

VOICES FROM THE MARGIN

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Burawoy's call for a public sociology has been widely discussed and debated. The kind of enthusiasm we have seen from his audiences and readers is indicative of a thirst of reflection on an academic discipline's own purposes and visions. This time, the question is neither about a looming crisis (Gouldner 1970) nor about one's moral and political stance: whose side are you on? It is both a review of the division of sociological labour and an engaging discussion of how sociology will respond to the challenges of our changing world.

The arrival of this debate in Hong Kong, and a call for public sociology on a global scale, is timely. It comes at a time when sociology in Hong Kong and other parts of East Asia as well, as an academic discipline, is under enormous pressure. That pressure comes from institutional and organizational restructuring at local universities. Competitiveness (never defined) on a global scale is stressed and, as we shall see in later discussion, instead of adopting a more inclusive approach and thus recognizing different types of sociological labour and practice, universities have moved in the opposite direction—only instrumental sociological knowledge (primarily professional sociology and more recently but half-heartedly, policy sociology), according to Burawoy's classification, is taken as proper (meaning that the outputs of such practice are counted in various assessments). Burawoy (2005a:17) suggested that sociologists in the U.S. are fighting in 'fields of power' wherein instrumental sociological knowledge prevails over reflexive practice. Here in Hong Kong, the struggle of public sociology, as I will elaborate in the following sections, is indeed an up-hill battle.

Few sociologists, irrespective of their political persuasions, would reject the idea of building a public sociology. After all, sociology as an academic discipline is intrinsically connected to the social; however, it is defined. Yet quite often, the consensus stops at this point and the practice of public sociology has become more of a kind of lip service than as a challenge for sociologists. In this regard, Burawoy's labour in bringing public sociology back to our appreciation of sociological knowledge and practice is much appreciated. That said,

while I share Burawoy's enthusiasm for a public sociology, I am less sure of its prospect.

There are three issues that I believe we must address in arguing for a public sociology. Firstly, it is about the organizational milieu of the academic practice of sociology. Of course, it would not be fair to say that Burawoy is unaware of the effects of macro socio-economic changes, especially those triggered by the process of privatization and marketization, on the production of sociological knowledge. He once remarked that, "the crisis of higher education could strip the University of its public role if its professoriate keels over in the face of state regulation and market forces. But this is another reason for not dismissing the university as a political arena but instead making it a terrain of struggle" (Burawoy 2005b:388; also see Burawoy 2005a:6). This is an important point, particularly in view of Burawoy's contribution to the development of a critical sociological analysis of labour process in his previous works, and is most relevant to our understanding of the prospect of a public sociology. Organizational restructuring in higher education has significantly reshaped the environment in which sociological knowledge is produced. In the name of global competitiveness (very often expressed in terms of global ranking among universities in the world), quality assurance and the objective assessment of academic performance (i.e. the application of quantifiable indicators to the measurement of academic outputs), university management, in Hong Kong and increasingly in other countries in this region, has re-defined what is professional academic output. Short-hand indicators (e.g. the citation index) replace the actual processes of the reading and evaluation of academic work by peers. Though university management, and more critically those assessors controlling university funding, have never explicitly stated that public sociology would not be properly recognized, emphasis is put on more formalistic (some call them 'professional') indicators (say, publication venues) of academic quality.

Such institutional and organizational restructuring in higher education has its effects on the configuration of the labour process of the production of sociological knowledge. Such effects work like Lukes's two-dimensional power (cf. Lukes 2005), pre-empting certain kinds of sociological practice by setting priorities and marginalizing those so-called misfits that do not fit in with the so-called institutional and professional requirements (very often, this means the adoption of short-hand indicators of academic quality stated above). In

the case of Hong Kong, the situation is even more complicated than that envisaged by Burawoy. Here power is in operation at two different levels. First, probably reflecting the power differentials among countries in the capitalist world economy, the academic world is stratified, not only in terms of institutional and organizational resources and status, but also according to the social and intellectual distance from 'the core'. While many sociologists in the U.S. and the U.K. talk about this English-language-centrism in the academic world with tongues in their cheeks, they may not be fully aware that 'the core' does define what to do in the periphery. This is done by setting research agendas and defining what is relevant, in terms of research questions and methodologies, to the main currents of sociological research. On the one hand, this is fair enough. 'The core' has its own concerns, looking at the rest of the world from its own position. On the other, this perspective from 'the core' has its own limitations. It has its own taken-for-grantedness. This is a point noted by Burawoy (2005a:20-22) in his Thesis IX on provincializing American sociology. He discussed how the four types of sociology in his typology are inter-connected differently in different national contexts. He argued that American sociology is particular, yet presents itself as universal and through its academic and professional organizations, is becoming powerful, influential and hegemonic.

This hegemony of 'the core' is particularly problematic when universities on the periphery see 'the core' as their model to follow. In the stratified academic world, those universities under enormous pressure of competition and marketization see the strategy of replicating the hegemonic model as a way in which they can climb up the ladder of the global university hierarchy. Global ranking is quickly becoming the major academic concern of universities on the periphery. To secure a place and a proper rank (whatever that means) in the global ranking of universities is the new 'academic vocation' of university management. This requires them to think of how to outdo their (local, regional and global) competitors. They do this by complying with the rules of global ranking and developing indicators that convince the outside (often non-academic) world that they are members of the league of leading universities. As said earlier, Burawoy is not unaware of the existence of a hegemony of 'the core' and its influence. Yet, he has not really dwelled upon its implications for the labour process of the production of academic knowledge on the periphery.

Of course, role models themselves in 'the core' are not necessarily problematic, and I would not understate their academic achievements. Yet, the practice of following those role models uncritically and formalistically can be dangerous. Most problematic is in the search of quantifiable indicators of excellence. Venues (and thus very often the language) of publication constitute a source of contemporary academic fetishism. Again, the problem does not lie with the publishers or the journals themselves, and I would not suggest that there is no variation in the quality of work among the publishers and journals. But the results of a highly formalistic adoption of a framework of assessment of academic quality based on short-hand indicators derived from practices in 'the core' by universities on the periphery can be disastrous, especially for the practice of public sociology. Local publications in the local language are marginalized and under-valued. True, university management does not show its low respect for local publications in the local language directly and bluntly. On paper, all publications are treated seriously according to their merits. However, during research assessment, what is requested is an abstract of the paper not the publication itself. The marginalization of and low respect given to a local publication in the local language pose a real challenge to the practice of public sociology outside 'the core' (though I would not assume that practicing public sociology in 'the core' is a simple and easy matter). This is the second level of two-dimensional power I mentioned earlier. If the essence of public sociology is to bring "sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation" (Burawoy 2005a:7) and is a process involving 'a double conversation' engaging "publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern" (Burawoy 2004:1607), it cannot be practised via media and/or channels through which publics find themselves at a distance. Engaging publics in a double conversation on social, political, cultural and moral matters requires sociologists to become accessible, in terms of their way of framing the research and analytical questions, their style of dissemination and their language. The changing academic environment on the periphery does not encourage, and is not conducive to, the development of public sociology.

Even worse is the reproduction of such a view of different types of sociological knowledge among sociologists themselves. This is partly a kind of coercive reproduction in the sense that sociologists, espe-

cially those who have not yet secured regular appointment and/or substantiation, have to play according to the official rules to find the opportunities to teach and research. It is also partly a result of sociologists' own high regard for instrumental knowledge and little respect for reflexive practice. Respect for local research in the local language is more often announced than practised. In Hong Kong, only one non-discipline-based social science journal publishes Chinese articles, the *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*. The Hong Kong Sociological Association had a journal (launched in 2000) including both English and Chinese articles, but it was discontinued without even becoming an agenda item for discussion and debate among members in its annual general meeting.* A review of sociological research monographs and books published in Chinese would be even more disappointing. In a sense, public sociology in Hong Kong is found in the wilderness, struggling to find a chance of reaching the margin. To describe its status and condition as being marginalized seems like an understatement.

The second issue concerns the need to develop a sociology of publics, as noted by Burawoy himself (2005a:8). Burawoy argued that, "we should not think of publics as fixed but in flux" (ibid.). He further elaborated that, "the multiplicity of public sociologies reflects not only different publics but different value commitments on the part of sociologists. Public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence, other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology . . . If sociology actually supports more liberal or critical public sociologies, that is a consequence of the evolving ethos of the sociological community" (ibid.: 8-9). The points made by Burawoy above are very important. It is easy to associate public sociology with a sociology that is open-minded (because it is a dialogue between sociologists and publics), critical (because it is engaging), and reflexive (because it works in and through the public domain). Indeed, Burawoy has made the distinction between traditional and organic public sociologies. The former are "written by sociologists, they are read beyond the academy, and they become the vehicle of a public discussion about the nature of U.S. society—the nature of its values,

* Editor's note: According to Article 4.3.1 of the Constitution of Hong Kong Sociological Association, all policy changes about the journal are entirely under the jurisdiction of the Council, which endorsed the decision to transform the journal in question to its present form.

the gap between its promise and its reality, its malaise, its tendencies." (ibid.: 7) The latter are works that "the sociologist works in close connection with [in] visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public [ways]. The bulk of public sociology is indeed an organic kind—sociologists working with a labour movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations." (ibid.: 7–8) Here the gap in Burawoy's discussion is most evident. While he is aware that the substance of public sociology is not pre-determined by its public-ness, at the same time he is bringing reflexivity and some kind of critical consciousness or even radicalism into public sociology through the backdoor. His analytical framework (see his discussion of the sociological division of labor) that defines public sociology (vis-à-vis professional, policy and critical sociologies) does not support his projection of what public sociology can or should be. A sociology of publics is in order. This is a question that Burawoy has not adequately dealt with.

Publics can be conservative. Indeed, our public domain is more often overwhelmed by groups and foundations, which are resourceful in terms of finance, political influence in and out of the establishment, and connectivity, with a conservative orientation than those that are critical and/or radical.¹ Examples of public sociology, be it traditional or organic, quoted by Burawoy are almost one-sidedly on the liberal and broadly defined critical spectrum. The public-ness of public sociology does not guarantee that it would be as reflexive as we would like it to be. As Burawoy noted (2005a:7), "there are multiple public sociologies."

This brings us to the third issue, namely the mission of a global public sociology. Burawoy (2005a:24) argued that, "the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity." This argument is further elaborated in his statement on public sociology on a global scale (Burawoy 2005c). Seeing the rise of different orientations of sociology in response to different waves of marketization in modern history, the third wave of marketization starts a process of commodification of nature and thus brings about the destruction of the envi-

ronment. The commodification of nature affects everyone, and sociology is called upon for the defense of human community, and this time for universalistic human rights and on a global scale. Again, while I appreciate the kind of passion found in Burawoy's statement, I am less sure of its relevance to existing sociological practice in the changing world. Indeed, what is civil society? Like multiple public sociologies, there are civil societies or different segments of a civil society. The association of public sociology with civil society and the social (implying something critical of the state and the market), and with the defense of different kinds of human rights on a global scale is more of a theoretically deduced construct (reflecting Burawoy's own theoretical, political and moral standpoints) than a projection based upon a sociology of sociology.

Tensions and antagonisms between instrumental and reflexive knowledge and those among the four types of sociological practices are perennial issues of debate. I would not expect Burawoy's call for a public sociology to be the last statement on these issues to settle the debate. No doubt, the debate would go on. Burawoy's contribution lies in reviving the debate and throwing a very important question to all sociologists. This is a question about sociologists' hearts and minds. After all, while our sociological labour is purposive, do we really know what we are working for?

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