

The Arrogance of Public Sociology*

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My job is to introduce a little tension into an otherwise harmonious system. Public sociology, along with its cousin policy sociology, are currently very popular. My guess is that the vast majority of the audience is in agreement with Burawoy's call for an enlargement of public sociology. And I suspect that most people in the U.S. today who call themselves sociologists somehow want to be molders of society. It is important, therefore, to challenge some issues implied by the call for more public sociology.

Yet, criticizing Burawoy's argument in a cogent way is difficult because his position is not entirely clear. Because what he means by "public sociology" is somewhat problematic, almost anything I say can be countered by a disclaimer that the object of my comment is not, in fact, part of his position or that it is not what he meant. Nevertheless, I will react to what I understand his points to be and to what I interpret his statements about public sociology to imply.

As I understand it, Burawoy argues that (1) public sociology bears an interactive and mutually stimulating relationship with other forms of sociology, particularly what he calls "professional sociology," (2) public sociology is a desirable activity to be encouraged; indeed, that it is vital to the health of the entire sociological enterprise, (3) public sociology depends on a base of strong professional sociology and that the two are not fundamentally incompatible. Further, from his remarks here and from his writings, I gather that public sociology encompasses many things, including: (1) engagement in political activities to promote somebody's conception (I guess his) of social justice, (2) actively revealing to nonprofessional audiences the knowledge that sociologists think they have or the truths they think they know, (3) orienting our research and writing around moral issues, (4) engaging the public in debate about moral questions based on sociological insights, and (5) helping various "publics" solve problems or gather information relevant to their concerns, or helping to create such publics.

If my interpretation of the meaning of "public sociology" is correct, then a program encouraging sociologists to become more "public" would appear to be a mistake. In my opinion, "public sociology" (1) involves some false assumptions, (2) endangers what little legitimacy sociology has, thereby helping

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to undermine the chances of sociological knowledge ever being taken seriously in public arenas, and (3) is, in fact, incompatible with good “professional sociology.” Moreover, urging “public sociology” is contrary to one of the bases of a good society that Burawoy would probably endorse — participation on a more or less equal basis by all citizens.

Before setting forth my reasoning about these matters, I want to make it clear that I believe in the power of morality. I believe that moral questions are and ought to be at the center of human life, and that moral education is highly desirable. I take a back seat to no one in concerns for human suffering or the state of contemporary societies. Moreover, I believe that sociology and other social sciences hold the promise of providing information and insights that ultimately can be used to manipulate social conditions. My complaint with public sociology does not stem from lack of feeling or from lack of concern about the human condition. Rather, it flows from what I regard as defects in the notion itself.

First, public sociology appears to embrace some dubious assumptions. Advocates seem to think that what is “socially just” is clear and easily agreed upon among people with good will or sociological training. Actually, almost every social issue involves moral dilemmas, not moral clarity. What is or is not “just” is almost never unambiguous. Two examples will illustrate the point. In one of his writings Burawoy lists preventing the spread of disease as one of the goals of a just society and therefore one to be pursued by “public” sociologists. On a superficial level, most people would readily agree. Preventing diseases, however, often involves restrictions on human freedom and hard decisions about allocation of scarce products or services. During the rise of the AIDS epidemic, for instance, a strong effort to suppress any form of nonmarital sex probably would have helped prevent the spread of that disease. But, does sociological training, or the fact of being a sociologist, provide any basis for deciding whether restricting freedom is better than chancing a possible disease epidemic? Do sociologists have any way of knowing the proper tradeoff of sacrificing X amount of freedom for saving Y number of lives? Or consider the case of vaccinations against disease. Almost every vaccine itself kills or injures a certain number of people. Does sociology equip us to know how many people should be sacrificed in order to save a given number of potential victims of the disease? Does sociology give us any basis for judging which diseases are worth costly efforts at prevention? I do not think it does. And because it does not, there is no reason to imagine that sociologists have a claim to superiority in questions of “social justice,” or even to imagine that sociologists themselves agree. To assume that we do have such superiority and to expect people to accord us respect on that basis is really quite arrogant.

Moreover, the notion of “public sociology” assumes that sociologists actually have good knowledge that can be applied to human problems. In fact, however,

our supposed knowledge is quite shaky. In the two areas of sociology about which I know the most, criminology and urban sociology, there is not a single issue about which even a modestly demanding critic could be convinced. For example, despite what some of my professional colleagues would like to believe, we cannot say with even reasonable certainty what causes crime, we do not know with much assurance whether or under what conditions arresting domestic abusers deters their future misconduct, we do not know whether gun control prevents violence, and we do not even know for sure the extent to which the death penalty curbs capital crime. In every case, there is conflicting evidence. This is not surprising since research is limited, and our data are always incomplete, error prone, and accepted as supporting an argument if it simply shows something "better than chance." Indeed, most sociologists are thrilled to explain 25% of the variance in some dependent variable.

Yet many of us want to go forth to tell others what to do about crime or help them to arrive at the same conclusions we currently hold. The fact is, criminologists and other sociologists are as likely to be wrong as right and in the process they can easily cause damage. Here we are not talking about innocuous outcomes but instead about matters of human life, safety, and freedom. Being wrong can be very costly. To my way of thinking it is not acceptable to dismiss such damage by saying that we simply act on what we think we know at a given point in time. Knowledge evolves from the accumulation of large bodies of research evidence collected with the guidance of theoretical direction. One, or even several studies, do not make a science. What we think we know today may prove contrary to what we learn tomorrow, as has been shown in so many instances. Knowing this, why would we assume that we now have sufficient knowledge to share with the public and why would we assume that lay persons are equipped to judge the strength of the evidence?

In addition to its questionable assumptions, public sociology is a bad idea because it endangers what little legitimacy sociology currently has, which is precious little. When we do public sociology, especially when we collectively do it by acting as an association, we shift our collective status from generators of knowledge to advocates of one thing or another. And, even if the positions we advocate may be "right," by advocating them we become just another interest group in competition with the legions of interest groups already out there. If we define ourselves as an interest group, we can expect to be treated like other interest groups; that is, we will be credible only if we have money or influence over a large electoral bloc. Sociology has neither of those and almost certainly never will have. Instead, our claim to credibility must rest on the reliable body of knowledge that we may accumulate. At the moment, though, sociologists do not have that body of reliable knowledge and the public pretense that we do actually undermines any hope of influencing society or of obtaining the support necessary for developing such knowledge. Lay people know we have weak knowledge and in response they accord us little credibil-

ity. We, in turn, continually undermine the little respect we might otherwise have by trying to promote our ideas (a form of ideology) in the guise of superior knowledge. Most of the time we actually do not know as much as we pretend and even when there is a chance we might provide or compile useful information, people do not trust us. One of the more fascinating pieces I have read recently traces a debate in the legislature of a state noted for its educated population. The debate concerned a bill to restore the death penalty, which had previously been rescinded. The record is clear in showing that the legislators did not regard sociologists or criminologists as scientists, did not believe their research, and most of all, did not trust their motives in interpreting accumulated research and setting forth its implications. In the end the legislators ignored the testimony of the social scientists and restored the death penalty. Similarly, many states and the federal government have embraced capital punishment despite the fact that the American Society of Criminology, composed mostly of sociologists, has had an official position in opposition to capital punishment for a long time (the one and only official position ever taken by that association).

Thus, if we ever expect our work to influence society, we must gain public credibility by building a body of reliable knowledge. But building such a body of knowledge is actually inhibited by the commitments involved in public sociology. The most useful and reliable knowledge is likely to be that developed following the canons of science. Those canons are not value free but instead tout a particular set of values — those of science. Scientific values require theory that, in the case of sociology, is designed to explain human behavior and social organization as well as changes to each. It mandates that such theory be thoroughly tested and confirmed by empirical studies in which the possibility of negative evidence is seriously entertained. Finally, it demands that such work satisfy a community of critics who are themselves trained in the rigors of science. To the extent that we orient our work around moral principles, we are less likely to attend to theoretical issues. The greater the extent to which we favor particular outcomes, the less able are we to design our work to actually access such outcomes. And the more ideologically oriented our objectives, the less the chance that we can recognize or assimilate contrary evidence. In other words, rather than good professional sociology being mutually interactive with public sociology, I believe that public sociology gets in the way of good professional sociology. Moreover, if sociologists cannot neutralize the intrusion of other, personal, values into the process of knowledge building — through such techniques as peer review, rewarding those who design research to reveal things contrary to their personal values, and training in the rigors of science — the enterprise is inherently doomed, further weakening a claim to credibility.

Even the objective of helping various “publics” solve problems or helping them to gather information relevant to their concerns threatens to further erode the public image of sociology and appears to offer little help in the larger

project of building reliable knowledge. “Publics” usually begin with a set of interests they want affirmed, or the public sociologist tells them what those interests ought to be. To the extent that they want sociologists’ help, they want us to find evidence that supports those interests. Publics rarely want to find the “truth” in the sense of looking at the full array of positive and negative evidence. Are the sociologists then free to pursue the evidence fully or are they simply handmaidens of their clients? What do public sociologists do if the research contradicts the initial contentions or assumptions of the public being served (if such a thing is even possible when doing public sociology). Recently a public sociologist presented some of his work to my department. Seems he was called in by a community group because they believed they were suffering from pollution from a particular source. They wanted him to find supportive evidence they could use as ammunition to fight back in court and in the legislative halls. Presumably they did not want him to find out if they were the victims of pollution; they wanted him to show that they were. Not surprisingly, he assisted his clients by providing data supporting their position. But, I could not help but wonder, given his moral bent, whether he had allowed or even could have allowed sufficiently for the possibility that pollution was not occurring or was not due to the culprit that the clients wanted indicted. Indeed, I wondered how he would have mollified the clients had his research turned up evidence contrary to their desires. Would he have simply ignored or suppressed it?

Finally, to urge that we should engage societal processes as sociologists rather than as citizens is contrary to the principles of participatory democracy. In my opinion, everybody has a duty to be a public person and in performing that duty people employ knowledge, values, and skills obtained in many ways, sometimes through specific training as a sociologist. But to imagine that sociologists, qua sociologists, should exercise more influence in public affairs than other citizens is to embrace a form of inequality that in other contexts Burawoy would probably abhor. Moreover, for individuals to engage in public activities wearing hats identifying themselves as sociologists is often a ploy to claim respect that is not deserved. Better that we have two hats — one we wear while performing as sociologists and another we don in our roles as citizens. And it is far better that we wear these respective hats at different times and in different contexts, not at the same time.

In summary, if public sociology encompasses the activities that I have surmised that it does, it is not a desirable thing. It assumes an unjustified moral superiority. It jeopardizes accomplishment of goals that would make sociology genuinely useful. It is somewhat dishonest in claiming more than can be delivered and in the process undermines sociological credibility. And it often patronizes those outside the profession.