

A WILL TO PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY:
PARRHESIA OR DIALECTICAL REGRESSION?

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Professor Michael Burawoy was almost like a *parrhesiast*, an organic public intellectual of fearless speech, when he passionately advocated a global mission of public sociology at the public forum of the 2005 Hong Kong Sociological Association Annual Meeting. In Michel Foucault's *Fearless Speech, parrhesia*, a Greek concept of fearless and public speech, implies "frankness, truth, danger, criticism and obligation".¹ To be a *parrhesiast*, the subject of the speech has to contain these five essential elements at the same time. Professor Burawoy's *parrhesia*-ness glittered when he stood on the stage of 2005 HKSA annual meeting evocating the mission impossible to the local circle of Hong Kong sociologists, who, as a marginalized or self-colonized group, persistently suffocated in a rapidly hegemonized environment of global competitiveness, professionalism, managerialism and hence social *distantiation*. Professor Burawoy's heroic aestheticism is his courage, commitment and passion to create a will to public sociology that strikes the heart of young generations of sociologists.

Professor Burawoy once said that, "sociology is born with civil society and dies with civil society." The defense of the social becomes the ultimate goal of sociology as a specific discipline and unique praxis of knowledge production. Unfortunately, the practice of sociologists in Hong Kong has long neglected this mission and often been trapped in an intangible nexus of power/knowledge/hegemony colored by a preoccupation with, if not a disposition toward, serving power from above. Local knowledge, language and publication have never been seriously respected, not to mention the production of sociological knowledge having a "public or critical face" confronting either the domination of the state or the tyranny of the market.

Hong Kong is now a post-colonial society—in saying this, I mean we are still living in the same colonizing situation, or even worsen

¹ Michel Foucault, 2001. *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles, Ca: Semiotext(e).

than the pre-1997 period, and Fanon's critique of local intellectuals is still very much applicable here. The cultural domination of the West and self-colonization of local sociologists still prevails—a mentality of phantom-like colonialism fed by the coming of an imagined globalized world in which we are called up to live with a well-justified neo-liberal marketized society. The social has been lost, not in actual struggles, but in the mind of local sociologists.

Professor Burawoy's speech on "Public sociology on a global scale" came at a time when Hong Kong was about to hold the WTO Ministerial Meeting and local society would soon be punctuated by regular street protests. Burawoy himself had participated in one of the biggest local marches on December 4, 2005, in which more than 100,000 Hong Kong people poured into the streets demanding universal suffrage from the central government of China. With Professor Burawoy in the march, surrounded by a group of young activists and students, I was perplexed by the coincidence of the protestors' slogans centering on the basic human rights for democracy and Burawoy's advocacy for universal human rights to fight against the current neo-liberal globalism and the third wave of marketization which he has classified. It would have seemed like mischief in the public forum if I had revealed that my immediate response to Burawoy's periodization of three waves of marketization and his sincere effort to provide public sociology from the standpoint of safeguarding humanity and nature through a call for universal human rights, was that it was a praxis of 'dialectical regression' that lacked serious reflection on the Enlightenment model of universal human liberty and freedom that has long been criticized. I was nevertheless lost in the long march, with a sense of anachronism that what we had demanded for Hong Kong society retreated back to the 19th century—the right of universal suffrage, the most basic human right prevailing in the political scenario of two centuries ago. Is this the farce, if not tragedy, of Hong Kong in the present? The 'long' march toward democracy, as basic human right, dances back and forth across the past two centuries in different societies. Do we know what we are really doing, and what we're doing it for?

To prevent nihilism and cynicism, and to engage seriously with Burawoy's call for public sociology, we need perhaps more reflection, questioning and even deconstruction of public sociology before we can devise useful agendas. What is missing here is not really a vision or standpoint for a public sociology, as many critics would, like

Burawoy have. What we lack is a feasible way of linking the vision of public sociology to the institutional or cultural milieu in which many sociologists live under a system of substantiation and promotion. If there is no genuine reflection and collective resistance to the present practice of sociological knowledge, the social conditioning of knowledge reproduction and hence the institutional milieu of sociological praxis will hardly be changed. Let us say that Professor Burawoy has helped to sharpen this reflection and generate momentum for resistance to the present praxis of sociology. He has also helped us to name and define what public sociology is, as he knows well the politics of naming is the battlefield of struggle:

The first step is to name it—public sociology—a sociology that seeks to bring sociology to publics beyond the academy, promoting dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values . . . which adhere, under a microscope. What is important here is the multiplicity of public sociologies, reflecting the multiplicity of publics—visible and invisible, thick and thin, active and passive, local, national and even global, dominant and counter publics (Burawoy, 2004:104).

However, what is a public? What is public sociology for? What does the 'publics' mean in a local context? Professor Burawoy is well aware of the waning of the social due to globalization, and the increasing complexities of publics if not the complicity of the discourse of publics with state and market. The privatization and commercialization of public services have been earnestly promoted and implemented in Hong Kong and the rationale fed by the neo-liberal state is for the effective management of public goods. Sadly, the 'public' of Hong Kong believes in this 'public' discourse, and anti-privatization movement is seriously opposed by both government and mainstream media—one has to bear in mind that we do not have significant alternative media that are able to articulate *minor* stories in Hong Kong.² Hong Kong is rapidly turning itself into a *stockholding* society in which the majority of stockholders claim to represent the dominant public, and hence the public interest. The battle over what the public is indeed urgently in need of, and I am afraid that will run counter to the sympathetic understanding of Burawoy's conception of a multiplicity of publics that could be called up for a

² A few and respectful attempts in Hong Kong are In-media (<http://www.inmediahk.net>) and Video Power (<http://www.videopower.org.hk/link.adp>).

common goal of fighting for universal human rights. Here, Hong Kong stockholders say, "I have the right to buy shares of public goods on the stock market and to safeguard Hong Kong as an international financial city—this is of utmost importance for the public of Hong Kong." While I was not convinced by the arguments put forth by David Brady that public sociology may fail,³ we nevertheless need a genealogy of 'public' and in particular a genealogy of public sociology in the Western context before we elevate it to a global scale. Do we really need a compromise with the public, a radicalization of the concept or simply the birth of a multitude of new publics? There is no simple answer.

Regarding Burawoy's advocacy for a universality of human rights to resist the third wave of marketization, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri put it clearly that the notion of human rights is the engine of Empire which "sets in motion an ethico-political dynamic that lies at the heart of its juridical concept" (2000:11) and there is a "coincidence and universality of the ethical and juridical to the extreme: in Empire there is peace, in Empire there is guarantee of justice for all peoples" (2000:10). In Hong Kong, as a sandwich society living in fissures between two empires and their dominant cultures, we witness squabbles from time to time between the U.S. and Chinese governments over the ground of 'human rights'. These two governments are earnest agents, paradoxically through the works of sociologists or political scientists, in producing human rights discourses that are geared against each other and most likely will support public sociologists whose work can feed their political agendas. In this sense, we have no choice but look into the possible collaboration between power and knowledge in producing and reproducing the knowledge of a public sociology in various contexts.

Here, again we have no easy way to resolve the puzzle. What we need perhaps is a rebirth of the concept of rights, and a new ethical and ontological axis of public sociology. To be a new *aetas*, a new becoming and metamorphosis of our time, it looks like public sociology still has a long way to go. What is missing is not only a vision or standpoint of public sociology, but tactics, wars of position,

³ David Brady. "Why Public Sociology May Fail", *Social Forces*, 82 (4): 1629–1638. (2004).

infra-politics, lines of movement and, most important of all, the creation of insurgent subjectivities who are ready to resist the present practice of sociology. It is not really important to distinguish the exploitation of labour from the expropriation of life as long as the battle is against the alienation of labour, life and nature from global capitalism in which the state and market are still working hand in hand, and in which the cleavages of the public are hard to prevent. Let us confront these challenges and start to rework the concepts of 'public' and 'rights', radicalize them and turn them into weapons of the powerless.

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