

Public Sociology: The Task and the Promise

Michael Burawoy

I was telling my nephew, a schoolteacher in England, about **public sociology**, and the idea of making sociology comprehensible to people like himself. I told him that I had become an evangelist for public sociology. He looked at me quizzically, trying to imagine his uncle as an evangelist, and then asked: "What's the big deal? Sociology for the people? Isn't that what sociology is for? Isn't it supposed to shed light on people's lives, shouldn't they be able to comprehend it?" He shrugged his shoulders, at a loss to understand what the fuss was about.

CHANGING THE WORLD

He was not the only one! When I travel to South Africa, or India, or Brazil and speak about public sociology to sociologists, they too look bored and bemused. If sociology is not "public," then what on earth is it? Why would anyone bother to do sociology if it did not have a public mission? In each of these countries sociology has been deeply implicated in social movements, in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggles, for example, sociology demonstrated that violence could only be averted if conflict was institutionalized, if workers were given the right to organize into trade unions, if Africans were given residence rights in the cities, and in the final analysis if they were given the vote. Now sociologists are involved in the reconstruction of the post-apartheid state, or in accounting for xenophobic violence, debating these matters in the media.

In Brazil, during the dictatorship, sociologists around Fernando Henrique Cardoso and his colleagues at his Center for Social Science Research, known locally as CEBRAP, developed connections to social movements, fostering the demand for the expansion of rights, and today Brazilian sociologists continue to work with trade unions, or they invent new forms of democracy, such as the now famous scheme of participatory budgeting, whereby citizens collectively decide how to spend municipal funding—for schools, for roads, for parks, for better services, and so on. Similarly, in India, sociologists are actively promoting the rights of indigenous people against predatory



What are the different ways that the lessons of sociology can be communicated to the public?

From Kenneth Gould & Tammy Lewis (Eds)

TEN LESSONS IN INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY

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capitalists—both national and international—who want to expropriate the land of the peasantry, or they work with populations displaced by government sponsored dams. Many Indian sociologists assume they will partake in people's struggles by offering interpretations that demonstrate the broader social, economic and political forces that are responsible for their plight. So obviously, sociology has to be public!

After all that is why many of us became interested in sociology in the first place. Perhaps we had read Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* and it stirred us to recognize that the world is made up of more than individuals; that there are social, political, and economic forces that control our destiny; and that we need to understand those forces if we are to improve our society. That was certainly why I became a sociologist. In this lesson I want to illustrate Mills's idea by showing how I made my own life as a sociologist not freely, but under the influence of forces beyond my control. Sociology, says Mills, enables us to "grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society" (Mills 1959, 6). Sociologists cannot be the exception to their own rules. Sociologists are social beings, too, living lives at the intersection of the history of the world and their own biographies.

LOSING NAÏVETÉ AND BECOMING A SOCIOLOGIST

Let us begin when I was a student like you. It was in 1965. I was a mathematics student at the University of Cambridge in England, and that meant you did nothing but mathematics for three years. I hated both Cambridge and mathematics. They seemed irrelevant to the pressing problems of the world that the student protests of that era brought to public attention.

One of the virtues of Cambridge education, however, was the brevity of the terms: eight weeks. This gave me long summer vacations which I exploited by traveling to distant lands on money I saved up during the year from my government scholarship. Just imagine that—money saved on a grant! That's history indeed. These travels—hitch-hiking through Africa, for example, at the end of my first year—opened my eyes not just to the meaning of underdevelopment and the problems it defines. Meeting people on the roads, in the villages and in the towns of Africa, also made me optimistic about the human capacity and ingenuity to overcome those problems.

This was, indeed, an era of optimism; the era of the Beatles, who were my symbolic neighbors. For me the optimism took a particular direction. Despite my own negative experience at university, or perhaps because of it, I thought that education could save the world. So, at the end of my second year in Cambridge, having nearly flunked the exams, I packed my bags and went off to India to study what seemed to be an important problem: the medium of instruction in university education. Should it be English (the inherited language of the colonizer), Hindi (the controversial national language spoken by 30 percent of the population that put people from southern

states at a disadvantage), or one of the 14 official regional languages (of which 10 were spoken by more than 15 million people).

Who was I, a 20 year-old mathematics student, to go off to India to investigate this matter? You may well ask. Fools march in where angels fear to tread. I thought this problem of medium of instruction was a technical issue—which language would be the most effective as a medium of instruction—and so I went around India by third class rail (an experience by itself) dividing university economics classes into two and giving them the same comprehension test in English and the regional language. This was a very crude randomized controlled experiment.

Well, I learned my first and most important sociology lesson: technical problems often turn out to be political problems. The medium of instruction in university education held all sorts of implications for different groups—the national elite who already spoke English could lose privileged access to the best universities, and thus the best jobs, if the medium of instruction became the regional language or Hindi. Regional elites, on the other hand, might reap the benefits of regional language. They would appeal to their people—Bengalis, Tamils, Marathas, Gujaratis—to oppose the imposition of a colonial language (English). In south India, however, there were riots when the north threatened to make Hindi the language of the civil service examination. If they could not secure the legitimacy of their own regional languages, then non-Hindi speakers preferred English. In short this was and has always been a political struggle of intersecting class and regional interests, conducted in the idiom of nationalism. There were many other issues involved in this apparently simple question of the medium of instruction, such as the availability of texts in the regional language, and the brain drain that might follow if the best students were taught in English. But there was no doubt that this was far more than a simple technical issue, far more than whether students were more competent in their regional language, Hindi or English. The result was that I lost my political naïveté and became a sociologist.

POLICY SOCIOLOGIST

I managed, somehow or other, to complete my mathematics degree and immediately quit England for Africa, hoping somehow, someday to become a sociologist. It was 1968, the year of student rebellions. After a period in South Africa, working as a journalist, I ended up in Zambia penniless. Zambia had been a British colony until 1964. At the advice of South African sociologist in exile, Jack Simons, I looked for a job on the Copperbelt, with one of the two major multinational mining corporations. Jack said that we knew about the conditions of workers, but we didn't know what the mining companies were up to, and how they were reacting to the new Zambian government, installed after independence. With my skin color and my Cambridge degree—my cultural capital, as sociologists say—I landed a job in the copper industry's personnel research unit.

As it turns out, I could not have been better situated to investigate the policies of the mining companies through what sociologists call participant observation. At the time the mining companies were trying to develop an integrated wage scale to replace the two segregated wages scales that existed before independence—a wage scale for whites and a wage scale for blacks. They were trying to develop a single job evaluation scheme that would bring the jobs of 50,000 employees under a single rank ordering, based on the ranking of 20 key jobs, representative of the industry as a whole. Each job was evaluated on a range of factors (skill, responsibility, training, education, etc.). The task was to develop a system of evaluation that would award every job, black and white, a number of points that would translate into pay differentials and to do so without upsetting the existing wage hierarchy. Well, the only way this could be accomplished was through manipulating the weights accorded to each factor with a mathematical technique known as linear programming. Once again I saw how a technically neutral mode of evaluation concealed a political determination upon which it was based, namely the choice and ranking of key jobs that had to conform to the previous wage structure. Here I was, unexpectedly crowned as a policy sociologist, deploying my expertise to serve a very clear goal defined by the mining companies.

I didn't exactly see myself as a policy sociologist. All I knew was that the mining companies were dependent on my mathematical skills. It gave me entry into the high-level negotiations with the trade unions, but also access to all sorts of company information. I even milked the companies for resources to run a social survey of miners, my imagination of what a sociologist should do. The companies were very pleased with my work and awarded me a scholarship to go to the University of Zambia, where I got my first degree in sociology.

The mining companies may have been happy with me, but I was not happy with them. I was appalled by their complicit maintenance of the "color bar," defined as a racial division of labor in which no black employee has any authority over any white employee. This had characterized the colonial division of labor, but it was expected to disappear with independence whose central plank, after all, was the struggle for racial equality. But first the colonial and postcolonial context needs filling out.

THE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGIST AS ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

I arrived in Africa at one of its most exciting moments. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, country after country had secured its independence from colonial rule. The people of Africa were no longer governed from Paris, London, or Lisbon but governed themselves, bringing equality to all citizens, allowing them to vote in their own elections, have access to education, and live where they had the means. The racial despotism of colonialism had largely disappeared, except in Southern Africa, namely, Southern Rhodesia (now

Zimbabwe), South Africa, Mozambique, and Angola. Zambia had achieved independence in 1964 and four years later the shine was still on, the country was breathing optimism, and President Kaunda was preaching Zambian Humanism, a form of African socialism. Among social scientists debates raged about development, dependency, neocolonialism, class, socialism, and tribalism. Sociologists engaged in the debates from different vantage points, but everyone thought their analysis really mattered and if only the right policies were pursued, Africa would be a beacon to the whole world, transcending the Cold War dividing the United States and the Soviet Union that divided the capitalist and communist worlds. For an aspiring sociologist, this was indeed an exciting time and place to be—an experience deeply seared into my sociological mindset.

I was especially influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962), a book that took Africa by storm. Fanon was an intellectual organically connected to the colonized and their struggles for freedom, but he was also much more than that. He offered a powerful sociological analysis of the postcolonial predicament. Born in Martinique of Creole parents, he trained to be a psychiatrist in France after World War II, and left for Algeria to head up a psychiatric hospital in 1953. There he despaired of treating his patients—black and white—suffering from the traumas of the violence of the Algerian war of independence. He joined the liberation struggle, only to be deported from Algeria in 1957 and became an ambassador for the Algerian National Liberation Front. He dictated *The Wretched of the Earth*, an encomium of colonial revolution, while dying from leukemia at the age of thirty-six. That was 1961, a year before Algeria won its independence from France.

In his lyrical analysis, Fanon identified two struggles: the first was to overthrow colonial rule and here he argued violence had to be met with violence—but also violence unified, violence was redemptive of the century of violence suffered by the colonized, violence was cathartic. It delivered the colonized from internalized oppression. Important as this struggle was, far more important was a second struggle among the colonized themselves, a struggle between two visions of independence—on the one hand, an independence in which black simply replaced white as the rulers of the post-colony, becoming a national bourgeoisie, and, on the other hand, an independence that involved liberation, not a racial succession that left the class structure untouched but a revolution that would abolish class domination and inaugurate socialism based on collective, participatory democracy. Such a revolution would not be made by a working class, which Fanon regarded as pampered and parasitic, but by the peasantry, the overwhelming majority of the population which had lost so much of their land to the colonizers that they had nothing more to lose. Fanon argued that the first road, the national bourgeois road, imitative of Western democracy, would be unable to sustain itself due to economic backwardness. It could only be an appendage of Western capital, and as a result the multiparty democracy would degenerate into one party rule, and then one-man dictatorship. The only alternative was

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

BECOMING A SOCIOLOGIST OF FOOD

Justin Myers

It was the summer of 2008. My wife and I, newlyweds, were driving up the coast of northern California and southern Oregon on our honeymoon. During our two-week trip we would see grey whales, sea otters, and sea anemone, become engulfed by millions of monarchs in migration, go white-water rafting on the Klamath River, and swim in Crater Lake—which at 42 degrees was quite a refreshing or chilling experience, depending on your point of view. To top the trip off, everywhere we stopped had fresh local food to eat: fruits, veggies, greens, and fish. All of it was delicious. Grown by small farmers. Grown without pesticides. Harvested locally.

The cool weather of the coast, the laid-back lifestyle, and the beautiful wilderness was a pleasant break from the hustle and bustle of Manhattan, especially the hot and humid Brooklyn summers, and my doctoral program in sociology. But the respite also forced me to reflect on how much I really enjoyed my academic life. I was studying mainstream films and mining their critiques of capitalism in terms of their “political” potential for social change. But more and more, I felt that this research focus was trivial compared to the broader social problems of the day: water wars, electronic waste, pesticide contamination, and mountaintop removal mining. I looked to Vandana Shiva’s *Earth Democracy* (2005) for some answers, and my beliefs were quickly confirmed. In the book she documented food sovereignty struggles globally: how peasants, small farmers, and the indigenous struggled to maintain their livelihoods against national governments, transnational corporations, and international agencies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. I learned how trade policies, land theft, and the privatization of seeds were dispossessing millions from the land base and consolidating the food system under the power of factory farming and for-profit corporations. By the end of the book it was clear that a global struggle today is occurring over *who* controls the preconditions for life—water, land, and seed—and *how* they are used to feed people or to feed profit rates.

Hollywood seemed far less important than democratizing the food system, as this could improve the health of people and the land base, ensure small farmers could survive as farmers, and that indigenous peoples have a cultural right to the land. What was I doing spending my time studying the film industry when I enjoyed my time in nature and with food to a much higher degree? I thought about how much happier I was when I was rafting or hiking then sitting inside reading a book about how audiences interpret films. I thought back to my days growing up in Southern California with my family’s chickens and vegetable gardens, and how much I relished those memories. But why did those experiences merely have to be memories? Why did being in nature only have to happen between semesters? Why couldn’t I get back into food and the environment? Why couldn’t I work for the world I enjoyed?

It was this trip that woke me from the slumber of the critical armchair sociology of film studies toward becoming a public sociologist engaged in the local food movement. When I got back to New York City I engaged in a self-directed crash course in the sociology of food and agriculture, found professors who supported my interests,

Food for Thought *continued*

and began to volunteer at a local food justice organization. As a result, my overall quality of life is dramatically higher today than it was in 2008. In fact, I tell people that my late twenties and early thirties has been the best time of my life. I get to spend my time outdoors in the sun working on urban farms, selling food at farmers markets, and shooting the breeze with community gardeners. I know far more people, have developed what are optimistically lifelong friendships, and built national connections through getting involved in the local food movement. But most importantly for my role as a public sociologist, I know far more now about the local food movement by being a part of it, its successes, its barriers, and its internal conflicts, because I live them. Such insights benefit my scholarship as well as my activism and most hopefully the long-term success of the food justice movement.

Sources

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a revolutionary struggle that would liberate human energy and creativity, hold Western capital to ransom, and build a new socialist order.

So which road would Africa take? Fanon interrogated the strength and the interests of the classes among the colonized. The interests of the middle classes and working class on the one side and the peasantry on the other were quite clear, but the interests of the traditional leaders, the *lumpenproletariat* (unemployed migrants, living in squatter settlements in the urban periphery), and the intellectuals were far more ambiguous and contradictory. Would they support the bourgeois road or the socialist road? Fanon examines the pressures that might push them in one direction or another, hoping that a symbiosis of dissident intellectuals and a volcanic peasantry would capture the imagination of the vacillating classes.

Well, we know what happened. He was tragically right about the bourgeois road—Africa has taken great leaps in the direction of dictatorship. As to the national liberation road, this was a phantasm that could not be realized. Where settler colonialism held out and engendered violent struggles, as in Algeria or Mozambique or Zimbabwe or South Africa, the upshot has been more violence and less revolution. The idea of blackmailing the West or cancelling Africa’s past through struggle were pious hopes. Still, it was the phantasm—the vision of an alternative—that drove his prophetic analysis of Africa’s future and that has inspired so many in their struggles against all manner of oppressions.

So what sort of sociology is this? Certainly, it was not intended for *professional sociologists*, yet it did offer an original analysis of colonialism and post-colonialism that has influenced professional sociologists. But influence is not enough to make it **professional sociology**. More important, Fanon would have to worry about the empirical basis of his claims, such as, in the colonial context, the revolutionary character of the peasantry or the conservative

impetus of workers. Evidence is simply lacking. At best, it represents a hotly disputed hypothesis. If it is not professional sociology, perhaps it is **critical sociology**, aimed against the more evolutionary, reformist models of development that took little account of the legacy of colonialism and even less account of class. That may have been how it has been seen in some quarters, but, still, it was not Fanon's intent. He couldn't have cared less about professional sociology—whether to develop it or to criticize it.

Equally, it is hard to think of *The Wretched of the Earth* as policy sociology. Fanon was not paid to write this for some client and, yet, paradoxically, it has been read by governments to forearm themselves against revolution. More to the point, one could say that it was a form of **policy sociology** for the liberation movement. It was meant to serve the liberation struggle, even if the liberation struggle did not contract Fanon to write it, even if parts of it are quite critical of the liberation struggle.

Confining attention to professional, critical, and policy sociologies misses *The Wretched of the Earth's* enormous influence on much wider publics. In dictating what became a bible of revolution for and by the marginalized, Fanon started a conversation among and within liberation struggles everywhere about possible postcolonial trajectories and radical transformations, a conversation that took on a life of its own soon after he died. Whatever Fanon's intentions, *The Wretched of the Earth* generated debate about the nature of colonial oppression not just in Africa, but among French intellectuals divided over France's role in Algeria, in the United States among the Black Panthers, and other groups over the revolutionary potential of ghettoized African Americans, and in Italy where it informed Gillo Pontecorvo's masterful film, *Battle of Algiers*. The circulation of *The Wretched of the Earth* generated worldwide discussion that still continues.

That makes it public but does it make it public sociology? Certainly, its analysis was profoundly sociological, linking the experience of the colonized to the wider social structures in which they were entangled, but did the analysis have sufficient empirical veracity? I tried to demonstrate its empirical and analytical power by adapting his scheme to Zambia. Let me explain.

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGIST OF A TRADITIONAL STRIPE

Fanon's class analysis was rooted in his experience of Algeria, a settler colony with a strong agrarian base. There were peasant rebellions and the independence struggle did have a rural base. Zambia, on the other hand, was dominated by its industrial base, its copper enclave. **Zambian Humanism** was a socialist cloak that concealed a raw capitalist reality. Zambia had clearly taken the national bourgeois road of racial succession. So the sociological question was how did this succession work—why did it end up reproducing the old racial hierarchy, the color bar?

Let's begin with the government's perspective. When I arrived in 1968, the government had just put out a report on **Zambianization**, that is the

Table 10-1 Progress of **Zambianization***

	Total No. of Expatriates	Total No. of Zambians in the field of expatriate employment
December 1964	7,621	704
March 1966	6,592	1,138
September 1966	6,358	1,884
October 1967	5,671	2,617
June 1968	5,024	3,671

Source: Government of the Republic of Zambia (1968, 9).

localization of the labor force, the displacement of white by black. It was a congratulatory report that spoke of great success of **Zambianization**. Above I reproduce the table that captured the progress made since independence (see Table 10-1). Sure enough, the number of Zambians in expatriate positions had increased over fivefold. At the same time, the number of expatriates had fallen. No doubt about it this was a great success story. But do you notice anything about the numbers? The increase in the number of Zambians (2,967) exceeds the number of expatriate displaced (2,597), which suggests that managerial hierarchy was getting bloated. Why might that be the case? That would require careful investigation of the microprocesses of **Zambianization**.

I couldn't interview management about **Zambianization**—this was such a delicate matter that I would have been chased off the mine immediately and that would have been the end of the research. I had to undertake *covert* research, but of a particular sort: what sociologists call participant observation, research conducted in the time and space of the subjects themselves. In other words, I had to watch the process of racial succession as it unfolded over time. To do that I solicited the help of fellow (Zambian) students at the University of Zambia who worked in the mine. So what happened?

I focused on instances of **Zambianization**, that is, cases in which a Zambian succeeded a white (expatriate) employee. Take the position of mine captain which was the highest level of managerial supervision underground, and just beginning to be **Zambianized**. What happened when a black shift boss (the next level down in the hierarchy), was promoted to replace the white mine captain? Perhaps you can guess? The white mine captain was displaced but not removed. He was displaced upward, that is promoted into a newly created position, called assistant underground manager.

This, of course, effectively protected the color bar, but at the cost of creating all sorts of tensions within the organization. The erstwhile white mine captain took with him into the new position many of the resources and influence that he had previously possessed, while the new black mine captain had the same responsibilities as his predecessor but not the organization support to carry them out. The job of the immediate subordinate of the mine captain—the black shift boss—was, thereby, made more difficult and he came to resent his new black supervisor, even to the point of wishing for

the return of the previous white mine captain. The tensions reverberated all the way down the hierarchy so that the Zambian successors were seen to be an "uppity class," in thrall to white management. The Zambian successor, himself, therefore led a very insecure existence and sought to alleviate his anxiety by an ostentatious lifestyle, sporting fancy cars, which only intensified class hostility.

Still, why did Zambianization happen this way on the Copperbelt, when in government it would take place from top down as well as bottom up? The answer lay in developing the distinctive Millsian method, linking microprocesses to macroforces, moving beyond everyday common sense of the participants to the structural forces at work. What did this mean in this case? I examined the postcolonial class structure to tease out the interests of different classes. So the African working class—the miners—was not interested in Zambianization, the creation of a new class of Zambian overlords, but in improving their wages and bettering the conditions of work. White management—and management was still largely white—was even less interested in removing the color bar since they wanted to cling on to their lucrative jobs (their skills were often specific to the Zambian copper mines so they wouldn't be able to find such rewarding jobs elsewhere). Corporate management, on the other hand, found itself in a quandary: on the one hand, it was interested in promoting Zambianization and dismantling the color bar as this would lower labor costs; on the other hand, they did not want to upset the apple cart by alienating white mine management that were not easy to replace, having developed special skills to run the mines.

As I discovered, corporate management did not have a fixed strategy or plan, but would wake up every morning and see which way the winds were blowing. They found themselves in a very uncertain environment—political (government), economic (price of copper), and technological (always facing new unexpected problem of excavation)—and so adopted a flexible decision-making process. It let government take the lead on the matter of Zambianization, and the government was not interested in removing the color bar, or so it seemed, because they did not want to jeopardize the foreign revenue that came from the mines. More than that, having expatriates running the mines was preferable to Zambians who might pose as a political opposition to government—expatriates on three-year contracts could be removed at any time if they presented any threat. And, then, of course, there was the question of whether there was a sufficient number of Zambians who were equipped to take over the mines. In other words, none of these "class" entities, with the exception of the Zambian successors themselves, had a clear interest in removing the color bar—that is, in demolishing the colonial racial order. In moving from the microprocesses to the macroforces, I identified the class interests behind racism.

Having undertaken this analysis, all covert, unbeknownst to the mining companies but based on company data and on four years of detailed observations of successions, I had to decide whether to turn this local problem into a public issue, and if so, how. Mills writes as though the sociological

imagination linking micro to macro automatically brings about the move from personal troubles into public issues. Nothing could be further from truth. When people are confronted with the macroforces shaping their lives, they are as likely to withdraw into cynicism as to take public action. Turning the sociological imagination into a public project requires **political imagination**.

Having written up my report on Zambianization, I decided to seek permission to publish it from the mining companies, even though I realized this might spell the end of social science research on the mines. The corporate executives were both shocked and annoyed by what I had done and flatly opposed publication. "It's all based on your data," I pleaded. That may be, they said, but we don't agree with your interpretation. Faced with my insistence that this was too important to keep quiet, they sent me to the Zambianization department of the Ministry of Mines, on the grounds that the mines had recently been nationalized. My attack on the government was even more severe than on the companies, so they knew and I knew the government would turn down my request even more forcefully than they. But we were both wrong. The person responsible for Zambianization (ironically an expatriate) read the report with enthusiasm and instructed me to get it published as quickly as possible. I was astonished. It refuted my claim that the state was a monolithic entity not interested in disrupting the color bar—there were clearly different interests within the state. I would have to revise my theory.

So the report was published and when it appeared it was subject to lively discussion in newspapers and television. I was not aware of any vitriolic feeling from the mining companies or government, even though this was a condemnation of the class structure of postcolonial Zambia. As is usually the case with public debates, it is not possible to measure their influence; what is important is the debate itself. Still, I do know that the mining companies, ever flexible, exploited the opportunity and used my Fanonite report to discipline their own mine managers, ordering them to get their Zambianization house in order. Once again I had to face my own political naïveté—knowledge, however progressive, does not create its own impetus for self-realization, and it is easily used by those with power for their own ends. Once more, chipping away at my political naïveté was all part of becoming a sociologist.

Just as class analysis applied to the processes of Zambianization, so now it also applied to the dissemination of knowledge. In such *traditional public sociology* a report, a book, or a commentary is broadcast, sent out into the public arena where, if it commands any attention at all, it is subject to a political struggle over its interpretation, and the stronger party usually wins. An alternative strategy is the method of *organic public sociology*, in which the sociologist develops a direct unmediated relation to a given public and in that way contests the balance of forces in society. Thus, I could have made the young Zambian personnel officers, with whom I worked closely on the project, the interlocutors or audience for my research. The danger of such *unmediated* engagement, however, is that the reciprocal conversation dissolves

SOCIOLOGY AT WORK**WORK AND PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY: PROFESSIONAL SOCIOLOGISTS**

Arne L. Kalleberg

Professional sociologists are one of four types of sociologists in the sociological division of labor that Michael Burawoy identifies, the others being public, critical, and policy-oriented sociologists. Professional sociologists seek to obtain instrumental knowledge; they try to solve puzzles or social problems by discovering new methods, theories, or conducting new empirical research using these methods and theories. Professional sociologists regard themselves as social scientists, and thus use rigorous scientific methods to try to answer questions and solve problems in a dispassionate and apolitical way. They publish their results primarily in academic journals or books, thereby speaking to audiences consisting mainly of other professional sociologists and students in universities. Publishing in academic journals and books and teaching students are key requirements in order to establish one's career as a professional sociologist. Most PhD sociologists in the United States can be classified as professional sociologists, as about 70 percent teach in colleges and universities. In other countries, public, policy, and critical sociologists might be the dominant type.

Sociologists often move among the four types over the course of their careers. As Burawoy discusses in this chapter, some people are drawn to sociology because they want to be critical or public sociologists, and then become professional sociologists as they attend graduate school and begin their careers in academia, and finally become critical or public sociologists again later on (as he did). Others are motivated to become sociologists mainly because of an interest in understanding particular puzzles (such as my desire to understand the causes behind overtraining), and then later seek to disseminate their findings to policymakers and various publics. Their scientific discoveries may also lead them to become highly critical of the social and economic systems that account for the phenomena they are studying, and thus turn to public or critical sociology. Professional sociologists need not check their values at their office doors nor hesitate to study important critical, policy, and public issues. However, professional sociologists should conduct their research objectively according to rigorous scientific standards and not set out to prove a particular result a priori.

Professional sociologists are thus complementary to, not inconsistent with, the other three types of sociologists in the sociological division of labor. The four types of sociologies are interrelated, mutually dependent, and reinforcing. At the same time, professional sociology is in many ways the heart of the discipline of sociology, since it creates the high-quality research and basic knowledge that is necessary to address and understand significant social issues, problems, and puzzles. In addition, the research that professional sociologists conduct and publish provides the scientific authority and basis of scientific expertise that helps public, policy, and critical sociologists to be persuasive in reaching and convincing their respective audiences. Good public sociology depends on good professional sociology.

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either in the direction of the sociologist who leads or dominates the public—Fanon's revolutionary intellectuals—or the other way around, wherein the sociologist is dragged on to the terrain of the public, thereby losing autonomy. These are, indeed, the political dilemmas of public sociology, dilemmas that can divert it from its goal—two-way conversation between sociologist and public.

THE CRITICAL SOCIOLOGIST

Chastened by my first experience of public sociology, and thinking I needed further training in sociology, I applied to graduate school in the United States. Why the United States? Because, in the English-speaking world and beyond, the United States was the home of sociology, not least of what I regarded as the deeply flawed theories of underdevelopment that attributed African backwardness to traditional mores and primordial attachments. I arrived at the University of Chicago (the only department that accepted me) ready to dedicate myself to the fundamentals of sociology. I was shocked, however, by the poverty of the courses—the trivial accounts, the tedious abstraction, the smug complacency, and their remarkable irrelevance, mired in provincialism. There was no sniff of Marxism or feminism; even the famed ethnography had disappeared. I had come all this way for this? This is a common experience for many graduate students, but it was in a sense worse for me as I knew from Zambia that it didn't have to be this way.

It was in my second year that I stumbled across a political science course on contemporary Marxism. I was not the only one. Indeed, it seemed the whole university wanted to squeeze into Professor Przeworski's seminar. At the time I didn't realize that there was a pent up demand for some form of critical thinking to bring sociology into line with contemporary realities—the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the student movement. Critical thinking aimed at self-congratulatory functionalism was on the agenda in many sociology departments, at least among graduate students and some forward looking teachers, such as Maurice Zeitlin at Wisconsin, Immanuel Wallerstein at Binghamton, and Barrington Moore at Harvard. A new generation of insurgent sociologists had been born on the waves of the 1960s social movements, and was now delivering body blows to the reigning mainstream sociologists. Although in Chicago, such critical analysis was rather thin on the ground.

This was when I first met Erik Wright. We were both opposing mainstream sociology with Marxist analysis, he against stratification theory and I against industrial sociology. He used statistical analysis of survey data to demonstrate the explanatory power of a Marxist theory of class that was rooted in *relations of production*, relations between those who own the means of production and those who don't, that is, between capitalist and workers. He added a third category, "the petty bourgeoisie"—individuals who owned their own means of production but didn't employ wage laborers (shop

keepers, independent craft workers, etc.). Between each pair of fundamental class positions he identified three intermediate positions—supervisors and managers, small employers, and semiautonomous workers (teachers, lawyers, and so on who were between wage laborers and petty bourgeoisie). He called them “contradictory class locations.” He tried to show that this paradigm of class analysis was superior to the conventional models of status attainment that strung occupations on a continuum or to the economists’ models of human capital, superior in its capacity to explain variations in income inequality.

While Erik was developing his analysis of national class structure based on relations of production, I was focused on a microanalysis of social *relations in production* at one factory in South Chicago where I worked for a year. I tried to develop the ideas of a politics of production to explain why workers so actively participated in the production of profit for their employers. Hitherto Marxists were focused more on the objective features of work organization, what they called the labor process, but I was focused on the subjective dimensions, the way workers were constituted as citizens with rights and obligations by what I called the “internal state” and the “internal labor market.” I began with a criticism of industrial sociology, which had the interests of employers in mind, focusing on why workers are so lazy, why they don’t work harder whereas I wondered why they worked so hard, given that the benefits accrued to their employer not to themselves. Marxists had answered this question by emphasizing the coercive element of the employment relation, fear of being fired, whereas I focused on the organization of consent, albeit backed up by force.

At the time we, the young Turks, suffered from illusions of grandeur. We thought we would conquer sociology with our new Marxist science. We were using the tools of sociology—regression analysis and participant observation—against sociology. Our work was definitively not aimed at “publics” beyond sociology, but we naively thought that to revolutionize sociology would somehow challenge capitalism. Thus, when I worked at Allied I was not concerned with converting my fellow workers to Marxism, or even working with them to build a stronger trade union, my goal was to use my experiences as a worker as the basis of a critique of mainstream sociology. My audience was undoubtedly other sociologists. I was not a public sociologist, but a critical sociologist.

THE PROFESSIONAL SOCIOLOGIST

As we became established sociologists, our work lost its critical edge and became part of mainstream sociology—Erik’s elaborations on the Marxist theories of class have become part of the canon, and my notion of production politics has been systematically criticized and developed by a succession of graduate students. Over time the interest in class analysis on the one side and of the labor process on the other have waned, and in their stead younger

generations of sociologists have been interested in class formation, classes acting to make history. They have become interested in social movements, in particular new directions in union organizing. They have become less interested in transforming sociology and more interested again in building close connections to the union movement. Like Dan Clawson or Ruth Milkman, for example, they have become practitioners of public sociology. Indeed, the labor section of the American Sociological Association has become a beehive of creative public sociology that has inspired new directions for research.

Through the 1980s and 1990s Erik and I grew into the professional world, which entailed teaching and researching within the framework of academic norms. For me the transition to teaching had been traumatic, and the tenure battle draining. Our research followed parallel routes: he organized surveys in different countries to map out national class structures, while I turned to a comparative analysis of production regimes in different countries. We wanted to understand just how peculiar was the United States, whether in terms of its class structure or its politics of production. Our students were no less critical but less passionate about Marxism, especially as it became more mainstream. But this was also because the world beyond had become more quiescent under the assault of the market that was depleting the labor movement and exhausting the civil rights movement.

We took stock of the situation and in our different ways sought to enliven the sociological imagination by reflecting upon alternatives to capitalism. I turned to the study of actually existing socialism, working in factories in socialist Hungary and post-Soviet Russia, trying to understand what had become of the greatest social experiments of the twentieth century, how and why it had deviated from the ideals that motivated it, and above all how workers lived in what was called the workers’ state. Erik, on the other hand, developed an interest in other types of experiments, surviving in the interstices of capitalism, such as participatory budgeting, cooperatives, Wikipedia, and the universal income grant. All contained the seeds of alternatives to capitalism, alternatives he calls “real utopias.” He called it a sociology of the possible as opposed to a sociology of the actual or of the impossible. Against the idea of a value-neutral sociology, Erik has advanced a sociology that is self-consciously founded on values—equality, democracy, freedom—and their institutional expression. He had made the return to critical sociology from where he had come, and then created a science of real utopias that was and is energized by moral concerns.

In the meantime my own biography took an unexpected twist. Desperate to find someone to chair their department, my colleagues turned to me. The department had been rather fractious for many years, reflecting and inheriting the turmoil on the Berkeley campus, but in the mid-1990s, peace reigned. We asked ourselves what sort of vision Berkeley sociology had of itself, and what collective identity might we develop. I had always admired the way my colleagues had transmitted their ideas to broader audiences—Erving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* or his book on stigma, Robert Blauner’s theory of internal colonialism, Arlie Hochschild’s sociology of

emotions and the gender division of labor, Kristin Luker's study of the politics of abortion, Todd Gitlin's account of the sixties and the student movement, Robert Bellah's work on civil religion and then his collaborative work on American individualism, Jerry Karabel's work on educational inequalities and the history of quotas at Ivy League universities. They all reached out to audiences way beyond sociology. When I became chair, my colleagues Claude Fischer, Mike Hout, Martin Sánchez Jankowski, Sam Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss had just completed *Inequality by Design*, a book aimed at dispelling biogenetic views of inequality then being popularized by Murray and Hernstein's *The Bell Curve*. Experts in different areas, they put their heads together to produce what was intended to be a prototype of traditional public sociology.

So that is how the public sociology project began—we defined the department as engaged with the world, addressing big issues in public ways. We ran a colloquium series on public sociology and with Jonathan van Antwerpen, then a graduate student, I wrote a history of the department from the standpoint of public sociology. At the time it seemed quite harmless to all concerned.

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY LIVE!

When I was elected president of the American Sociological Association (ASA) it was natural to take the public sociology theme to a national level and I crisscrossed the country giving talks and having debates with faculty and students in different universities. Now the battle lines were being drawn. The professional sociologists, the leaders of our profession, many residing in the top universities, professionals who publish articles in the *American Sociological Review* (important articles but accessible and of interest to the few) disapproved of public sociology. They feared it might question the sacrosanct nature of their science. If sociology is made accessible to broad publics, then perhaps, after all, it is no more than common sense. It has no right to claim to be a discipline competing with other disciplines for a place in the sun, or more precisely for funds, for positions, for a space in the university. There is the view, hotly contested by C. Wright Mills, that for sociology to be a science it must create its own language, its own methods, its own style of arguing that clearly demarcates it from common sense.

While public sociology garnered a lot of support from sociologists in non-elite departments, or at least those that did not aspire to climb the disciplinary totem pole, and from those parts of the discipline that felt marginalized, it was given the cold shoulder by the guardians of our profession. As far as the professionals were concerned, even the critical sociologists were more acceptable than the public ones. However harsh their criticism, the critical theorists rarely targeted broader publics and, therefore, did not threaten the credibility of the discipline as a whole. The professionals, however, were most at home with policy sociology, because policy sociology was the

mobilization of sociology's scientific status to solve problems defined by clients. Besides, it often brought in hefty funds. For their part, policy sociologists, seeking to influence government agencies with their "neutral" science, were even more avid than the professionals in their disavowal of public sociology for fear it would politicize their craft, and leave them without any clients.

So now, finally, you can see why something so obvious and natural—public sociology—should be so controversial. It's because, in the United States, sociology has such a strong presence in the universities, where the status of disciplines as academic enterprises rules the roost. Of course, we do need a professional sociology that accumulates bodies of research findings and makes possible the sort of book you are reading and to which I'm contributing. Without an established body of research there simply cannot be any public sociology, not to mention critical and policy sociology. So while public sociologists such as C. Wright Mills might rail against the irrelevance and obscurity of professional sociology, they are actually attacking its pathological forms and not its essence. Mills was himself, for much of his life, a professional sociologist writing for fellow academics. Indeed, it requires substantial investment in scientific research before one can become an effective public sociologist or else you simply reinvent the wheel or draw erroneous conclusions from sloppy research. Training in methods, accumulating knowledge, and grasping social theory are all essential for the advance of professional sociology, but also good public sociology. Still, professional sociology can be taken too far, becoming self-referential and dismissive of public engagement. Where there is a more balanced relation—as in Brazil, India, and South Africa—between public and professional sociologies they can inspire each other.

Let me give you some examples from an experimental course called Public Sociology Live! The idea was to bring Berkeley undergraduates into conversation with sociologists engaging with publics in different places in the world. We did this over Skype—the sociologist in question would lecture for 15 minutes or so and then there would be a discussion for the next 40 minutes. (You can watch these conversations on video at www.isa-sociology.org/public-sociology-live.) Classes around the world have discussed them and posted their own comments on Facebook. You can look at those and contribute your own.

The seminars start with the famous Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells talking about the way media control the very space public sociology seeks to enter. We move on to Nandini Sundar, talking about her work with indigenous groups in India faced with land expropriations and caught in a field of violence between left wing guerrillas and a state-sponsored special police force. Having spent many years studying the adivasi of Chhattisgarh, she now seeks to bring their plight to public attention through media and bringing a case before the Supreme Court. César Rodríguez Garavito describes a similar situation for indigenous groups in Colombia, only he works with human rights nongovernmental organizations that are seeking leverage through the application of international law. Sari Hanafi works with Palestinians in Lebanese refugee camps, describing their fate to the media,

drawing attention to rights of employment and education that they have been denied. Marta Soler and Ramon Flecha show how their critical communicative methodology, a form of organic public sociology, gives voice to marginalized groups in Spain, such as the Roma, and how their work has influenced social policies. Walden Bello, now a politician, describes a public sociology that borders on political activism, an investigation into the role of the World Bank in upholding the Marcos Dictatorship in the Philippines. Karl von Holdt describes the frustrations of policy oriented sociology concerned with the transformation of the post-apartheid state, in particular one of the world's biggest hospitals. Michel Wieviorka recounts the challenges of public sociology in France where he has been concerned with questions of anti-Semitism, racism, and terrorism—topics that are fraught with political divisiveness—again based on detailed sociological research. Finally, we talked with Frances Fox Piven about her theory of disruptive power, and how that has influenced the way she has fostered movements for the defense of the welfare rights and voting rights of marginalized populations in the United States.

What we learn from all these examples is the fortitude and commitment required by public sociology. Even in the United States, Frances Fox Piven, for example, was subject to a barrage of public vilification from Glenn Beck of Fox News, and with it came death threats. Venturing into the public sphere armed with sociology can, indeed, prompt violent reactions. For this reason and more generally to develop method and strategy it is important that public sociology be conducted collectively. Second, each public engagement is based on a wealth of prior research undertaken by themselves or by others. There is no warrant for naively stumbling into a political battlefield. Third, the context within which public sociology operates varies a great deal. Here too professional sociology can help us explore the nature of that context so that we are better equipped to negotiate its terrain.

All of these points were captured in the seminar presentation of Pun Ngai, a Chinese sociologist based in Hong Kong. She reported on the appalling conditions of work at Foxconn, one of the world's biggest multinational corporations that makes the parts for Apple Computers, iPhones, and iPads. Foxconn employs a million young workers in China, half of them in one city, Shenzhen. Pun Ngai herself had worked in one of Shenzhen's electronics factories as a participant observer narrating her experiences of China's despotic labor system in her book *Made in China*. She began our seminar with a six-minute film made by herself and other sociologists associated with the non-governmental organization, Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior, contrasting the enormous profit of Apple with the impoverished conditions of Foxconn workers. She went on to describe the military organization necessary to run factories with over 100,000 workers and the resulting anomie and alienation that in 2010 led to a spate of 17 suicides. Her account was based on the undercover research of students who became workers at Foxconn factories in order to conduct interviews and observe conditions there.

We felt very uncomfortable as we listened to the gruesome details of the labor that produced the shining Mac computers lining our seminar tables, all

made visible on camera. Unlike so many of the other seminars that were about distant places with which students had little direct connection, this seminar brought home their connection to the very public issues being discussed. Even though China was far away they benefited directly from the degradation and exploitation of Chinese workers. Pun Ngai was urging the students to get involved in protesting Apple's connection to Foxconn. Students shrugged their shoulders—Apple products are part of everyone's life, there's no way of getting rid of them. She said that the campaign was more to shame Apple into giving up one dollar on each product sold, by revealing how Foxconn depends on indentured student apprentices as cheap and insecure labor. She was appealing to their identity as students. They responded defensively: "But this is capitalism, you can't reform it without overthrowing the whole system." Sociological imagination—that is, tying lived experience to its wider determination—was mobilized to justify inactivity rather than to move forward with political imagination to public sociology.

After the seminar, students wondered whether Pun Ngai had strayed into political activism. Indeed, the line between public sociology and political activism can be a very fine one. Public sociology is primarily accountable to the community of sociologists; it operates in the fields of sociology whereas political activism operates in the field of politics. When the two fields overlap then they can be indistinguishable, but the principle of public sociology must prevail: namely, that it is a two-way conversation between sociologist and public. This means that we have to recognize that everyone is a sociologist, and carries with him or her a theory of how the world works. We call it common sense and it is with common sense that public sociologists converse.

Just as my nephew, outstanding teacher that he is, knows he must start with the lived experience of his students, so public sociology does something similar: it elaborates common sense. I can see him laughing again, shrugging his shoulders: "So public sociology is just common sense?" Yes and no. Public sociology is the *elaboration* of common sense, but a particular part of common sense, what we can call the *good sense*, composed of the sociological imagination that ties biography to history, that recognizes the source of personal ailments as lying with wider societal forces. At the same time the public sociologist seeks to delete the other part of common sense, the *bad sense*—the mythologies of individualism, the ideologies of success, the falsehoods of conventions, the distortions of stereotypes, the blindness to injustice—that bombard us from all sides and that we inherit from the past. So yes, public sociology is a form of teaching in which common sense is cultivated and society itself becomes a classroom, a classroom for developing a critical social consciousness that strives for what could be rather than adapting to what is.

Discussion Questions

1. What is public sociology and does it differ from political activism?
2. What are the relations among public sociology and critical, policy, and professional sociologies? Give an example of each.
3. What public sociology project could you imagine pursuing?

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Related Websites

- Public Sociologies <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS.Webpage/ps.mainpage.htm>
 Public Sociology, Live! www.isa-sociology.org/public-sociology-live

LESSON 10, PHOTO REFLECTION:



Sociology professor leading students on a field trip to a local brownfield.
 Photo by Tammy Lewis.

There are many ways to teach about the intersection of biography and history. In the photo, a sociology professor is leading his class on a walking tour of a toxic brown field not far from campus. Many of the students pass by this site on a regular basis, not wondering much about what goes on here. Walking the site, learning its social history, and knowing its present, students are better able to understand the neighborhood around it: why it smells so bad, why low-income housing has been placed there, and why there's been an ongoing political battle over what to do about the site. Using our sociological imaginations to examine the everyday places in our lives, we have the potential to imagine if and how we can shape the future. Students can ask, what should be done here? Who are the winners and losers if we decide to clean this site up? What are the social consequences? What outcomes would I advocate for, and how? If you were the photographer, what picture would you take to represent public sociology?