce knowledge? Whom are we thinking and learning with? What kind of knowledges and experiences are we taking seriously? Not all sociology must be critical, collaborative and/or public; but the critiques elaborated through this article are important if we aspire to produce a sociology of liberation adapted to our times, a decolonial social science, that defends human life and human dignity – society itself – against market, state and epistemic fundamentalism.

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Author biography

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Résumé

Cet article se propose de questionner le modèle de la « sociologie publique » de Burawoy en examinant plusieurs de ses limitations épistémiques et méthodologiques. En premier lieu, l'auteur souligne l'ambiguïté de la proposition de Burawoy en insistant sur l'absence de délimitation claire du concept de « sociologie publique ». En deuxième lieu, l'auteur établit un lien entre la réussite de la sociologie publique et la division mondiale du travail sociologique en soulignant l'importance de la « géopolitique de la connaissance » mise en jeu dans les travaux de Burawoy et en appelant à la décolonisation des sciences sociales. L'auteur critique la hiérarchie entre les différents types de sociologie proposée par Burawoy et la préférence accordée à la sociologie professionnelle sur les autres pratiques de la discipline. L'examen de ces éléments est l'occasion d'observer les modes de fonctionnement de notre discipline et de faire des propositions pour contribuer à sa transformation. Dans cette optique, dans la dernière partie de l'article, l'auteur insiste sur la nécessité de dépasser le modèle de la sociologie publique (caractérisée par la diffusion à sens unique de la « connaissance des experts » vers le public en général) pour aller vers une compréhension collaborative de la production du savoir.

Mots-clés

Sociologie publique, recherche collaborative, géopolitique de la connaissance, violence épistémique, décolonisation des sciences sociales

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un análisis crítico del modelo de sociología pública de Michael Burawoy, discutiendo varias de sus limitaciones epistémicas y metodológicas. En primer lugar, el autor se centrará en la ambigüedad de la propuesta de Burawoy, problematizando la ausencia de una delimitación clara del concepto de “sociología pública”. En segundo lugar, el autor relacionará el éxito académico de la categoría de sociología pública con la división global del trabajo sociológico, enfatizando la “geopolítica del conocimiento” involucrada en la obra de Burawoy y llamando a la descolonización de las ciencias sociales. Luego, el autor expondrá sus preocupaciones con respecto a la jerarquía de los diferentes tipos de sociología propuesta por Burawoy, que privilegia la sociología profesional sobre otros tipos de praxis sociológica. Reflexionar sobre estos elementos proporcionará una buena oportunidad para observar cómo funciona nuestra disciplina, promoviendo también sugerencias para su transformación. En esta última parte del artículo, el autor explicará la necesidad de ir más allá de un modelo de difusión de la sociología pública -la difusión unidireccional del “conocimiento experto” hacia el público extra-académico- y hacia una comprensión más colaborativa de la producción de conocimiento.

Palabras clave

Sociología pública, Investigación colaborativa, Geopolítica del conocimiento, Violencia epistémica, Descolonización de las ciencias sociales