

DISCUSSION FORUM

Economic sociology as public sociology

Keywords: economic sociology, markets

JEL classification: A14 sociology of economics

Public sociology and economic sociology: introductory remarks

Richard Swedberg

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

Correspondence: rs328@cornell.edu

This issue of SER contains three articles on public sociology and economic sociology, which all have their origin in a session on this theme that was held at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in August 2006 in Montreal.¹ The reason for organizing this session was a sense that ‘new economic sociology’ has ignored many of the issues that are associated with the term ‘public sociology’.

If one looks at the writings in ‘new economic sociology’ from the mid-1980s and onwards one will, on the whole, find very few attempts to relate economic sociology to such issues as the political role of the analyst, how economic sociology can be used to change or improve the world and the like. The reasons for this apolitical character of new economic sociology is not clear. Maybe the desire to establish economic sociology as a legitimate academic field was too strong or maybe many of its early practitioners had had enough of activist politics during the 1960s. Alternatively, maybe they were responding to the ideology of neo-liberalism that was just being launched at around this time. In any case, issues that should have been addressed were not being addressed.

¹For comments, assistance or inspiration I thank Mabel Berezin, Michael Burawoy, Mark Granovetter and Chris Winship. The session took place on 13 August 2006 and was organized by myself. Other participants included Mike Useem and Nicole Woolsey Biggart.

Some exceptions exist, and the works of Fred Block and Neil Fligstein deserve a special mention in this context. In *Postindustrial Possibilities: A Critique of Economic Discourse* (1990), for example, Block makes a sharp political critique of mainstream economic categories and suggests a number of alternatives, which are more humane as well as more comprehensive, and in *Markets, Politics, and Globalization* (1997) Neil Fligstein raises the issue of 'normative implications of a sociology of markets' (Fligstein, 1997, pp. 38–41; cf. Fligstein, 1996). Fligstein has also presented himself here as well as elsewhere as an advocate of stakeholder theory.

A special mention must finally be made of Pierre Bourdieu, who from early on addressed normative and political issues in his work. Bourdieu's position on public sociology can be illustrated by *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, a short book which mainly consists of lectures and speeches given at various public occasions, including strike meetings (Bourdieu, 1998). Its major theme is that the welfare state is under heavy attack from neo-liberalism, and that this is something that has to be fought since the welfare state protects people from the ravages of the market (for the full set of Bourdieu's activist writings during 1961 and 2001, see Bourdieu, 2002).

Bourdieu's attack on neo-liberalism is not very different from what one can find elsewhere among social scientists who define themselves as progressive and anti-liberal, but there is one part to Bourdieu's criticism that is very suggestive to my mind and of special interest to the discussion of public sociology and economic sociology. This is the part which has to do with Bourdieu's attempt to introduce a new set of concepts to criticize neo-liberalism and capitalism more generally, and which somehow succeed in serving both as political concepts and as sociological ones. These are centred around the idea of theodicy and include concepts such as 'sociodicy' and 'social suffering' (e.g. Bourdieu, 1979, 1998; Bourdieu et al. 1999).

Theodicy tries to answer questions such as the following: *Why is there suffering in the world, and why do some people suffer more than others?* Bourdieu's position is that the organization of society has much to do with the creation of suffering, and he therefore speaks of 'sociodicy' and 'social suffering' (e.g. Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 35, 43; see also Morgan and Wilkinson, 2001). Neo-liberalism, for example, is characterized by Bourdieu as a 'conservative sociodicy' since it justifies suffering on the ground that it is necessary for economic progress (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 35). Also education is presented as a form of sociodicy by Bourdieu, since it justifies the mistreatment of certain people on the ground that they are less competent and knowledgeable than others (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 177).

However, the real wake-up call for economic sociology, and much of sociology more generally, came with the work of Michael Burawoy and his attempt to draw attention to public sociology. This was done in a marathon of talks and articles,

which began in 2002 and still continues. The most important item in this production is Burawoy's presidential address from 2004 at the American Sociological Association, entitled 'Public Sociology' (Burawoy, 2005). This article has generated a large number of comments (see e.g. *British Journal of Sociology*, 2005; *American Sociologist*, 2005).

Burawoy's 2004 address makes two important contributions that should be kept apart. First, it put the term 'public sociology' on the map of sociology once and for all (the term itself was coined by Herbert Gans, after the pattern of 'public intellectual'). Second, it also presents a new and interesting version of what public sociology should be and, more generally, its place in sociology as a whole.² Burawoy distinguishes between what he terms traditional public sociology and organic public sociology, with the former meaning the production by sociologists of newspaper articles, books aimed at the general public and the like, and the latter meaning activist work of a critical type.

Burawoy's main project, however, is not so much to distinguish one type of public sociology from another, as to present an analysis of public sociology in relation to other types of sociology. With this purpose in mind, he states that sociology can either be instrumental or reflexive in its approach, and that it can be either aimed at an academic audience or at an extra-academic audience. This gives us a two-by-two with four types of sociology: professional sociology, critical sociology, policy sociology—and *public sociology* (see Table 1).

Burawoy's suggestion that we equate public sociology with reflexive sociology directed at an extra-academic audience gives, among other things, legitimacy to a type of sociology that by tradition is part of the tradition of sociology, but which over the years has also been much criticized in the name of objective social

²All histories of words are complex. Here is Michael Burawoy's reaction to my question if it was he who invented the term public sociology:

Well it's more complicated. First, it's difficult to say I invented the term public sociology, the inspiration is very clear in Mills's *Sociological Imagination*, especially chapter 6. There is a clear demarcation made by myself and Gans between public sociologist and public intellectual—the former is so-to-speak a specialist public intellectual, someone who knows what (s)he's talking about and still subject to accountability from peers. If I contributed anything it was to organize our discipline into four interdependent sociologies—professional, public, policy and critical—and insist that a vibrant discipline depends upon the flourishing of all four.

Some more digging showed that the first use was probably that of Herbert Gans, in his 1988 presidential address at ASA entitled 'Sociology in America: The Discipline and the Public' (Gans, 1989, p. 7). Gans states that he constructed the term public sociology with Russell Jacoby's notion of public intellectuals in mind; and he cites *The Lonely Crowd* and *Habits of the Heart* as examples of public sociology. In 2000 Ben Agger published a volume entitled *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts*.

Table 1 Public sociology and other types of sociology, according to Michael Burawoy

	Academic audience	Extra-academic audience
Instrumental knowledge	Professional sociology	Policy sociology
Reflexive knowledge	Critical sociology	Public sociology

Source: Adapted after Table 3 in Michael Burawoy, "Public Sociology", *American Sociological Review* 70 (2005), p. 16.

science, namely activist research. In response to Burawoy's article, Edna Bonacich writes for example:

By acknowledging a long tradition within our discipline, and recognizing its important contribution to the field, he is providing legitimacy to many of us who have been toiling in this area for years. We know that many of our students were attracted to sociology because it promised the opportunity not only to understand our complex world better, but to try to do something to change it. Yet we also knew that many in our discipline and departments felt compelled to crush this impulse, and to drive students into a narrow professionalism. 'If you want to be an activist', they would say, 'you don't belong in graduate school'. (Bonacich, 2005, p. 105)

My own sense is that Burawoy has made a very valuable contribution to sociology through his work on public sociology that will be with us for a long time to come. Having said this, I would also argue that his definition of public sociology is perhaps too narrow in scope. His work on public sociology, I suggest, might best be seen in economic sociology as an inspiration to address a number of questions about what I would like to call the role of economic sociology in the world of today.

When economic sociology was revived in the mid-1980s it termed itself 'new economic sociology', and by 'new' it meant first and foremost that it represented a different approach from the old economy and society-approach. According to this approach, typically associated with the work of Talcott Parsons and Wilbert E. Moore, economists should deal with the economy and not with society, and sociologists should deal with society and not with the economy.

However, this is a point that is well understood by now, and I suggest that a better way to justify the 'new' in 'new economic sociology' would be to interpret it in the sense that we need a new economic sociology in a new economic world.

While economic sociology is rightly seen as building on the work of Marx, Weber, Schumpeter and Polanyi, the economy of today is quite different from what it was 150 years ago or even 50 years ago. Classes are not the same as they were in Marx's days; rational capitalism is not the same as in Weber's days; entrepreneurs are not the same as in Schumpeter's days; and markets are not the same as in Polanyi's days. Capitalism means *change, change, change*—as all the classics argued!

To capture these new features of economic life—networks, electronic markets, the changing role of gender in economic life and much, much more—constitutes the real and important agenda of new economic sociology, and this agenda also extends to the public sociology of these new issues.

Exactly which these new issues are is something that economic sociologists need to discuss. In the meantime, let me quickly mention a few of them, just to give a sense of my way of looking at these things.

1. The profitable use of networks

While economic sociologists did not invent network analysis, they have contributed importantly to its development. They have not, however, looked at the growing use of networks to make money. Social networking is growing by leaps and MySpace, for example, had 56 million visitors in September 2006 (Rivlin, 2006). LinkedIn, which aims at business people and not just anyone interested in electronic socializing, claims to be a network of 8 million professionals in 130 countries.

2. New ways for economic sociologists to be useful

According to a full-scale article in *Business Week* from May 2006, sociologist William Bielby has testified in more than 50 cases against corporations in suits relating to discriminatory employment practices (Orey, 2006; see e.g. Bielby, 2003). Wal-Mart, Fedex and Johnson & Johnson are some of the corporations involved. In 2004 Bielby testified in a case against Morgan Stanley in which the firm settled sex discrimination claims for \$56 million. Also, other sociologists have participated as expert witnesses in cases involving corporations and their employment policies. Is this a new role for economic sociologists?

3. The role of the media

An important part of people's knowledge and attitudes towards economic topics comes from opinions voiced in the media. What role, for example, did various experts voicing their opinions about the market on television play in the corporate scandals of 2001–2002? How does television influence the attitudes of children to money, wealth and material well-being? There exists practically no research on these particular issues or on the role of media in transmitting economic information and forming economic attitudes more generally.

4. The role of business schools

Since the main purpose of business schools is to educate managers and (increasingly) people working in finance, how does this mandate influence the economic sociology that is produced there? There exists a huge literature on business schools by sociologists, but little of this is reflexive in nature (see however Rakesh Khurana's forthcoming *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*, 2007).

Many more issues could be cited, but the ones I have mentioned should be enough, I hope, to make the point that there is a new and peculiar economic world out there, which it is the task of economic sociology to study—and more. What should this 'more' consist of? I do think that the situation today is different enough from what it was in the days of Marx–Weber–Polanyi, and that a number of old positions need to be re-evaluated.

This also includes the issue of activism and objectivity. Marx, at one end of the spectrum, wanted us to change the world, not just explain it; and Weber, at the other end, wanted us to make objective analyses in our capacity as social scientists and do politics in our capacity as citizens. However, is this choice between Total Activism and Total Objectivity the only possible one? Is it perhaps time to rethink objectivity and try to relate it in some new ways to the world that has come into being after World War I and the end of classical sociology?

All articles in this issue on the theme of public sociology and economic sociology address, in one way or another, the attempt to find a place for economic sociology also outside of academia or, as I have phrased it, find a new place for economic sociology in the new economic world that has come into being. In 'Confronting Market Fundamentalism: Doing "Public Economic Sociology"', Fred Block argues that the old strategy of trying to affect change through the publication of books, articles and op-eds ('traditional public sociology' in Burawoy's terminology) is insufficient in a time when Market Fundamentalism is hegemonic.

Something else, he argues, is needed; and he suggests that people interested in doing 'public economic sociology' should try to engage in strategic behaviour by building coalitions with groups that would benefit from a weakening of Market Fundamentalism. One example of such a strategy is discussed, involving a standard setting organization called INMEX in the hotel and convention industry.

In 'Public Sociology vs. the Market', Michael Burawoy suggests that the world is currently undergoing a third period or wave of marketization, which threatens to create havoc in society, destroy the environment and kill off sociology for good. During each of the two earlier waves of marketization, a specific type of sociology

developed in response; and so it will this time as well. Public sociology will in this way take over from the utopian sociology of the nineteenth century and the policy sociology that came into being after World War I.

The new type of sociology that is needed to effectively meet the challenge of third-wave marketization, Burawoy continues, will have to be global in nature, be directed at many different audiences and express the values of many communities. This represents a difficult enterprise, but sociology itself is under attack today; and there is no choice but to try to develop an effective form of public sociology.

In 'The Invisible Science of the Invisible Hand: The Public Presence of Economic Sociology in the USA', Akos Rona-Tas and Nadav Gabay focus primarily on how the ideas of economic sociology are diffused. Using two case studies, they show that, when ideas that sociologists have developed and published are presented to the general public by economists, these latter are given credit for their discovery. Economic sociology, as a consequence, is little known.

The reason for this is institutional; and the authors suggest a number of ways in which institutions structure the diffusion of ideas about the economy. Economics, for example, has much more disciplinary cohesion than sociology. What is at issue is not so much if you have one or several perspectives at the core of the discipline, the authors argue, but if there is fragmentation or not in the discipline. Sociology, as opposed to economics, is badly fragmented into a number of subfields which have little to do with one another. Economic sociologists should continue to fight successfully against this trend; and the way to do so is by being concerned with sociology as a whole and by taking ideas from other subfields. The authors also suggest that it would be helpful if there was a prestigious prize in economic sociology.

References

- Agger, B. (2000) *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.
- American Sociologist*. (2005) 'Public Sociology', 36(3/4), 1–165.
- Bielby, W. (2003) *Betty Dukes et al. v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.*
- Block, F. (1990) *Postindustrial Possibilities: a Critique of Economic Discourse*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.
- Bonacich, E. (2005) 'Working with the labor movement: a personal journey in organic public sociology', *The American Sociologist*, 36(3/4), 195–220.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) 'The Disenchantment of the World'. In *Algeria 1960*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–91.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) *Sociology in Question*, London, SAGE.

- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, New York. The New Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2002) *Interventions, 1961–2001. Science Sociale & Action Politique*, Marseille, Agone.
- Bourdieu, P. et al. (1999) *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.
- British Journal of Sociology*. (2005) 'Public Sociology', **56**(2).
- Burawoy, M. (2005) 'Public Sociology', *American Sociological Review*, **70**, 4–28.
- Fligstein, N. (1996) 'Markets as Politics: A Political-Cultural Approach to Market Institutions', *American Sociological Review*, **61**, 656–673.
- Fligstein, N. (1997) *Markets, Politics, and Globalization, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis no. 42*, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- Gans, H. (1989) 'Sociology in America: The Discipline and the Public', *American Sociological Review*, **54**, 1–16.
- Khurana, R. (2007) *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press (in press).
- Morgan, LD. and Wilkinson, I. (2001) 'The problem of suffering and the sociological task of theodicy', *European Journal of Social Theory*, **4**(2), 199–214.
- Orey, M. (2006) 'White men can't help it', *Business Week*, 15 May, pp. 54–57.
- Rivlin, G. (2006) 'Wallflower at the web party: how Friendster missed a billion-dollar break', *The New York Times*, 15 October, pp. 1, 9.