PUBLIC SOCIOLOGIES AND THE GRASS ROOTS

Wrightsville Beach, February 7, 2002

Michael Burawoy

Talking to SWS (Sociologists for Women in Society) about public sociology is like bringing coal to Newcastle. But in these difficult times -- when the supply of coal is threatened even in Newcastle -- it is perhaps useful for an outsider to valorize the sort of public sociology SWS stands for, especially when others are lamenting the disappearance of public sociology.

Not for the first time nor for the last, intellectuals are spreading the mythology of their decline as if, in some by-gone golden age, intellectuals had power and influence they no longer possess. We see this "declinism" in Russell Jacoby's, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (1987) or in Richard Posner's *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2001). Here I wish to dwell on an even more recent example and one more close to home. Last May, Harvard sociologist, Orlando Patterson wrote an obituary for his mentor David Riesman. It appeared as an op-ed in *The New York Times*, under the provocative title "The Last Sociologist." David Riesman was, of course, the author of the all-time best-selling sociological classic, *The Lonely Crowd*. Written in 1950 it traced the decline of the inner-directed individual and the rise of the other-directed individual, who succumbed to a host of conformist pressures from peer groups to status seeking consumerism and seductive advertising, from mass media to political manipulation. Patterson's obituary, however, was not just for David Riesman but also for the sociology he stood for -- a public sociology that dealt with the big issues of the day. In "The Last Sociologist," Patterson claims that sociology has lost sight of its *raison etre*, and instead is mindlessly pursuing trivial issues, fetishizing technique over substance. Patterson points an accusing finger at professionalism, the supposed enemy of the public intellect.

Undoubtedly, there is truth here, professional sociology has become specialized, it has been guilty of reifying technique over substance, and like any profession it has become self-referential. But has there been a concomitant decline in public sociology since its supposed golden age in the 1950s? To be sure the 1950s was an era of heroic public sociologists, of C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, and Daniel Bell, but they were few and far

between. They were indeed heroic, it was after all the repressive era of McCarthyism! We shouldn't forget that it was also the era of sociology as messianic science. Today we live in a period that, so far at least, is still less repressive and more skeptical of the virtues of science. Today there are many more public sociologists of renown – William Julius Wilson, Herb Gans, Linda Waite, Judy Stacey, Dick Sennett, Pepper Schwartz, Alan Wolfe, Arlie Hochschild, Robert Bellah, Todd Gitlin, Amitai Etzioni, Sandy Jencks, to name but a few. Perhaps, more narrowly focused, they are nonetheless tackling the important issues of the day – family and work, race and class, community and the individual, education and the media.

If one side of Patterson's critique – the decline of public sociology -- has little foundation what about the other side? Is it true that sociology no longer deals with the big issues of the day? If one thinks that sociology only deals with trivia then take a look at the American Sociological Association's new magazine, *Contexts*, where it becomes obvious that sociologists are indeed contributing to a wide range of public issues of substance and moment. Or look at the activities of the American Sociological Association itself. Its recent Race Statement and its authoring of an Amicus Brief submitted to the Supreme Court in the Affirmative Action Case of Grutter versus Bollinger are both based on a rich tradition of research into the ways race matters – all the more important as we face legislation that would deny state governments the right to classify populations by race, as though we live in a race blind society.

In the face of all this data to the contrary how can Patterson be talking of the "Last Sociologist," and the decline of public sociology? His tunnel vision comes from his peculiarly parochial focus on Harvard -- Patterson's deep sense of hurt and shame that his own sociology department suspended a lecture series to commemorate David Riesman. But American sociology cannot be reduced to Harvard.[1] Indeed, over the last 30 years sociology's center of gravity has shifted not only away from Harvard but from private universities in general (Harvard, Chicago and Columbia) to the public universities of Michigan, Wisconsin, Berkeley, and others, reflecting not only a deeper professionalism but the expansion of public sociologies.

[1] Even at Harvard matters are not as bleak as Patterson claims, especially if one includes the sociologists outside the sociology department!

Connecting professionalism and public sociology is outside Patterson's vision because he holds to an elitist conception of public sociology whose currency is writing op-ed pieces for *The New York Times,* visiting the White House or writing best-selling books for an emergent middle class. Today we have to expand our horizons, and expand the meaning of public sociology to include a wide range of publics -- not just the readerships of national media which is an amorphous, invisible, passive, public made up of strangers but also the much thicker publics that must begin with our students (our best emissaries to the world beyond), extending to local communities (such as communities of faith which we address in our churches), or social movements we stimulate to achieve greater self-awareness (such as civil rights or labor). Indeed, the prototype of the public sociology of today is the feminist movement that first constituted its public, then brought that public to self-awareness and mobilization. And in this view SWS represents the archetypal mediator between professional and public sociology.

Patterson, then, is lamenting the decline of a particular type of public sociologist -- the lonely, usually male, inner-directed sociologist, alienated from both public and profession. Today we may say, to continue in Riesman's vocabulary, we have to give pride of place to the "other-directed" public sociologist – other-directed not in the sense of being manipulated or conformist but in Riesman's second sense of developing a relational autonomy, that is a public sociologist who is connected to *both* sociology *and* to the publics he or she engages. The "other-directed" public sociologist is not the free floating intellectual hoping to reach audiences on distant shores by sending messages in bottles, although there must be space for that too, but the sociologist connected both to the academic world and to a world of diverse publics. "The Last Sociologist" refers to the traditional or elite public sociologist who is indeed losing ground to the grassroots public sociologist, to the organic public sociologist. This broader version of public sociologist includes many of you here at SWS, even if your labors are invisible to the discipline of sociology -- whether you are working in applied sociology programs, defending battered women who kill their partners, involved with campaigns to educate illegal immigrants about their rights, or defending gay marriage.

Just as feminists transformed sociology by recognizing and validating what women do in their personal lives, so now we must do the same with public sociology, making the invisible visible. All the sociological work we

do in our communities should not be some taken-for-granted private labor of love, but must be declared part of sociology. Moreover, we should do this not only to make a better world but also to make a better sociology. We must *democratize* the very idea of public sociology, rid it of its confinement to the alienated intellectual bemoaning his loss of power, and instead valorize and validate the new connections forged between sociologist and community. We must not only democratize public sociology but also *collectivize* it, recognize our common projects as engaging with diverse publics. Again SWS may be as close to that collective public sociologist as we have to-day, but many of the sections of the ASA are also potential collective public sociologists, if on a smaller scale. From the hegemonic point of view the proliferation of sections signifies fragmentation, but from the underneath it facilitates sociology's connection to its many publics. Of course, this will be an uphill battle as professional status depends on insulation from the world around us, on objectifying and distancing the world, but it's a battle worth fighting!

As we face a national government that is ever more hostile to social justice, as we face an administration intent on dismantling welfare, affirmative action, and labor protections, as we confront the quiet erosion of civil liberties, so the traditional individual public sociologist who talks to power increasingly depends on the collective sociologist who talks directly to publics. This is where we can find, for example, Patricia Hill Collins' outsiders within -- African American sociologists who straddle academia and the communities of color. Or to use Nancy Fraser's theoretical arsenal -- as we move from a politics of redistribution to a politics of recognition, the relevant public sociologist also shifts from the policy pundit or traditional intellectual to the organic professional. In this era of rollbacks and repression we have to foster resilient identities, important in their own right, but also as a condition for defending the material existence of so many marginalized groups and individuals.