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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public sociology in the age of Obama[1]

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This article begins by describing the genesis of the idea of public sociology to better assess its meaning and significance. I then move from the particular account to a general formulation of the four types of knowledge that comprise the sociological field and its division of labor. All four types of knowledge are necessary ingredients for a flourishing discipline. From the general I return to the particular, pointing out different national expressions of this division of sociological labor and the conflicts they engender. Antagonisms notwithstanding, sociologists do share a distinctive project rooted in the defense and expansion of civil society, which brings me to the final point. With their roots in civil society, sociologists have a stake in responses to market fundamentalism and the economic crises it has caused. Inspired by these eventful times, public sociologists can now emerge from their academic shells to take their place in shaping the direction of society.

Keywords: public sociology; markets; division of labor

Public sociology is about sociology's public commitment and today there are many reasons for seeking this commitment anew and on the global scale. Moreover, in some countries the term "public" is negatively or ambivalently connoted and this spills over into public sociology. In Japanese, for instance, the term for "public" is permeated with ambiguity, as it has connotations of "officialdom" not associated with the English word. In Russian, on the other hand, the term is so tainted, due in part to its association with the Communist regime, that translators of "public" sociology have tried to find an alternative word, but without much success. "Public sociology" can truly get lost in translation! These tasks of interpretation and translation are made all the more difficult because of the intense debates, both in the United States and elsewhere, concerning the meaning and place, the pitfalls and pathologies of public sociology. Finally, the circulation of an idea is especially dangerous when the originating context is a hegemonic world power, and even more so when the idea is accompanied by claims to universalism.

Still, it is important to talk and reflect about public sociology because sociologists, despite national traditions and global inequalities, share a common interest, even a mission, to combat the market fundamentalism that has proliferated throughout the world – a project that is now showing signs of rupture and exhaustion. The three chickens of market fundamentalism – deregulation of the financial sphere, commercialization and privatization of nature and the exploitation

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and repression of labor – have come home to roost, portending global depression. But, just as the Great Depression of the 1930s gave rise to Fascism and Stalinism as well as to Social Democracy and the New Deal, the anticipated depression will present its own dangers as well as possibilities. We are approaching a fork in the road where sociologists can join what Max Weber called the switch men and switch women of history.

The election of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States, a historic event in its own right, coincides with a deepening economic crisis. In all likelihood it signals the beginning of a US counter-movement against market fundamentalism – a counter-movement forced upon the new administration as it was upon the tail-end of the old. What is not clear is the political color of such a counter-movement, its connection to grassroots and whether it can be confined to the national level, i.e. whether an effective counter-movement must necessarily be global. Will the grassroots movement the Obama election campaign unleashed continue and, if so, will it be sufficiently powerful to force him into a progressive New Deal-like response to the ongoing crisis? Will his race and his rhetoric ignite struggles for social justice in the United States, and even abroad? Will he be captive of the hope and the imagination he has inspired? There is real uncertainty about what lies ahead.

Whatever directions the Obama administration may take to combat the ongoing crisis – and the directions are in any case sure to be contradictory – sociologists have their own interests in channelling the counter-movements towards a stronger and more democratic civil society and a more robust and inclusive public sphere. This is so, not simply because it is the progressive thing to do, but because the vitality of sociology is rooted in civil society, as the standpoint of sociology is civil society. Thus, in this era of indeterminacy, public sociology – sociology's public commitment – will have both the opportunity and the obligation to defend sociology's *raison d'être*, and, thereby, a certain shared universal interest. Not just sociology, but also humanity as a whole, has an interest in creating and then preserving a vibrant civil society.

This article has five parts. I begin by describing the genesis of the idea of public sociology to help better assess its meaning and significance. I then move from the particular account to a general formulation of the four types of knowledge comprising our discipline's – and any other discipline's – division of labor. All four types are necessary for a flourishing discipline. From the general I return to the particular, pointing out different national expressions of this division of sociological labor and the conflicts they engender. Antagonisms notwithstanding, sociologists do share a distinctive project rooted in the defense and expansion of civil society, which brings me to the final point. With their roots in civil society, sociologists have a stake in responses to market fundamentalism and the economic crises it has caused. Inspired by these eventful times, public sociologists can now emerge from their academic shells to take their place in shaping the direction of society.

A vision of public sociology

My vision of public sociology was born in South Africa. I returned there in 1990 after the academic boycott had been lifted. It was my first visit since 1968, invited to address the Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa (ASSA). For the previous decade I had been doing field research in industrial centers in socialist Hungary, so I was in South Africa to talk about the demise of state socialism as experienced by its working class. There was much interest in this topic, as South Africa's movement for

liberation – centered as it was on its working class and supported by long-standing connections to the Soviet Union – had deeply imbibed the ideas of socialism. To be more precise, the writing was on the wall for the apartheid regime, the last colonial order in Africa. If the class and community struggles provided the dynamite that would bring down the old regime, what would happen to their protagonists in the new South Africa?

Listening to the panels at the ASSA conference in 1990, I was stunned and exhilarated by the involvement of sociologists in the trenches of civil society, the ardent debates that emanated from those trenches and the originality of their theories of race, state and society. How different they were from what I had become accustomed to in the United States – a hyper-professionalized sociology that fetishized its separation from society, a self-referential community that organized and policed the exchange of papers and ideas, remote from the world it studied, a community that inducted its graduate students as though they were entering a secret society. Here then lay the origin of my distinction between a professional and a public sociology.

I left Hungary in transition to capitalism and throughout the 1990s turned to research in Russia. There I would follow the tragic demise, or what I called economic "involution", of the Soviet order, creating enormous disparities in wealth and living conditions. But before the decline set in, there were moments of hope and optimism. During the twilight of *perestroika* and the opening years of post-Soviet Russia I witnessed another vital public sociology that appeared from nowhere, borne on the waves of an effervescent civil society. The last gasp of the Soviet era gave birth to the halcyon years of sociology, but the ensuing, calamitous transition to a market economy transformed sociologists into opinion pollsters and market researchers, pursuing the crudest form of client-driven policy work. Of course, with a few notable exceptions, Soviet sociology had never had much professional autonomy. It had always been the ideological tool of the party–state, so its relapse into such an instrumental role was not surprising. If South African sociology showed the dark side of US professional sociology, the sorry state of Russian sociology brought out the virtues of strong professional sociology. Without the strong backbone of professional sociology there can be no sociology worthy of the name, neither policy sociology nor public sociology. It is not without reason that Russian sociologists say today that public sociology, before it is anything else, is the public defense of an autonomous professional sociology.

Yes, we need a professional sociology, but we also have to keep an eye on it. It needs to be subject to continual criticism and the community of professional sociologists cannot be relied on to supply auto-criticism. Thus, we need to cultivate a brand of critical sociologists who will make it their business to challenge the foundations of professional sociology and its research programs. In the United States people such as Robert Lynd (1939), Pitirim Sorokin (1956), C. Wright Mills (1959), Alvin Gouldner (1970) or Dorothy Smith (1987) come to mind as exemplars of critical sociology. By unearthing the value foundations of professional sociology and holding them up for examination, discussion and debate, critical sociology not only redirects professional sociology, but also sustains and stimulates public sociology.

Dividing sociological labor

We have four types of sociology – professional, policy, critical and public – each with its own distinctive practice and purpose, its own notion of truth and politics. This

scheme has been derived from my experiences in different countries, but its universality follows from two fundamental questions that we, as professional sociologists, all too conveniently repress. The first is: Knowledge for Whom? Are we talking to ourselves or to audiences beyond the academy? The second question is: Knowledge for What? Here I invoke a distinction to be found at the core of the writings of Max Weber and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, i.e. the differentiation between instrumental knowledge concerned with determining the appropriate means for given ends, and reflexive knowledge concerned with the discussion of ends themselves.

Thus, policy sociology is defined as the solving of "problems" defined by clients. The client may be an NGO, a politician, a trade union or any entity that has predefined goals and the resources to obtain the services of a sociologist. Professional sociology, on the other hand, pursues "puzzles" defined by research programs. Puzzles are only such within a given framework – Japanese economic development was only an enigma in the context of an evolutionary modernization theory. Social change was only a riddle within the framework of a structural functionalism that took social stability and value consensus for granted. Student rebellion was a puzzle within political sociology only because anything outside electoral and party politics, i.e. social movements, was viewed as irrational. Restriction of output was an unknown quantity in industrial sociology only because it was assumed that workers and managers had common interests. National variations in social mobility remained a mystery within stratification theory as long as the structure of occupations was assumed to be invariant. That is how science develops: by taking as given a range of assumptions that define a paradigm and then wrestling with its internal contradictions and external anomalies.

A successful researcher can no more challenge these assumptions – Imre Lakatos (1978) calls them the negative heuristic – than a serious chess player can question the rules of the game. Sociologists, embedded in their research programs, cannot pursue these puzzles and at the same time question the assumptions upon which these puzzles are based. For that, you need people who specialize in questioning assumptions, critical sociologists. Here there is Sorokin's (1956) critique of the obsession with quantification or Gouldner's (1970) critique of structural functionalism. If critical sociology involves a dialogue with other sociologists about the foundations of professional sociology, public sociology is the dialogue about the foundations of society with publics beyond the academy (Table 1).

In order better to appreciate what I understand public sociology to be, let me distinguish between traditional and organic public sociology. Traditional public sociology includes the celebrities of our discipline. Examples from my own department at Berkeley would have to include Robert Bellah, a major interpreter of Japan, but also the leading author of the widely-read *Habits of the heart* (Bellah *et al*. 1985), an account of American individualism in a lineage stretching back to Alexis De Tocqueville and David Riesman, both traditional public sociologists in

Table 1. The division of sociological labor

	Academic audience	Extra-academic audience
Instrumental knowledge	Professional	Policy
Reflexive knowledge	Critical	Public

their own right. Then Robert Blauner (1972) would also have to be included, whose radical exposé of racism, *Racial oppression in America*, was widely read in the 1970s. More recently, Arlie Hochschild's (Hochschild and Machung 1989, Hochschild 1997) *The second shift* and *Time-bind* were defining texts in the debates on work and family. All these books bring a sociological perspective to public issues, or, in the immortal words of C. Wright Mills (1959), they turn private troubles into public issues. They do so by the specifically sociological exercise of showing the interconnection between micro-experience and macro-structure.

The publics addressed by traditional public sociology are broad, thin, passive and mainstream. They have an amorphous presence. Indeed, for Mills, paradoxically, they barely exist in his mass society, just as for Pierre Bourdieu (2000), another traditional public sociologist, people are impervious to the sociological message. Habituated to subjugation, they cannot comprehend the conditions of their existence. So who is Bourdieu talking to? Anthony Giddens (1984), himself a traditional public sociologist, takes the opposite view that people rapidly absorb the sociological message, so that what sociology is today will be folk wisdom tomorrow! All these commentators share the view that sociological education emanates from above.

Organic public sociology is very different and assumes that subjugated populations possess, to use Antonio Gramsci's (1971) diction, a kernel of good sense contained in their common sense. Sociological education is an unmediated dialogue between sociologist and a putative or actual public, deploying sociology to elaborate the core of insight into social structure that we all possess. Apart from Gramsci, there are such distinguished educators as Paulo Freire (1970) and feminists like Dorothy Smith (2005) who believe in working from the experience of the oppressed. Here, Alain Touraine's (1988) action sociology can also be included, which deepens the insights of social movement militants through the discussions and interventions orchestrated by sociologists. In this case the public is thick rather than thin, local rather than broad, active rather than passive, oppositional rather than mainstream.

The organic public sociologist, who works in the trenches of civil society, is invisible and very different from the traditional public sociologist, whose effectiveness depends upon his or her visibility. For the organic public sociologist, the challenge is to negotiate three sets of power relations: first, within the academic community that often spurns such engagement; second, between him or herself and the community of engagement; and, third, the power relations within the community. For the traditional public sociologist, the challenge is primarily to cope with the mediators of his or her message. Not surprisingly, Bourdieu (1998) and Mills (1956) both railed against the power and the distortions of the mass media upon which they relied for disseminating their public commentaries.

There is often a deep animosity between the two types of public sociologist. The traditional public sociologist regards close encounters with publics as contaminating, whilst the organic public sociologists regards knowledge incubated in the academy as serving the powers that be. This mutual hostility has its roots within the academic hierarchy as well as ideology, but I will argue that each benefits from the presence of the other – the traditional public sociologist gives overarching direction and legitimacy to and receives energy and insight from the intense involvement of the organic public sociologist.

National and global configurations of the sociological field

So far we have moved from the particular to the general, from the specific experiences of sociology in different countries to the fundamental questions defining the matrix of disciplinary knowledge. Now we must return to the particular. Our four-fold scheme depicts a division of sociological labor, within which sociologists specialize in one or more types of knowledge and through which they travel as their careers unfold. The division of labor also represents a configuration of domination among the four types of knowledge that vary over time and by country. Thus, US sociology is today heavily weighted in favor of professional sociology, but this has not always been the case. US sociology began as public sociology in the nineteenth century and developed a strong policy moment in the first half of the twentieth century. Nor should we over-generalize about contemporary US sociology. The configuration of the field looks very different in a community college with its overriding emphasis on teaching than it does in the public universities of the state system, which, in turn, exhibit a different configuration from the top research departments.

Let us go further afield and glance at two contrasting national contexts. In Russia, policy sociology is ascendant, but without the backing of a strong professional sociology, whilst in Scandinavia policy sociology is also strong, but is here supported by (and beholden to) equally strong professional and public moments. In South Africa, Brazil and India the public moment is stronger, although here, too, there is increasing pressure for sociologists to enter the policy realm – pressure from the state and from university administrations – intensified, at least in South Africa, by the demobilization of civil society. In France, the public moment is notoriously strong, accompanied as much by critical sociology as by professional sociology. Time and again I have heard French sociologists lament the weakness of their professional sociology, as against "hyper-critical" sociology on the one side and "experts" on the other. It should not be forgotten either that sociology barely exists in many poor countries, so even talking of a division of labor makes no sense. Mapping the different national fields of sociology would be a major undertaking!

We can also begin to identify the contours of a global division of sociological labor in which national fields come to be organized in some sort of recognizable hierarchy. Thus, a process of "internationalization" can be observed, reflected in increasing pressure on states to rank their system of higher education on an international scale, rating their universities, departments and individual scholars. The criteria center on international accreditation, publications in international journals and references from international scholars, where international is generally understood to mean North America or Europe. This formal professionalization pushes academics into studying their own countries through the lens of alien paradigms and it makes them accountable to foreign scholars rather than national and local audiences. It encourages writing in English and "sociologese" for international academic audiences rather than in languages accessible to national or local publics. Extreme cases of such internationalization can be found in such countries as Israel and Taiwan, reflecting their geopolitical position in the world. Yet, even here reactions can be found to the dominant trend, bifurcating the field into a cosmopolitan professional wing oriented towards the international community and a local public sociology oriented towards local communities. Japan is a particularly interesting case, about which I know little, where sociology cultivated its own tradition of national folklore at the same time as it was heavily influenced from

outside, by German sociology before World War Two and by US sociology after World War Two. Yet, since it has become a global power, it has also developed a resolute independence from international pressure, based on its prestigious universities and academic traditions.

US and European hegemonies generate responses ranging from an embrace of internationalization and connection to Northern metropolises to a rejection of all that is Western, promoting indigenous sociologies and thereby risking isolationism. Emergent regional dialogues, such as that pioneered by the Japanese Sociological Society with South Korea and China, or the powerful cooperative communities set up across Latin America and represented in ALAS (the Latin American Sociological Association), are steering a middle course. In "semi-peripheral" countries such as India, Brazil and South Africa, subaltern sociologies are challenging the hegemony of the North by affirming the critical and public moments of sociology against formal professionalism. Such tendencies do not deny the importance of professionalism, but rather make it responsive to local issues, turning it, as Weber might put it, from a formal to a substantive professionalization. The hegemony of European theory and US research programs, the latter backed up by enormous material resources, is palpable the world over. But we should be careful not to essentialize US sociology, since it, too, is divided. This is nowhere more apparent than in the "public sociology wars" waged in a wide range of venues and published in such journals as *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *The American Sociologist*, *Contemporary Sociology* and *Critical Sociology* as well as in a series of edited volumes. The battle lines, predictably enough, fall along those of the division of labor, so that professional sociologists are likely to condemn public sociology as bad science, as divisive, as discrediting the discipline or as a cover for politicization. It is said that sociology is not yet mature enough to go public or, if there is to be a public sociology, then it should be under the control of professionals. Critical public sociologies retaliate with attacks on the irrelevance, myopia and chauvinism of professional sociology, seeing the professional claim to value neutrality as an ideology concealing a political agenda of its own. The *Sturm und Drang* of the public sociology wars constitutes a battle for the (re)articulation of the field's division of labor.

When pointing to the world hegemony of US sociology, one should therefore talk of two hegemonies, both contested. On the one hand, there is an external global hegemony that depends upon the absorption and radiation of people, resources, methods and ideas from the United States. Alternative sociologies deriving from Europe, but also from the South (Alatas 2006, Connell 2007), have sought to challenge US global hegemony. On the other hand, this US external hegemony depends upon an internal national hegemony of professional sociology. As has been suggested, this second hegemony of professional sociology is also contested – the very existence of public sociology wars is testimony to this contestation. Since the US field is far from unified, it should be possible to build cross-national alliances between subaltern perspectives within the United States, such as feminism, critical race studies, liberation sociology, Marxism, participatory action research, on the one hand, and subaltern perspectives in other countries, on the other. Indeed, the most effective way to dislodge US global hegemony may come from alliances connecting critical-public projects within the belly of the beast to similar subaltern projects in other countries.

Sociology's unity-in-division

Over the last five years debates, discussions and symposia about public sociology have spread to countries as far apart as France, Denmark, China, Germany, UK, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Canada, Russia, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Iran, Hong Kong and Brazil. The topic proves to be more or less contentious wherever it insinuates itself. The schisms and conflicts, however, vary dramatically from place to place, reflecting the very different fields that they divide. If there is so much division, can it be said that there is a common collective project?

First, although the conflicts are deep, they nonetheless work within a shared understanding of the parameters of our field. The protagonists define themselves in relation to others within the field, in terms of the categories of public, professional, critical and policy. Indeed, it might be said that the antagonisms effectively constitute and then reproduce the contours of the shared division of labor. It is through conflict that the field of sociology is produced and defined, not through any forced or artificial consensus. That is a mark of its vitality.

I would go even further to claim that a thriving sociology requires all four types of knowledge, and that underlying their antagonism there is a fundamental interdependence, the foundation of a symbiotic division of labor. Professional sociology derives its energy from infusions of public sociology, advances under pressure from critical sociology, and is often sustained by policy sociology. Equally, public sociology could not exist if there were not a professional sociology that informs it and upholds its autonomy *vis-à-vis* the publics it engages. It depends on critical sociology for the infusion of values that help it steer a steady course. Critical sociology depends on its antagonist, professional sociology, if only because it would have nothing to criticize without the latter! Antagonists are all locked into a common division of labor, and to the extent that professional sociology becomes irrelevant, critical sociology becomes dogmatic, policy sociology becomes servile or public sociology becomes populist, i.e. to the extent any given type lose touches with and loses respect for the others, all suffer, and our discipline loses its vitality.

This putative unity-in-division, this antagonistic interdependence, is grounded in the standpoint sociologists share, namely the standpoint of civil society, by which I mean the organizations, associations and movements that are neither part of the state nor part of the economy. Without civil society, not only would public sociology disappear, but also sociology *tout court*, as occurred in Hitler's Germany, Pinochet's Chile and Mao's China. This is hardly a surprise. Sociology emerged in Europe and the United States, together with the advent of civil society at the end of the nineteenth century. Saying that we study the world from the standpoint of civil society does not mean that we only study civil society. This is far from the case. Instead, we study the economy from the standpoint of the social – the conditions of existence on the market, the way production generates labor movements, etc. We study the state from the standpoint of its social benefits and subsidies (family, education, political parties, etc.) or its social consequences (atomization, repression, social movements, etc.).

Hence, we are different from economists, who study the world from the standpoint of the market and its expansion, and from political scientists, who study the world from the standpoint of the state and the consolidation of its power. Nevertheless, in both cases there have always been dissenting voices, since they, like sociology, are fields of domination. The significance of public sociology therefore lies

not only in the vibrancy it transmits to professional sociology, but also in its dialogues with publics promoting the very idea of civil society that is the *sine qua non* of the discipline itself. Just as the success of economics lies in its capacity to constitute the object we call the economy and the success of political science is to do the same for the state, the success of sociology lies in the constitution and defense of civil society, which is all the more important in the present conjuncture.

It has been said that the idea of public sociology romanticizes civil society, at the same time demonizing the state and the market. By no means. I am quite well aware that civil society is rent by conflicts, dominations and exclusions. Race, gender and class divide its terrain. These divisions are one reason why sociology is itself so split and pluralistic with its numerous subfields. Put in more analytical terms, it might be said that civil society is Janus-faced: whilst organizing consent to the domination of state and capital, it also provides the best, but still far from perfect, terrain for countering the excesses of state and capital, excesses that generate and deepen so many social inequalities and excesses that have become ever more extreme in recent times.

Sociology and third-wave marketization

Since the mid-1970s we have been experiencing what I would term third-wave marketization. In the United States this has entailed the reversal of social and civil rights as well as redistributive policies gained in the New Deal – from the decline of state regulation of the economy, to the hemorrhaging of the welfare state to the assault on labor unions and basic civil rights. In the Global South it has involved the reversal of socialist and state-run projects of development and their replacement by the structural adjustment programs of privatization and deregulation. In the communist world we witnessed the collapse of Soviet regimes, followed by different forms of shock therapy to bring about the most rapid transition to the market economy. Although the communist regime did not collapse in China, it certainly injected the economy with strong doses of marketization. Asian hold-outs for state-run economic expansion suffered major setbacks in the aftermath of the financial crises that swept through the region in 1997/1998. This wholesale assault on what was social pushed sociology itself into a defensive retreat – with some notable exceptions – after its vibrant expansion in the 1960s and 1970s.

This third wave of marketization – the first wave took place in the nineteenth century and the second wave began after World War One in the twentieth century – is sowing the seeds of its own demise by generating crises of increasing proportions, just like its predecessors. We only need to look at the deregulated US banking system, which had gorged itself on bad loans, a house of cards that would come crashing down with the bursting of the real estate bubble. Despite the unprecedented bail-out, economists predict that this is but the beginning of a deflationary period, a crisis of overproduction that will lead to shrinking economies all over the world. Certainly credit is getting tighter, job losses are reaching historic proportions and, failing another huge bail-out, the US automobile industry has entered its final crisis to date. The forecast is bleak.

History shows what might happen. So destructive were the consequences of the second-wave marketization that began with the end of World War One – widespread destitution, unemployment as well as Fascism and Stalinism, not to mention World War Two – that Karl Polanyi, writing his canonical *The great transformation* in 1944,

believed the lessons had been learned. There could never be another wave of market fundamentalism. He was wrong, but his theory of fictitious commodities can nevertheless be used to frame the crisis we are now facing. For Polanyi, human existence depends on three basic elements – land, labor and money – which if subjected to unregulated commodification threaten human existence. By commodifying land, and we may extend this to air and water, we threaten human sustenance; by commodifying labor we threaten its productive capacity; and by commodifying money we threaten economic enterprise. Polanyi argues that society either reacts or is destroyed when it is faced with the commodification of these three elements. But the medicine is not always pleasant – too often it is made up of repressive regimes that rule over their peoples with an iron fist.

Sociologists must come out of their shells, the shells into which they retreated when market euphoria was raging around them. They must fight for a counter-movement that foregrounds society rather than installing a despotic state or appealing to a market utopia. There is no shortage of examples to inspire us. Sociologists have already been deeply involved in struggles over the privatization of land, e.g. the Special Economic Zones in India, over water privatization, e.g. in South Africa, or the destruction of squatter settlements, e.g. over the rural land expropriations in Brazil. Koichi Hasegawa (2004) has written of citizen intervention in various Japanese environmental movements against nuclear power, dams and reforestation. Sociologists can collaborate with activists on the ground – organic public sociology – or represent environmental issues in the public sphere, like traditional public sociologists. There has to be a place for both.

Similarly, third-wave marketization has dealt devastating reversals to labor organizations across the world, but we also have stirring examples of sociologists giving voice to new ideas about social movement unionism in South Africa, the United States, Brazil and elsewhere. In Spain, sociologists have participated in the Mondragon Cooperative as another vehicle to protect labor from unregulated markets. Finally, we can regard the financial meltdown as a specific case of the unregulated commodification of money, leading states across the world to bail out the very banks whose unrestrained pursuit of profit brought about the crisis in the first place. This has not been a terrain for public sociologists, although it might have been. After all, the different terms of the bail-outs have different implications for society. In this realm, as in others, Latin America, once again, has proven to be the heartland of shining examples – such as local participatory budgeting to bring municipal finances under popular control – that should inspire traditional and organic public sociologists elsewhere.

In short, we are living at a crossroads of history when the old market fundamentalism is dying and the new counter-movements have still to take form. We are entering uncharted waters, where sociologists, equipped with an understanding of the state and the economy from the standpoint of civil society, can help guide the counter-movement into safe waters. Our discipline can turn from a field-in-itself, with a fragmented division of labor, into a field-for-itself, a symbiotic division of labor that can become a social movement for an expanded public sphere rooted in a self-organizing civil society. Alternatively, our discipline can retreat into irrelevance, fiddling with matches while Rome burns.

Note

1. This article was the basis for an address to the Japanese Sociological Society, Tohoku University, Sendai, 23 November 2008.

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