

The Vacant “We”: Remarks on Public Sociology*

FRANÇOIS NIELSEN, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Temperamental Incompatibility

I am temperamentally incompatible with public sociology. As an introvert who prefers to deal with things and ideas rather than with people, I avoid activities that engage some public sociologists. When William Gamson and Charlotte Ryan describe their participation in countless meetings over several years discussing media strategies with grass-roots community organizations, my eyes glaze over. I want to go home and take a nap. I feel relief when Burawoy writes “there is no implication that we should all become public sociologists” (Burawoy et al. 2004:125). Thank you, Michael. Public sociology is not for me. I will happily remain in my professional cell. If public sociology is so much a question of personal choice, what could possibly be the matter? Research-oriented professional sociologists have, in fact, legitimate concerns with public sociology. There are concerns with assumptions of a common moral political agenda for sociologists, with the Marxist roots of public sociology, with its emphasis on advocacy, and with the role of public sociology within the American Sociological Association (ASA). I will discuss each of these issues in turn.

The Vacant “We”

The description of public sociology recognizes that practitioners are driven by their own ideological agenda, but it greatly overestimates the uniformity of the moral and political agenda of sociologists. This may be called the “illusion of unanimity.” Propping up the illusion must be important, because Burawoy makes a remarkable attempt to argue for a “natural” set of values for sociologists. He does this by associating the rise of sociology with the emergence of civil

* I am grateful to Robert Conklin, Lee Herring, Arne Kalleberg, Edward McDill, Mette Sørensen, Sy Spilerman, and Cathy Zimmer for contributing in various ways to the realization of this project. The opinions expressed are solely my own. Direct correspondence to François Nielsen, CB 3210, Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

society in the nineteenth century. Since civil society provides the conditions of existence for sociology, the argument goes, it follows that sociology should identify with the values emanating from civil society. This swift line of argumentation is supposed to convince us that sociologists have an inherent collective interest, perhaps even a binding moral duty, to oppose “the erosion of civil liberties, the violation of human rights, the degradation of the environment, the impoverishment of the working class, the spread of disease, the exclusion of ever greater numbers from the means of their existence, and deepening inequalities” (Burawoy et al. 2004:125). Never has the *ought* been derived so glibly from the *is*.

Not satisfied with proclaiming a natural moral imperative for sociology, public sociologists also like to press supposed methodological commonalities into service to construct a factitious “we sociologists,” e.g. draping themselves in the “sociological method,” “the sociological approach,” or “sociological principles” as if they knew what they are talking about; as if *anyone* knew what one is talking about.

The actual diversity of values held by sociologists is illustrated in a sobering anecdote that may be historically distant enough to be neutral relative to current passions. Burawoy identifies with some admiration Marx, Durkheim, and Weber as early practitioners of public sociology. Durkheim and Weber were contemporaries. The biggest event of their adult lives, World War I, provides a quasi-experiment of their reactions as public sociologists. Their reactions are described by Aron ([1967] 1999):

When the war broke out, Durkheim was a passionate French patriot, and his only son died in the war; Max Weber was a passionate German patriot. Both Durkheim and Weber wrote studies on the origin of the war, and neither study adds to its author’s scientific reputation. Although they were scientists, both men were citizens as well. . . . the truth is that there was nothing in Durkheim’s sociology which predisposed him to react differently from any other man. . . . Durkheim reacted, not as the optimistic professor and pupil of Comte, but in the same way as the vast majority of Frenchmen, intellectuals and non-intellectuals alike (pp. 323-4).

These founding figures of sociology, supposedly driven by the lofty moral values of the civil society, in fact each succumbed to the prevalent nationalistic passion for their own country. So much for the ideals of the “transnational civil society” (Burawoy 2004). Why did these early public sociologists disagree concerning the engagement of their respective countries in World War I? Did they not make appropriate use of the sociological method? Was Durkheim’s methodology better than Weber’s, or vice versa? Maybe the reality is just the way Aron suggests, that of two men driven by their own moral-political passion that has nothing whatsoever to do with any privileged sociological insight into the nature of social phenomena. And I suggest that the values espoused by

modern public sociologists are just that also, individual moral values that do not derive any additional authority from the fact that they are espoused by sociologists. Burawoy's attempt to derive a moral obligation for sociologists from alleged roots in the civil society is as much a non sequitur as any other attempt to derive ethical principles from statements about objective reality.

The Genealogy of Public Sociology

One hears of public sociologies more and more just as one hears of Marxist sociology less and less. Is this a coincidence? There would be an interesting study to be made of the overlap in "personnel" between these two approaches. What proportion of public sociologists trace their roots to Marxist sociology? For those who do, why the new identity? By its very existence the Soviet Union, even when criticized by western Marxists as reactionary or misguided, did provide useful support to the status of Marxist intellectuals. There was considerable prestige in being associated, however distantly, with the socialist universe. The Second World (how quickly has this expression aged!) was a permanent reality check for Marxist ideologies. Now that Marxist-Leninist regimes have been rejected by their own people and Europe is littered with unemployed professors of Marxist political economy, identification with Marxism has lost much of its luster.

Marxist sociologists have reacted to the collapse of the Eastern block just like the sect members that Leon Festinger once observed waiting on the hill for the end of the world. When the expected cataclysm did not happen, there was no acknowledgement that anything had been wrong in the faith. Instead there was immediate ideological activity to reinterpret the faith and justify postponement to another day (Festinger, Riecken & Schachter 1956). It seems that the fall of the Berlin Wall has rendered Marxist sociologists speechless. One wonders if public sociology is a new avatar of denial, a new packaging of the old ideas, a new ideological mantle to cover up the embarrassing shortcomings of the "really existing Socialist societies" (Lenski 2001).

Why is the issue of the elective affinity between Marxist ideology and public sociology worth bringing up? As large chunks of the economic foundations of Marxism, including the labor theory of value, have been rejected by Western social scientists and even (more discreetly) by neo-Marxist ones, it takes admirable determination to proclaim today that Marxism is a viable scientific program, as Burawoy (1990) does in an *American Sociological Review* article. (What interesting timing. The Berlin Wall must have fallen between the time the paper was accepted and the time it appeared in print.) Marxism has been most effective not as a scientific approach but as an ideology of social movements. This may be due in large part to the dramatic structure of Marxism, with its underlying struggle between good and evil; it is a dragon-slaying myth

for modern times. Revolutionary Marxism has not produced any just society, but has been exceedingly effective at justifying oppression of the people by an oligarchy. It is opium for the people more potent than any of the traditional religions identified as such by Marx. Thus when I hear Western intellectuals claim inspiration from Marxism, I have lingering suspicions that they might be using Marxist ideology as a vehicle for their own personal advancement and drive for power — under the guise of collective concerns. Is this too paranoid? Perhaps it is, but since there seems to be an overlap of personnel between Marxist sociology and public sociology one would like to hear public sociologists reflect on their own career association with Marxism, and the role this experience has played in their new vocation in public sociology. One feels that ex-Marxists turned public sociologists owe us a debriefing on the lessons they draw from the end of Soviet Marxism; a little *autocritique*, if you wish. This is an area where public sociologists might profitably unleash their “dialogic” yearnings; there is a lot of explaining to do.

Public Sociology and Values

A fundamental feature of public sociology is that it is driven by a moral-political agenda. Notwithstanding Burawoy’s blanket assessment of the sociological profession as being politically “left,” the moral-political agenda of individual sociologists are diverse. Even if a high degree of consensus seems to reign at any one time, circumstances will change and issues arise that will activate dormant ideological fractures and precipitate sociologists on different sides, just like World War I did for Durkheim and Weber. Professional sociology is admittedly not value-free either, despite the hopes of some. As psychologist Sandra Scarr (1997:32) writes in relation to effects of intelligence on educational and occupational achievement: “As has been said so many times, *Science is not value-free*, and it operates in a context of disputes about moral/ethical issues of distributive justice and a just society.” But the existence and justification of professional sociology rest on the very attempt to separate the values from the research procedure, to prevent the values from directly affecting research results. This means a constant vigilance to identify values and renounce advocacy in the conduct of research.

Public sociologies do not believe in such arm’s length handling of moral values. Public sociologists wallow in values. Because of this basic difference in orientation, I am not as optimistic as Burawoy concerning the prospect of peaceful coexistence, let alone synergistic alliance, between public sociology and professional sociology. With its emphasis on advocacy based on a moral-political agenda, the outlook of public sociologists may be inherently incompatible with that of scientifically or scholarly oriented professional sociologists. The conflict between advocacy for moral political values and the ethics of research is

illustrated by the encounter between the late Alfred McClung Lee (American Sociological Association [ASA] President 1976), whose presidential address Burawoy (2004) cites admiringly, and the late James S. Coleman (ASA President 1992). Coleman was arguably himself a great public sociologist, although maybe not the kind Burawoy has in mind. Coleman’s early work on school achievement, the *Coleman Report*, had been received approvingly by the liberal left and the civil rights movement because his results were seen as justifying the use of busing to desegregate school systems (see Coleman 1990). In the mid-1970s Coleman published another study suggesting that massive busing to desegregate urban school systems resulted in “white flight” to the suburbs. The net result of this demographic effect, according to Coleman, was to *increase* residential segregation, especially in urban districts with large black populations. The reaction of the liberal establishment was strident. As Coleman analyzes the situation (1990):

One can understand the outrage with which many advocates of massive desegregation plans . . . greeted the report by recognizing the heterogeneous nature of the coalition on which the social movement depended. Although the principal leaders of the school desegregation movement, black and white, saw this as a movement to establish the rights of blacks in American society, the strength of the support for busing plans depended on the achievement of the announced intention: bringing about effective desegregation. Many of the supporters of desegregation plans supported them for this reason alone . . .

The vehemence with which many of the leaders and most ardent supporters of busing plans greeted the publication of this report stemmed from the report’s potential for destroying this heterogeneous coalition by leading those interested only in achieving desegregation to withdraw support: If busing were shown to be ineffective in its announced intention, through its indirect resegregating effects, then the movement would lose a large fraction of the support on which it depended (p. 167).

Alfred McClung Lee, a prominent liberal, took advantage of his position as President of the ASA to mount a campaign against Coleman described as “vicious” by one witness, “irresponsible” by another, and “an ignominious act that almost succeeded” by Sørensen (1991:2). Lee tried (unsuccessfully) to have the ASA censure (i.e., expel) Coleman; he also organized opposition to Coleman’s candidacy to the ASA presidency, succeeding in delaying Coleman’s election to that position by many years (Bulmer 1996; Coleman 1989).

Posterity will judge the contributions of James S. Coleman and Alfred McClung Lee to sociology. What is instructive in that episode is that a sociologist driven by a strong political agenda was able to use the resources of a professional association of sociologists to mount an attack *ad hominem* against a man whose research results he disliked. Lee did not engage in research to disprove

Coleman's results; he tried to squash the person. Proponents of public sociology will certainly understand that episodes like this one make scientifically oriented sociologists wary. Professional sociologists may well view the public sociologists' emphasis on moral and political values as a potential motive, and ready-made pretense, for disregarding professional standards of scholarship and persecuting researchers who have dared come up with politically incorrect findings.

Public Sociology and the American Sociological Association (ASA)

Despite the above concerns there is no a priori reason why the different kinds of sociologists — the professional ones and the public ones — could not coexist peacefully doing their own thing in relative ignorance of each other, in the same way for example as quantitative and qualitative sociologists often behave today. The possibility of peaceful coexistence may be precluded by the close association between Burawoy's promotion of public sociology and the adoption by the ASA in 2003 of a resolution against the "War against Iraq," which was voted by a majority of 66 percent of voting members. Many among the 34 percent who voted against the resolution, presumably some of those who did not vote, and perhaps even a few who voted in favor, are strongly opposed in principle to the adoption by the ASA of resolutions that are manifestly political in nature. Opponents view resolutions such as these as blatant pieces of partisan politics that are outside the purview of any professional or scholarly association. They feel that the "adoption" of such resolutions by the ASA abusively associates their name with a political opinion with which they disagree, represents contemptuous disregard for their minority opinion, and really aims at suppressing dissent among members under cover of a false unanimity.

The Iraq resolution was sponsored by another association, Sociologists Without Borders (SWB), that has since confirmed its partisan credentials by endorsing a Global Defeat Bush Network (SWB at <http://www.sociologistswithoutborders.org/> [accessed 2 April 2004]). Even though the Iraq resolution did not originate in the public sociology movement, the movement is perceived as closely associated with it. Public sociology has thereby made enemies of many professionally oriented members who dislike having their personal opinions on political issues preempted by a vote of their professional association, an organization to which they have not surrendered any such right.

The practice of public sociology does not necessitate endorsement or sponsoring by the ASA, as the paradigms of public sociology described in Burawoy et al. (2004) clearly show, so it seems at first that this is a fight the public sociology movement is picking up gratuitously. Has the movement painted itself into a corner by its association with the Iraq resolution,

compromising its own goals of legitimation and weakening the ASA in the process?

How does the Iraq resolution threaten the ASA? A parallel may be useful. Without in the least impugning Michael Burawoy's drinking habits, about which I know nothing, I would like to suggest that he take a serious look at Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). This voluntary association, founded in 1935, has been immensely successful. AA currently has chapters in 150 countries of the world, more than 100,000 local groups, and over 2 million members (AA World Services at <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/> accessed March 2004). Surely one would expect that AA would take advantage of its unique expertise in matters of alcohol abuse to take positions on such issues as the causes and treatment of alcoholism, drinking age regulation, drinking and driving, the organization of treatment centers, advertising for alcoholic beverages, and many more. Readers will be forgiven for not remembering AA's latest position on these issues: AA does not have any. As a matter of organizational tradition, AA eschews any public position on anything it considers an outside issue, i.e. anything that is not directly related to personal recovery from alcoholism. Bill W., the organizational genius who co-founded AA, embodied that wisdom in the "10th tradition of AA," which reads "Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy." This radical minimalism is the secret of AA's organizational longevity. AA would be infinitely better justified, on grounds of expertise, to take positions on matters of alcohol abuse than the ASA is concerning the war in Iraq. By renouncing the taking of positions on *any* public issue, AA permits internal diversity of opinion among members, at once minimizing centrifugal forces that might threaten organizational unity and eliminating contention with outside forces (Kurtz 1988; Seabright & Delacroix 1996).

Burawoy recognizes that most professional organizations, unlike the ASA, have bylaws that exclude political activities such as the Iraq resolution from the purview of the organization. This suggests that other professional organizations have, like AA, grasped a principle of organization theory that the ASA has not, namely that taking positions on outside issues is a major threat to the survival of voluntary organizations. This blind spot is rather ironic, since a good case can be made that organization theory rightfully "belongs" to the field of sociology. Members who have been offended by the Iraq resolution are now contemplating their options. If the ASA continues to engage in political activities, there will be a strong motivation on the part of many to either (1) organize within the ASA for annulment of the Iraq resolution and the exclusion of political activities in the future, or (2) resign from the ASA and join, or become more active in, other professional associations that refrain from politics. (There is a wide choice among regional sociological associations, research committees of the International Sociological Association, and

interdisciplinary associations), or (3) participate in the creation of a new, purely professional and scholarly sociological association in the U.S. as an alternative to the ASA.

One might think that proponents of public sociology would see the dangers of bringing in controversy over political issues within the ASA and refrain from doing this for the sake of preserving unity within the association. The potential benefit does not seem worth it. What can they possibly gain in pursuing an aggressive strategy of control within the association, except for the right of engaging in their chosen activities, a right they already have? There is, in fact, an advantage to be gained by taking control of the association. The prize is editorial control of the ASA publications, in particular the *American Sociological Review* (ASR). There is a potential windfall here, as editorial control might open the pages of ASR to public sociology pieces, and perhaps even set up a quota of pages reserved for public sociology. (Maybe new terms will be needed: ASR might soon be publishing “editorials,” “pamphlets,” and “manifestos,” alongside “articles” and “commentaries.”) Is this far-fetched? It may be relevant to recall that when Michael Burawoy was Chair of the Publications Committee of the ASA a few years ago he tried to impose the committee’s choice of editorial team for ASR, and resigned in protest when that attempt failed. Maybe professional sociologists do have reason to worry.

Conclusions

Because it promotes advocacy based on moral political values and overestimates the consensus on values, and because there are unresolved issues concerning its association with a Marxist political agenda, public sociology does not fit easily within a profession oriented to norms of scientific-scholarly objectivity. Despite this awkwardness, public sociology could conceivably coexist with professional sociology on the basis of a mutual agreement to let everyone carry out their chosen activities without interference. Coexistence may not be possible because of the close association of public sociology with the successful attempt to force adoption of a partisan position concerning the 2003 war in Iraq — a “resolution” in the name of the entire membership of the ASA — and an apparent attempt by the leader of the movement to seize editorial control of a major ASA journal. These events can be expected to generate growing resistance against the legitimation of public sociology by professionally oriented sociologists opposed to further politicization of the ASA.

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