Working with the Labor Movement: A Personal Journey in Organic Public Sociology

Edna Bonacich

Michael Burawoy has done an immense service to our discipline by opening up the discussion of public sociology.[1] 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 knew that many of our students were attracted to sociology because it promised the opportunity not only to understand our complex social 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."

Some of us fought against this claim. We would tell students that, once they got past these gatekeepers, they could do as they pleased. We would try to stand up for an expansive view of the discipline, that allowed room for those of us who didn't want a sociology that saw itself as "pure science," and left unexamined both its roots in, and its effects on the social world. We wanted to change the world, and we wanted room for our students to pursue the same goal. But we also felt like a threatened minority that had to watch its back and be careful who it talked to. And there have been casualties among our ranks. Now Michael Burawoy has brought the ideas and ideals we have tried to stand for out into the daylight. Yes, we *do* have a right to exist! Yes, we *are* a legitimate part of our discipline. We no longer have to hide, or expend endless energy trying to defend ourselves.

In this essay I plan to discuss my own journeys in public sociology. I want to examine five aspects: what brought me to this approach, what I have tried to do in terms of research, some of my efforts to teach public sociology, some of the difficulties one confronts, and why I think it contributes to the discipline. This is a very personal story. Perhaps I have chosen this approach because I am of an age (65) where looking back, interpreting, and trying to make sense of one's life becomes attractive. But I have also chosen it because the story has been hidden under the

Edna Bonacich is professor of sociology and ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside. She can be reached at edna.bonacich@ucr.edu.

pressures that have come from a narrower definition of the discipline. With the emergence of public sociology, I feel a new freedom to show myself fearlessly. I hope that this exercise will be more than just an autobiography, that it may help younger people who are exploring similar paths.

Before describing my own journey, I want to consider the niche I find myself in, namely "organic public sociology." Burawoy draws a distinction between traditional and organic public sociology. The traditional type involves addressing broader publics, in the form of books, lectures, newspaper commentaries, etc. According to Burawoy (2005: 7-8): "The publics being addressed are generally invisible in that they cannot be seen, thin in that they do not constitute a movement or organization, and they are usually mainstream." The role of the sociologist is to spur debate. In contrast, with organic public sociology "the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public.... Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education." This latter describes precisely what I try to do with labor unions.

Where Did the Impulse to Work with Labor Come From?

I am Jewish in background. My father was a rabbi. We did not live on the Lower East Side of New York, and neither of my parents worked in sweatshops or joined the ILG—the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (though my father's Eastern European parents were working class and settled in Brooklyn). Nevertheless, the values of that community permeated our domestic culture to some extent. At least we learned a little anti-racism.

Then in 1950, when I was ten years old, my family moved to South Africa—at the height of Apartheid. This was a life-transforming experience in terms of witnessing first-hand the world's most racist regime. It also opened up another kind of opportunity. Like all the Jewish kids in South Africa, I was recruited to join a Zionist youth movement. The movement I joined, Habonim (the Builders), was oriented towards building kibbutzim (collective farms) in Israel. It was socialist—believing in the centrality and dignity of labor, fiercely equalitarian in terms of gender, and (given the South African context) very critical of the racist regime. The movement was rebellious, counter-cultural, and idealistic. We read some Marxism. We believed it was possible to build a better society, based on collectivist principles, and we tried to live these ideas in practice as much as possible. After graduating from high school, I spent a year in Israel on an Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad. I was a member of a delegation from my movement in South Africa, and we decided to live collectively, pool our money, and make group decisions. This led to lots of fights, but also proved that it can be done. Half the time was spent living and working on a couple of kibbutzim. In that year I also began to see some of the massive problems with Zionism, and its unjust treatment of the Arab population. I left Israel disillusioned about Zionism, but the socialist ideals stuck.

After college, where I became somewhat involved in anti-Apartheid efforts, I returned to the United States to go to graduate school, where I got married and had two children and have remained here ever since. I was naturally drawn to issues of race and class. My first published work of significance was on the "split labor market." I wanted to understand how racism could divide the working class, and how the working class became complicit in racism, even though it was against its

long-term interests. When I got a job at the University of California, Riverside or UCR (where I have been forever) I joined the union, and tried a bit to work on the issue of tiers of workers who are pitted against each other by taking up the issue of lecturers and their "super-exploitation."

Serving as president of my local (American Federation of Teachers, or AFT Local 1966), a tiny organization in a non-union workplace when public employees in California were not allowed to engage in collective bargaining,[2] I ran into Ralph Cuaron, a custodian who was president of the AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) local on campus. Ralph had been a Communist and trade union activist in Los Angeles and, as a working-class Chicano, knew a lot about racism as well. Ralph had little formal education, but was one of the smartest people I ever met. I became Ralph's student, and he taught me a ton about teaching, philosophy, and trade unionism. We formed a coalition of campus unions, and tried to bridge the colossal status gaps between faculty and staff. During our tenure the State of California passed the Higher Education Employee Relations Act (HEERA) legitimizing collective bargaining for us. This attracted unions like AFSCME to become suddenly interested in our activities. They decided the existing locals were "too left," and tried to do us in. This was not a new experience for Ralph, who led the fight to try to stop this takeover, even as we fought for strong union representation. I remember sitting on the floor through the night at statewide meetings of the UC AFSCME locals as we passionately argued about how to counter the domination of the international and still have a successful organizing drive.[3] These learning experiences lay the ground for my moving to work with the ILG (International Ladies Garment Workers Union) when the opportunity arose.

What I Have Tried to Do in Terms of Research

In general, I have tried to conduct research that can be of value to the labor movement. I have not been employed by a union and have a principled resistance to taking money from them, since I certainly earn enough as a professor. Ideally I like to work with the Organizing Department, helping them to devise campaigns, and trying to do research that is relevant to the campaign. Of course, some unions, like the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) and HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees, now merged with UNITE, the Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees, into UNITE HERE) have their own, highly skilled research staffs, who are experts in campaign research. I cannot compete with their knowledge and experience. What I try to do is develop the "big picture"—how the industry works, what are the social forces surrounding it—and to suggest how they might be used.

My first experience was in the garment industry, with the ILG. I became interested in the industry by a circuitous route. I was hanging out at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, where a friend, Lucie Cheng, was director, and we decided to do a collaborative study on "the new Asian immigration" in Los Angeles. We brought a team together and divided up the topic. I knew that Asian immigrants were active in the apparel industry, especially as contractors, and wanted to find out more, so I decided to take this topic. This proved so interesting that Lucie, some others, and I developed a project on the apparel industry in the Pacific Rim.

Out of that, I decided to study the Los Angeles garment industry in some depth. All of this research ended up in books, and a few articles (Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng, 1994; Bonacich et al., 1994; Bonacich and Appelbaum, 2000; Bonacich, 2000).

The basic theme of this work was the exploitation of racialized labor—either immigrant or global. I wanted to understand how the structure of the apparel industry, with its pyramid of power: retailers dominating manufacturers, who dominate contractors, who dominate subcontractors, who exploit factory-workers and homeworkers (or what the union called the "pulpo," or octopus) led to the emergence of sweatshops even in the United States and Western Europe, let alone in the poorer "developing" countries. I also was intrigued by the role of the contractors, a form of ethnically identifiable middleman that fit into the concept of "middleman minorities." The apparel industry let me study both of my major sociological themes: split labor markets, and middleman minorities.

The garment industry also allowed me to study how a networked production system, with dispersed, hidden, and mobile, arm's length production arrangements, makes union organizing so difficult. If you successfully organize a contracting shop it simply goes out of business, whether on the local or the global level. The garment industry was one of the first to use contracting out as a way of weakening labor—this is the industry where the concept of "sweatshops" was first developed. But now, almost all of the consumer goods industries have adopted this pattern of production (global contracting)—the world is more and more coming to look like the garment industry. I have come to believe that finding a way to gain power against retailer-centered production networks is the key to gaining power for the international working class, and this is the reason for my current study of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, as I shall explain below.

Parenthetically, the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA, and Ethnic Studies departments in general, represent efforts to institutionalize a form of public sociology (though they are inter-disciplinary and extend beyond sociology). They try to exemplify the principle that the university should serve the community, including the excluded and oppressed. They are highly critical of an institution that has a history of white male, Eurocentric domination, with a particular political and cultural slant, yet claiming to be "universal." During the time of Lucie's tenure, the AASC, inspired by the Chinese revolution, tried to create a garment cooperative in downtown LA, rewrite Japanese-American history from a Japanese-American perspective, and many other worthwhile projects.

In the course of studying the LA apparel industry, I decided that I wanted to find a way to link the research to union organizing. I contacted the director of organizing at the ILG, David Young, and tried to explain to him how I might be helpful. It took quite a bit of effort to get David to trust me but eventually he did and we have been friends ever since. We eventually got to the point where we were meeting weekly to discuss the following questions: What are the characteristics of the LA garment industry? What would it take to organize it? What research is necessary to achieve this goal? We talked about all aspects of the industry. I mainly listened and took notes, then wrote them up adding my own thoughts.

We eventually came up with a lengthy document, which we boiled down into a proposal to the union. Jeff Hermanson, who was the organizing director for the International in New York, supported our effort, but we could not get the union leadership to adopt it. Eventually we developed a more modest proposal to orga-

nize a single company, Guess Jeans, which was the largest garment manufacturer in LA. I helped David and others develop a plan to organize Guess and we began to implement it. Unfortunately, in the middle of this the ILG merged with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) to form UNITE, and the campaign ceased to be supported, for complicated internal political reasons. David and Jeff, two of the most talented organizers I have ever met, left the union.

What did David get out of our dialogue, and what did I get? I think this question has a bearing on the value of organic public sociology. Very briefly, most labor leaders are caught up in the hurly burly of dealing with daily crises. They rarely have the opportunity to step back and assess the big picture. My weekly meetings with David gave him a chance to do that, which (I hope) helped him to think strategically. He could bounce ideas off a reasonably intelligent and well-informed listener. In turn, I learned a heap about social struggle, strategy, and union politics. I learned about the labor movement from the inside, rather than studying it as an object.

I was extremely fortunate that David happened to be the Organizing Director of the ILG at the time. I have tried working with other union leaders, but none of the relationships were as effective as this one. Why? I think it is because David is himself an intellectual who likes to understand the "big picture." For example, he studied Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* with deep attention, trying to find its applicability to union struggles. I was also lucky that the ILG had no local research department at all, so there was a hole for me to fit into.

At some point I began attending Organizing Department meetings. These were conducted entirely in Spanish, of which I knew not a word. I went on a crash course to learn it, taking regular language classes, getting a tutor, reading books and newspapers, and imbibing Spanish-language TV and radio. I do not want to claim that I can speak or understand well, but learned enough to get by. This allowed for me to be able to participate in the newly created Garment Workers' Justice Center. I will not tell the whole story of that here, but briefly, the union ran a Center for non-union workers, and I helped to develop an education program for their weekly meetings. This allowed me to get to know some garment workers personally, if superficially—another invaluable contribution to my academic work.

During the Guess campaign, I helped to form a women's support group called Common Threads. My chief co-conspirator was Karen Brodkin, UCLA anthropologist. This became a wild and creative group that did some street theater, developed some anti-Guess art, met with workers, and eventually faced a lawsuit from Guess. It was fun and educational, as well as political. I learned first-hand how ready a multi-million dollar corporation can be to try to silence even the tiniest criticism. Luckily, Guess withdrew its suit, because Common Threads was able to embarrass the company publicly about it.

I also participated in the formation of a Jewish Coalition against Sweatshops, which eventually transformed itself into a Jewish Commission against Sweatshops. This group was built upon the contradiction that a number of major apparel capitalists were Jewish, including the owners of Guess, but so were many of the people who formed the garment industry unions and the unions still had many Jews in positions of power. The Coalition brought together some rabbis and progressive community organizations, based on a concern that Jewish values were being undermined by sweatshop production. The Commission eventually held hearings and

wrote a report (authored by Richard Appelbaum) that denounced the local industry. I was kicked off it because Guess's lawyer insisted that I was too pro-union. He was right, of course, but, unlike him, I did not see the union as evil so that having a pro-union voice on the Commission did not seem to me to be a form of bias. Ah well....

When UNITE formed and many of the ILG organizers left, I stuck around for a while, but never found a niche. Meanwhile some community forces formed a coalition to work on garment worker issues in the face of what was now perceived as UNITE neglect. Out of that grew the LA Garment Workers Center. I played a small role in the conception and development of that, and serve on its board.

The global garment industry has also generated an international anti-sweatshop movement, and I participated in that in a small way too. A student movement, USAS (United Students Against Sweatshops), formed and pressured universities to make sure that their licensed apparel (typically with university logos on it) not be made in sweatshops, either here or abroad. This in turn led to the creation of university Codes of Conduct regarding apparel production, moves to get licensees to disclose the location of their factories, efforts to move towards a living wage, etc. Out of USAS grew the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a tripartite organization of students from USAS, university administrators, and an advisory group of "experts" which I joined. The WRC now investigates reports of problems in factories producing collegiate apparel, and puts pressure on licensees to intervene. Some victories have come out of it. USAS has a new campaign now, trying to ensure that all collegiate-wear is manufactured in unionized factories that pay a living wage.

The garment industry work was my most focused "public sociology" project. It could have been a lifelong endeavor, and is for some individuals, but at some point I felt I needed to move on. I had published everything I wanted to say about the industry and, as a "professional" sociologist, needed another project. This is one of the contradictions of public sociology. Social activism has a different time frame from academia. Activism has both a very short and a very long time range—it requires quickly changing decisions, and people are often in it for the long haul, because the problems do not disappear. Academics have more of a middle-range time frame. We work hard on a topic, we develop a model, we give talks, we publish, and we are done. It is hard to keep working on something when you have finished your project.

Since apparel, I have been engaged in a number of other union/political projects. I will not go into them in detail, but will just give the flavor of what they have been about. One line has been, after a hiatus connected with the demise of the ILG and Guess campaign, to continue to work with David Young and to follow him through his union experiences. He worked for the Carpenters during a period in which I had no contact with him, but we hooked up again when he got a job as an organizer at LIUNA (Laborers International Union of North America), another construction union. There I participated in a team effort to try to determine which sector of the industry should be organized and how we should go about it. We decided to focus on the residential sector, which the union had lost over the years. One of my concerns was to try to counter the union's fierce "developmentalist" bias, and to seek coalitions with slow growth environmentalists, as well as low-cost housing, and homeless advocates. I think this has been my contribution to the labor movement, if I have made one—to push for a socially "progressive" unionism that links with

other social movements, and that tries to stand for the broad interests of the "working class," and not just for the advantage of union members and organizations.

Unfortunately, as is too often the case, LIUNA was not as interested in a large scale organizing project as it professed. For lots of complex internal political reasons, including a history of autonomy of the locals, it was impossible to move our project forward, and I dropped out. David stayed on and managed to win some small contracts, but was never permitted to pursue a bigger vision, and he eventually quit and moved to a completely different kind of union: the Writers Guild of America (WGA), one of the entertainment industry unions. David invited me to participate in developing a strategy, and I am currently attending a weekly discussion and planning meeting.

At first I had doubts about working with the WGA. I was used to working with low-wage, immigrant workers, not "privileged," mainly white, Hollywood creative artists. I wondered whether this work had any social significance. But in hanging out on the periphery of this work, I have come to realize that the entertainment guilds sit on a very important set of issues: the role of the powerful media in our society. The corporate opponent consists of giant media conglomerates like Viacom, News Corp (Fox) and Disney, each of which owns and controls multiple media outlets. Taking on these giants is no small or insignificant task.

The current organizing project at the Guild concerns reality TV writers, a group of unacknowledged creators who work under harsh conditions for low pay. The campaign has hired an excellent team of researchers and organizers, so my role is minor indeed. But I believe I did play a small role in raising a central social issue, namely, the pernicious degree of advertising penetration, especially in the Reality genre, but also in other areas of the media. As part of the campaign, we contend that "product integration" (making a sponsor's advertised item an integral part of the plot in a deeper way than occurs with mere product placement) is reaching dangerous levels, and that creative writers are being asked to participate in producing essentially advertising copy. We are calling for the right of the creative community to have some say over this process, including developing a Code of Conduct setting limits on product integration. This issue brings us close to the problem of the corporate domination of every facet of society (including the university, where I sit on the Academic Freedom committee and hope to counter the dangerous growth of corporate interference in research.)

My main research/political project right now is about global logistics, the rise of the giant discount retailers like Wal-Mart, and the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach as key nodes in global production and distribution. The fact that this port complex is one of the biggest in the world, and the major gateway into the United States for the importing of manufactured goods from Asia (especially China), affords the labor movement a strategic opportunity for international organizing. It opens up the possibility of joining production workers in Asia (for example) with distribution workers in the United States as a means of gaining power against giant networked companies (like Wal-Mart) that have created global sweatshops and can move their production around in a "race to the bottom." I decided to study the ports and their surrounding logistics systems to get a picture of how it all works. I also wanted to get a better picture of the state of workers and unions in this complex, to see whether such international, coalition work is possible, and how it might be developed.

I have been working on this project for the last four to five years, and am finishing up a book on it, co-authored with Jake B. Wilson. This is the academic side of the project. We found that, indeed, logistics labor has been shafted. With the major exception of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), logistics workers, including seafarers, port truckers, railroad workers, and warehouse workers, have suffered from a decline in working standards and a weakening of their unions. The mighty ILWU still retains a strong position, but it has come under serious attack, and it is unclear whether it will be able to maintain its strength. But all of these logistics workers/unions occupy a strategic site in global production/distribution that could literally shut the system down. There is definitely untapped power here that could be used to achieve serious social change, not only for logistics workers, but of global capitalism as a whole.

In an attempt to hook up with a union, I decided that the group to work with was the most oppressed workers in the system—the port truckers. As it happened the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) had recently started a campaign to organize them, and I contacted Gary Smith, the local organizer, and started meeting with him. I attended some meetings of the truckers, and gave a talk to them on the analysis I was developing of the ports system. They were all Latino, and we spent some time talking about the racial implications of the way truckers are treated, both by the industry and by some other unions.

Gary is a great guy and talented organizer, but he did not have significant power in the union, so there was not much I could do to help him. At one point he, Goetz Wolff (research director at the LA County Federation of Labor at the time) and I made a presentation to the local Teamsters regarding the possibilities of organizing warehouse workers in the Inland Empire (Riverside and San Bernardino Counties), where a huge, port-related, warehouse and distribution center complex has grown up. For a while, we met together with organizers from the ILWU and IBT, in a kind of tripartite effort. Goetz and I would try to provide research assistance, while the unions would develop and implement the campaign. But this never really got off the ground.

The political aspect of the ports project remains in limbo. I have given talks, including at an AFL-CIO Solidarity Center event, and have various feelers out about it. There have been some efforts to develop a Wal-Mart campaign, and if one is developed that incorporates their production/procurement/distribution empire, then our work may prove to be relevant. Jake and I have published a couple of relevant articles in the *New Labor Forum* (Bonacich, 2003; Bonacich and Wilson, 2005). I do not know how the split in the labor movement will affect the Wal-Mart efforts, but assume they will continue.

In general, in all of this effort, I see my underlying goal as the deepening of democracy. As Burawoy states, democracy is threatened by the domination of corporations and states. The decline of the labor movement reflects an attack by these forces on the rights to full representation and participation by working people in shaping the direction of our society. Unions, with all their difficulties, are vital institutions of civil society that fight for the voices of workers to be heard. They take on the power of corporations in direct confrontation. Labor struggles involve great risk and even greater courage. Workers take on the most powerful forces in our society. It is a glorious endeavor, even if messy in practice, and I want my work to contribute to it in some way.

Teaching Public Sociology

I usually try to put the concept of public sociology in the classroom, especially in undergraduate classes, by having a class project of some sort. I have been deeply influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and try to use its principles as much as possible. Freire advocates a dialogic approach to education, in which both teacher and students learn from each other. Since UCR has a substantial working class student body, and is the most racially diverse of the UCs, it affords lots of opportunities for co-learning, as in working together on social change that students find to be relevant to their lives. Ideally, I want the students to learn, in part, by doing—by taking some form of action in society to try to create change for the better.

I am fortunate to teach half the time in ethnic studies, which lends itself to this kind of teaching. For example, I teach a course on Research Methods in Ethnic Studies, and use it to have the class decide on a common research project that we can all work on together—one that will be of relevance to the ethnic communities of Riverside. At the end of the quarter, we compile the results of our research, try to make a presentation to the community, and make our findings available.

To decide on a "class project" I start by dividing the class into small groups to discuss what they want to work on (there are usually 35-50 students in the class). We then hear from each group and develop a list of possibilities that I write up on the board. We discuss the pros and cons of each one, and combine them where possible. Then we vote on which one we want. I play a role in encouraging topics that are multi-faceted, with clear research as well as action implications.

Once we have agreed upon a broad topic, we divide it up into sub-topics, and students decide which of them they want to work on. They form teams that work together on the sub-topic for the rest of the quarter. Each individual is required to write a report, but each team also summarizes their findings, and at the end of the quarter we create a committee that writes a final class report, summarizing our research, and making recommendations about what should be done. Sometimes one of the teams focuses on "alternatives" and examines efforts that have successfully dealt with the social problem under investigation.

I try to inject a "Marxist" understanding into our research and discussions. What are the underlying power relations? What are the major economic interests? How does the capitalist system shape social policy? How are people and communities, especially racialized groups, hurt by these policies? What community organizations have formed to combat them, and how can we help them? We invite guest speakers from the community to share their vision with us. We also sometimes invite representatives from the "powerful" so that we can question them. I feel there is an important lesson in democracy to be learned here: we have the *right* to challenge the powerful and hold them accountable for their harmful actions.

This particular class has studied a number of topics. One concerned the geographical expansion of our university (UCR) into a poor, ethnic neighborhood. We uncovered a link between the university, local police, and corporate interests in trying to get rid of the homeless and local small businesses. Another looked at the Riverside school system, how segregated it was, how various groups of students of color are performing, and what might be done to improve their achievement. The School Board got wind of our efforts, complained to the Chancellor, and sent rep-

resentatives to our public forum. Another year we focused on a poor, Chicano community called Casa Blanca, which was having problems with police abuse. Last year we studied the issue of political under-representation of communities of color in Riverside, including such topics as disenfranchisement, election rules, control of the media, and corporate influence over City Hall.

Sometimes in sociology classes I am able to have the students do group projects, with a view to "lessening inequality" or "countering racism." The students approach these projects with youthful creativity and enthusiasm. For some, it is the first time they have ever engaged in political action, like participating in a demonstration. They see the police reaction first hand, and are amazed and invigorated. I see these efforts as exercises in democracy. Students learn that they have a right to participate in their society's decision-making, that they have a right to protest, and that they can participate in and create social movements.

I am careful not to force anyone to engage in any political action that makes them uncomfortable. Groups choose for themselves what they will do. And if someone disagrees with their group, they are always free to opt out and do something else. Still, I think that getting off campus and trying to *do* something in the community, is a valuable lesson that could affect them for the rest of their lives.

Three of the graduate students with whom I have worked most closely, Ralph Armbruster Sandoval, Jill Esbenshade, and Carol Bank Muñoz, have become public sociologists as well as teachers. Ralph is in the Chicano Studies department at UC Santa Barbara, and has won the Distinguished Teaching Award for his ability to involve students in the learning process in a profound way that affects their lives. Jill teaches Sociology at San Diego State University, and has been active in anti-sweatshop work for years. Carol is an assistant professor at Brooklyn College, where she is active in the campus union, and studies and teaches about immigrant workers. They are all courageous young people who live by what they believe.

Difficulties and Challenges in Doing Public Sociology

A number of serious challenges arise in this approach to the discipline. I will discuss four of them: access, betrayal, human subjects, and career issues. I will then attempt to give some "advice" about how to do it for those who want to pursue organic public sociology, but are not sure how to get started.

Access. I have already given some sense of the difficulty of getting to work with unions. Some already have research teams and do not need outside assistance. Or if they do, they want to be able to specify exactly what it should be. They typically want impeccable academic research to prove their point. The academic researcher provides credibility for the union's point of view. The union contracts the research out to a professional, and sometimes pays for it. There is no question that this kind of research can be very useful, and I applaud those who do it. This kind of research sometimes straddles the line between public and policy sociology, as the work may address policy issues that are supported by the unions.

This is not the role that I play. For one thing, I am not good at that kind of research. But also I do not like being told what to do. I value the freedom to study whatever I want to study, and to take an independent stance. So, as I said above, I do not take money from unions, and I am not subject to their determining what I do. This is tricky because, undoubtedly, some people see me as someone who

cannot be controlled and therefore cannot be completely trusted. One way to avoid being distrusted is to be trustworthy. I do not study the unions themselves. I study their industries. I study the powerful, and share what knowledge I acquire with the unions. When I work with a union, I try to keep its dirty laundry to myself and do not write about it.

My approach is certainly not the only, or necessarily the best way for public sociologists to work with unions. For example, some sociologists and academics study the labor movement, providing invaluable feedback to the unions. A prime example is Kate Bronfenbrenner, who has conducted research about what makes unions successful at organizing, thereby suggesting possible ways of changing and improving. Ruth Milkman has conducted a census of California unions, as well as helping to build a strong Labor Center at UCLA. And there are many others, many of whom are associated with the ASA Section on Labor and Labor Movements, who have found innovative ways of working with and for the labor movement.

For me, given that what I have to offer is not always readily apparent, access has depended on developing relationships, especially with people in organizing departments. This has sometimes meant attending lots of meetings and being willing to help with the mundane but essential activities of setting up rooms, leafleting, walking the picket line, etc. I have tried to dispel the notion that I have "higher status" and that my education deserves any special respect. It certainly does not. As I learned from Ralph Cuaron, wisdom is not necessarily acquired from a university education. And people without formal education have a wealth of knowledge gained from their own experience and studies. On this issue I am a firm follower of Paulo Freire.

But none of these efforts guarantee access. All one can do is try, be persistent, and do work that the union may find useful.

Betrayal. Here is an ethical dilemma. My research typically involves interviewing people in positions of power. They are far from the most powerful. Most are likely to be members of the managerial-professional stratum who are paid a salary but hardly command a fortune. They are servants of the capitalist class. They serve as its functionaries. But the reality is that most of them are firm believers in the system as it is, and would be appalled if they knew how "radical" I am.

When I interview people like this, I hide my true intentions. I want to learn about their industry from them. Typically they are gracious and helpful. They are experienced in dealing with the public, and are happy to help an academic researcher. I believe I am a good interviewer. I get into the person's space and become authentically sympathetic to their point of view. They sometimes open up to me, and I acquire valuable information. And the truth is, I tend to like most people, enjoy talking with them, and get something out of learning their worldview. I feel that most of the middle-management people that I talk with are decent, sincere, sensitive, well-meaning people.

So the harsh question arises: am I betraying them in this research? In a sense I am. I am using their information to build the weapons of their enemies. I am a Robin Hood researcher, stealing information from the privileged to give to the poor. But it is not a completely comfortable role. I rationalize it as follows: Unions are good for society in that they create greater social equality. Unless they are already in unionized industries—and even that might not be enough in an era of

union decline—corporations and their staff will be fiercely anti-union because a union would weaken their competitive position. Yet collectively, they would (in my opinion) all benefit from the existence of floors of decency for their employees below which no one should be allowed to sink. They benefit morally, they benefit from the extension of a market of consumers that can afford their products, and they benefit from a more equal, hence less crime-ridden, society. In general, I strongly believe that social equality is much better for everyone, because, when everyone can flourish, we all gain more from each other. So even if, as individuals, they may feel that the union is their bitter enemy, at a social level they ought to have some interest in seeing it flourish

Human Subjects. In the University of California, the Human Subjects Committee is now called the Institutional Review Board or IRB. As you can imagine, my approach to research is not one that is likely to please the IRB. While I cannot say that organic public sociology is the primary thing they want to blot out, it would certainly raise some serious concerns. I personally think that the main mission of the IRB is to protect the university from being sued, but it is veiled with the language of "looking after" the well-being of research subjects. Indeed, it is best suited to biomedical research, where experimental subjects could be put in serious jeopardy, and is poorly adapted to ethnographic-style research, where the investigator cannot provide a blueprint for the research until she is actually in the field.

I must confess up-front that I simply do not deal with the IRB. I do not go after big grants, which is one way you get caught in their net. And if I get a small grant, I use it to hire Research Assistants and to cover the "respectable" aspect of the project. I know that I am violating university regulations, but I believe there is a clear, pro-business aspect to this policy. Somehow, it is perfectly okay for a university researcher to work with and on behalf of a business corporation. While I have not tested this proposition, my strong suspicion is that the same does not hold true for working with or for a union. The class struggle is not treated even-handedly. At UC, for example, huge sums are spent on funding business schools, yet one small labor institute (the Institute for Labor and Employment) has faced intense opposition, mainly from the governor, from the minute it was started, with the intention of snuffing it.

But I am aware that I have the advantage of old age and a long career behind me. In not cooperating with the IRB, I do not risk much. For younger public sociologists this has got to be a more serious challenge. What can you do about it? It seems to me there are two possibilities: confront the IRB's biases head on, or disguise your political intentions under the language of scientific research. The reality is that organic public sociology is not something that establishment research universities embrace. But, in the name of academic freedom, I strongly believe that we have a right to do it. Burawoy's efforts to give it recognition are in the spirit of carving a legitimate spot for it, not only in the discipline, but in the university as a whole.

Career Issues. Will your career be harmed by involvement in social action? The messages most young scholars receive from their older colleagues are likely to urge caution and conservatism. "Focus on publishing in the major journals. Don't waste your time on activism. You need to do what it takes to get tenure, first and foremost. Maybe you can do some activism on the side later, when you have some security." A similar message is given to politically involved undergrads and graduate students.

I personally find this kind of pressure infuriating. It is linked to the philosophy of individualistic upward mobility, rather than concern for the public good. I do not see a contradiction between being socially engaged and doing good sociology (as I discuss below). My advice, for what it is worth, is to be as true as possible to your own beliefs. Don't try to shape yourself to someone else's model of success. Rather, do what you believe is the right thing. That way you will give it your best effort, your deepest thought, your most creative ideas. Your sociological work will be better because you believe in it. Alienated academic labor is no better than any other form of alienated labor. It sours the soul. It shrinks the heart.

I am aware that some people have lost their jobs because of their pursuit of organic public sociology. I feel that, for myself, I have never been particularly careful. I always felt that people would respect you if you stood up for what you believe in. I certainly have tried to keep writing and publishing, and did not expect the academy to reward me for my political work. I think that, in general, if you do good work and are productive as a scholar, you are protected against retaliation for your political activities. Academic freedom is a very important value and protection.

Some Advice on How to Do It. These are tentative reflections, based on one person's experience. Everyone needs to find their own way. It is important to be authentic in your goals and your behavior. There is no blueprint. Nevertheless, here are some of the principles I have learned:

- You can approach your topic from either end, i.e., you can decide on a research topic, and look for its political implications, or you can decide on a political project and look for its research implications. In the case of the garment industry I moved from research to politics, while the ports project moved from a belief in the strategic importance of the ports to a research project.
- As I have said, gaining access can be difficult. One approach is to hang around with the group you want to work with, help with small things, and offer to help with bigger ones. The biggest error is likely to be an assumption that you have a lot to offer, and that the people who have been struggling on the ground for years do not know what they are doing. Arrogance is an unfortunate tendency among academics, and it certainly will not open doors. It is important to realize that you have a lot to learn, rather than much to teach. Try to maintain a stance of humility and respect.
- Be prepared to spend time on activities that are not directly relevant to your research. You want to become part of the organization as much as possible, and that can entail hanging out, doing the kinds of things that staff do, serving on community boards, and making yourself generally useful. You should use the skills learned in academia, where possible: writing, knowing how to run a meeting, keeping good notes, identifying useful materials, etc.
- Share your findings, not only with the leadership but also with the rank and file (by volunteering to hold educational events, for example). This is predicated on the idea that you are not studying the organization, but the world in which they are embedded. Also, share your write-ups with the leadership. You might even co-author pieces with them.

Does Organic Public Sociology Contribute to the Discipline?

Speaking only for myself, I believe that my political involvements have made me a better sociologist. One benefit is close to those of ethnography. By getting inside your subject, you get to understand it in a very different way from what you learn by running regression analyses on the computer based on abstracted data

acquired at a distance. This is not the place to present a critique of "abstracted empiricism." I have philosophical objections to that entire approach to knowledge. The point is that a good deal of insight is to be gained from being part of the lived experience of the people you are studying. Like an ethnographer, one must ponder the meanings of things to participants, and try to make sense of the social world they are involved in. The process is more of an art than a science, and the result is more interpretative than conclusive. It also enables one to incorporate the vital moral element inherent in all social relations in one's work.

These things are true of any ethnographic research, so what does the political element add? I believe that participating in social/political conflict reveals the fault lines of society in an especially vivid way. You learn how power is wielded. You feel the overbearing hand of institutional authority. And you also learn that there are ways to counter it, and to fight back. These understandings can also enrich your work. Moreover, you also get to witness the complexities of the alliances: how your opponents may be mixed and conflicted in their positions (for example, Jewish garment manufacturers), and how your allies can sometimes be self-righteous and self-promoting. But overall, engagement in social conflict and social struggle is a wonderful way to see how society works, in living color.

My major interests in the field concern race and class, and particularly, the racialization of labor. I approach the study of society from a Marxist perspective, and believe that capitalism is a system that is inherently exploitative. I also believe that race (also gender, but I do not focus on it as much) is a major tool of super-exploitation that is used not only by capitalists to suck surplus labor out of workers of color, but is also a basis for some workers and unions to create niches of privilege for themselves in opposition to people of color. This vicious triangle gets enacted in a myriad of ways.

By working with the labor movement, I get to witness some of these dynamics first hand. What does it mean to be an oppressed, Mexican immigrant garment worker in Los Angeles? What is the human side of this experience? More importantly, how do people maintain their dignity under these circumstances? What does it take for people to develop the courage to stand up with their fellows to protect themselves? How does the union answer their needs, and where does it fail them? How can you *win* a social struggle against a very powerful and wealthy opponent? How is social change created? And once a gain is made, how are people changed by it? If these are not topics of importance to our discipline, I do not know what are.

I keep coming back to the concept of "witnessing." By being in the middle of it all, you get to see it up close, to *live* the experience, to try to understand it from the inside. I feel this produces a different kind of knowledge, one that is closer to the way society, in all its complex conflicts, works.

Now I can imagine the objections: How can you be objective when you are involved? Doesn't this distort your perspective? Shouldn't a sociologist stand outside the fray, and consider all sides of a question? I would not argue that there is no room for some people to study subjects from the outside, though I do think that "objectivity" is a questionable concept. We are, willy-nilly, part of the society we study. We have a social location both in our personal histories and in our current situations. As sociologists we know that these experiences color the way we see the world. Can anyone free themselves from these things? Does it matter if one grew

up Black or white, male or female? Don't academics occupy a particular class position that shapes their social attitudes and values at least to some extent? Society is a contested arena. There is no truly objective vantage point. But that does not mean one should not try to tell the truth, as best you understand it. This is what I try to do.

This brings me to the question: how does the kind of public sociology that I do relate to the other three types identified by Burawoy? The connection with critical sociology should be clear. My work draws heavily on the critical tradition in sociology, especially Marxism, but also on the tradition that criticizes racism, following W.E.B. DuBois and many others. I see my work as deeply rooted in the critical tradition, which informs my choice of research projects, my method of research, and my interpretation of findings. All of my work is focused on questions of social inequality, and how to fight against it.

Another way to put this is to say that my work is informed by values, especially the values of diminishing inequality and increasing democracy. I want to promote full equality, and not just equality of opportunity, since the latter inevitably creates hierarchies of various kinds. I am still the person who believes in the values represented by the early kibbutz movement: the dignity of labor, the right of everyone to participate in the intellectual, artistic, and political life of their community, and the right of everyone to the same basic material well-being. This is not to say that leadership has no place, and that special contributions should not receive recognition. But leadership and effort need not be rewarded in terms of better housing, food, healthcare, and education for one's children. There are other, more equalitarian ways of honoring people.

In sum, I do not attempt to take a "value neutral" stance with regard to research. I believe every researcher brings values to their work whether they acknowledge it or not. By combining values and social action, I see myself as working at the intersection of critical and public sociology, trying to develop the social critique through theory and research, and to use that research towards moving from critique to involvement in trying to make it a reality.

Policy sociology is more problematic for me to link with. Some of policy sociology, as I understand it, is directed towards the state. Since I tend to view the state *in this country* as closely linked with private capital, it is hard for me to want to give them any advice. This is not to say that I do not admire and respect some of the excellent sociological work that has been done to get state policy to change. And, indeed, I have been linked with projects that have tried to impact the state. For example, the garment industry work has implications for state inspections (and their lack), legislation such as "joint liability" (or the legal responsibility of manufacturers for their contractors' malfeasance), and state certification programs that claim factories are sweat-free (which may end up as a public relations ploy).

One can define Policy Sociology more broadly as research that is done for a client (a practice that I generally try to avoid), or as research that is conducted to foster a particular social goal. Using this latter meaning, I think my work can be said to be influenced by this tradition a bit, as well. I am certainly pursuing a policy goal of trying to help unions win collective bargaining agreements, and more generally, of strengthening the power of labor as we weaken the power of corporate capital. These goals are central to my work as a sociologist. My ports project, for example, is aimed at getting a seat for labor at the table in the construction of

globalization. As it stands now, globalization is largely being propelled by private corporations and states, while workers and unions (as well as other important social actors) are excluded from the planning. I believe that a series of demands need to be placed on global corporations from a working class perspective, so that world development is not exploitative of either the peoples or the ecology of the planet.

Finally, as I think I have already indicated, contributing to professional sociology is definitely a central thread of my work. I try to develop "theory" that expands the field. I try to do empirical work that contributes to our theoretical understanding. I believe that theory and action *must* be connected, in both directions. Mindless activism may serve an expressive function, but it does not bring about needed social change. Similarly, theory, without action, can end up as a hollow intellectual game. I want the theory that I develop to be rooted in the real world, and to be useful to practitioners, but I also want it to be part of the discipline's debates, especially on the intersection of race and class.

Notes

1. Thanks to Ralph Armbruster Sandoval, Carol Bank Muñoz, Michael Burawoy, Vince Jeffries, and Rochelle McAdam for their careful reading and excellent feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. It may seem puzzling that unions existed in the University of California before the passage of a law that legitimated collective bargaining, but the right to freedom of assembly protects such organizations. The AFT met regularly, discussed campus issues, passed resolutions regarding public events, and generally provided a community for the leftist faculty.
3. For those who are interested, the result was that AFSCME won the election and stripped the locals of their power. The result was a much weakened union, which took decades to bounce back and develop some membership involvement, at least at UCR.

References

Bonacich, E. 2000. "Intense Challenges, Tentative Possibilities: Organizing Immigrant Garment Workers in Los Angeles." Pp. 130-149 in *Immigrants and Union Organizing in California*, edited by R. Milkman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

_____. 2003. "Pulling the Plug: Labor and the Global Supply Chain." *New Labor Forum* 12(Summer): 41-48.

_____, and Appelbaum, R. 2000. *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Garment Industry*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

_____, Cheng, L., Chinchilla, N., Hamilton, N., and Ong, P.1994. *Global Production: The Apparel Industry in the Pacific Rim*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

_____, and Wilson, J.B. 2005. "Hoisted by Its Own Petard: Organizing Wal-Mart's Logistics Workers." *New Labor Forum* 14(Summer): 67-75.

Burawoy, M. 2005. "For Public Sociology." *American Sociological Review*, 70: 4-28.

Ong, P., Bonacich, E. and Cheng, L. 1994. *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.