
*Guide for the Perplexed: On Michael Burawoy's "Public Sociology"*¹

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If you scratch the surface of a sociologist, you are likely to find a person who was initially attracted to the field either by its unconventional way of looking at the social world, or by the criticisms it offered of existing social relations. Most of us had (and many still have) a strong desire to “change the world”—to help it become more just, more equal, more accepting, more aware.

Add to this another factor. Much of our work as sociologists is directly relevant to public issues. We study race and immigration, religion and politics, environmental changes due to urban growth, educational success and failure, global inequalities. We know things that decision-makers should know: that bilingual students often do better in school than monolingual students, because they have wider networks (Rumberger and Larson, 1998); that religious politics is a form of status group assertion more common among uprooted peoples (Evans, 1996); that secrets in organizations can be corrosive and lead to disaster (Vaughan, 1996); that the interests of corporations lie behind the crisis in personal finances (Sullivan, Warren, and Westbrook, 2000). Our research touches directly on public issues—if only decision-makers would listen!

Add to this a third factor. Many people of progressive convictions understandably feel the need to fight back on behalf of the poor and dispossessed at a time when the rightward drift of the country has been apparent for a quarter century—and the right seems to be ever-better organized. The situation of the poor is often desperate and has not been improving, either globally or nationally. If we needed any additional proof, the suffering following the recent devastation of New Orleans and other Gulf Coast cities shows us clearly how many people have been left behind in our own prosperous country, and how little the government seems to care about these people. If we do not respond now, when will we?

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In view of all this, it is not surprising that Michael Burawoy's call for "public sociology" has found a receptive audience in the discipline. Since his electrifying presidential address at the 2004 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, the pages of *Footnotes* have been filled with encouragement for "public sociologists," and the ASA has set up a committee to institutionalize "public sociology." Burawoy has discussed his ideas at dozens of campuses. This symposium is additional testimony to the powerful stimulus of his ideas.

I will focus on the best known of Burawoy's works on "public sociology," the version of his presidential address published in the *American Sociological Review* under the title "For Public Sociology" (Burawoy, 2005). This is Burawoy's most influential statement. I regard it as a learned analysis of the current condition of the discipline. It is thoughtful, subtle, and it strives to be balanced. It presents an attractive proposal for resolving the conflicts that have arisen among sociologists of different orientations. Where others have seen only continuing discord, he sees possibilities for "reciprocal interdependence" among four sociologies, which he calls "professional sociology," "policy sociology," "public sociology," and "critical sociology." Although I disagree with Burawoy's assessment of the relations between these sociologies and his proposed resolution to the conflicts that divide us, I respect his efforts to create compatibility out of discord and to inspire future achievements in the discipline.

Here are the key passages in the article describing the four sociologies and the relations Burawoy sees among them:

"There can be neither policy sociology nor public sociology without a *professional sociology* that supplies true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks" (p. 10).

"Policy sociology is sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client. Policy sociology's *raison d'être* is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us..." (p. 9).

"Public sociology ... strikes up a dialogical relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table, in which each adjusts to the other.... In the ... genre of what I call *traditional public sociology* ... are (books and articles) read beyond the academy and (which) become the vehicle of public discussion about the nature of U.S. society.... (A)nother type of public sociology (is) *organic public sociology* in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counter-public" (pp. 9, 7—passages reorganized for clarity).

"It is the role of *critical sociology* ... to examine the foundations—both the explicit and the implicit, both normative and descriptive—of the research programs of professional sociology" (p. 10).

Unfortunately, the program Burawoy offers is likely to prove a mischievous diversion, because it follows from a basic misperception of the strengths of the discipline. To the extent that it succeeds in shifting attention away from "professional sociology," it will reduce the achievements and legitimacy of the field rather than increase its influence. To Burawoy's 11 theses, I will therefore offer 11 of my own. For the most part, they address problems in the logic and rhetoric of Burawoy's

argument. They also address weaknesses in Burawoy's conception of the environments the "four sociologies" face and in his conception of the relation of the four to one another. Finally, they address problems with the treaty he has designed to resolve the conflicts among us, and they propose a different direction, which I believe will lead to a much more productive peace. These themes are interconnected: flaws in the logic of Burawoy's argument help to explain flaws in the program he proposes.

Thesis I: The Ph.D. Is a Research Degree

Burawoy hopes to turn the focus of more sociology in the direction of disciplinary self-criticism ("critical sociology") and concrete contributions to society ("public" and "policy" sociologies). Because I think his program could undermine the development of our disciplinary core, let me start with a basic point. The doctoral degree is, at bottom, a research degree. The reason why students are admitted into a doctoral program is to learn theory and methods in sociology, to learn the literature of their fields of specialization, and to learn how to conduct research. Following completion of their dissertations, it is true many new Ph.D.s prefer to concentrate on teaching, and there is obviously nothing wrong with that. But, alone among all the courses of study in universities, the Ph.D. provides a qualification to conduct research for those who wish to do so. The culminating requirement of the degree is the production of a research report. The master's degree provides much less advanced training in research, and professional degrees like the M.D. and J.D. are qualifications for clinicians and practitioners, not researchers.

Similarly, professors in doctoral-granting institutions have no other central purposes than to conduct research, to develop the theories and methods that underlie research, and to teach students the best current thinking in their fields of study. They have no warrant as politicians, although the findings of their research may lead them at times to become involved in public affairs. The only reasonable basis that any public has for listening to sociologists is that their research or their discipline's insights bear on issues of public moment. Everyone has passions and values; but only professors and doctorate-level researchers have the accumulated knowledge and research of an academic discipline to offer. They alone have the rigorous methods to prove or disprove ideas that have gained currency.

Thesis II: Discomfiting Truths are Marks of a Mature Discipline; Some of these Discomfiting Truths Challenge our Moral Passions and "Good Values"

In the humanities and social sciences, one of the hallmarks of mature and fruitful disciplines is that they can tell us discomfiting truths. The foundation of classical microeconomics, after all, is that "greed is good"—an appalling but intellectually productive observation about markets. I remember the sting of disappointment I felt when I first encountered, what were to me, equally disturbing propositions in classic works of political sociology. Yet, this sense of disappointment was simultaneously the first stirring of a maturing consciousness. From Robert Michels (1911 [1962]), I learned that even the most democratic organizations give rise to self-

perpetuating oligarchies. My faith at the time was in participatory democracy, as captured in the stirring words of the Port Huron Statement. Imagine the bucket of cold water that Michels' work represented for me! From Max Weber (1919 [1946]), I learned that the "ethic of responsibility" required understanding the strength of contending powers and, very often, compromising for the good of one's cause. I was certain at the time that the "ethic of absolute ends" I shared with so many in Berkeley would triumph, even in the face of misguided opponents. Another bucket of cold water! But how true, my fellow protestors and I may have hastened the end of the war in Vietnam, but in our arrogance we also hastened the rise of Reaganism, which began as the visceral reaction of conservative America to rowdy protestors in the streets.

The value of sociology has something to do with social justice, but it is far from co-extensive with it. Its value comes primarily from telling us things we would never have known without it. Moreover, some of the things it tells us directly challenge our moral passions and "good values." We learn that communities often endure, not so much out of the spirit of comradeship, as from mutual dependence in the face of external discrimination (Hechter, 1987). We find that divisions among elites and resource mobilization through threats and incentives may be more important to the success of social movements than the justice of their cause (Gamson, 1990). We find that the strong forms of social reproduction theory are wrong: academic ability may be more important in status attainment than family background and that only about 40 percent born into the top income quintile end up in the top quintile as adults (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). We find that "oppressed" kids may be more interested in using sports and gangs as mechanisms for gaining a reputation in the community than in fighting the source of their oppression (Anderson et al., 2004). We find that two adults in a household might actually be better for kids than one adult (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson, 1997: Chapter 5). If we are honest sociologists, we take in all well-validated findings, both those that confirm our expectations and those that do not, and we adjust our theories accordingly. If we are political actors instead, we may look for ways to hold on to our worldviews, tied as they are to our deepest beliefs, even in the face of apparent disconfirmation.

Thesis III: The Heart of Sociology Should Not Be Faint

Burawoy places "professional sociology" squarely at the center of his scheme of "four sociologies." He defines "professional sociology" as supplying "true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks." Further, "(p)rofessional sociology is not the enemy of policy and public sociology but the *sine qua non* of their existence—providing both legitimacy and expertise..." (p. 10). Professional sociology is, he writes, the "heart" of the other sociologies (p. 15).

Yet, in Burawoy's treatment professional sociology supplies only a very faint heartbeat. We might expect at least *some* discussion of the theories, methods, and findings that have "supplied" public sociology with the "legitimacy and expertise" that allow it to be strong and effective. But there is nothing of the sort. We have no sense at all of the nutrients this heart pumps into the other sociologies. Professional sociology emerges instead as a vaguely perceived, distantly nurturing parent—necessary somehow, but not very interesting.

Instead, moral passion is the real pump. This is evident from the very beginning of the article, in the epigraph from Walter Benjamin. This epigraph associates with the “angel of history” with the moral sentiments of humanity, which are turned backward to grieve over the wreckage of the past. But the “angel of history” is caught in the “storm” of progress which “irresistibly propels him into the future...” The “angel” cannot help but be propelled forward by the storm. Later, on page 5, we find echoes of C. Wright Mills’ (1959) contention that the postwar professionals—from Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton to Neil Smelser and S.M. Lipset—buried the moral concerns that motivated the founders of the discipline.²

This condemnation of mid-century professionals is followed by more criticism of the “heart” of the discipline: “The original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom or simply a better world ... is channeled into the pursuit of academic credentials” (p. 5). He does not say “unsatisfying” or “unrewarding” credentials, but the implication is clear: “a battery of disciplinary techniques—standardized courses, validated reading lists, bureaucratic rankings, intensive examinations, literature reviews, tailored dissertations, refereed publications, the all-mighty CV, the job search, tenure file, and then policing one’s colleagues to make sure we all march in step” (ibid.). Burawoy appeals as directly as possible in this passage to people whose *values* and *advocacy* of social change underlie their feelings of having more to offer society than professional life can supply. If “professional sociology” is the core, the core appears to be quite rotten with useless requirements and disillusionment. But, fortunately, he writes, the originating “moral impetus” cannot be “extinguished so easily” (ibid.).

Instead of dwelling lovingly (as others might) on the scholarly apparatus that turns some talented, hard-working, dedicated raw recruits into competent professionals, Burawoy offers a swift tour of political and social issues of our age—the war in Vietnam (including attacks on the complicity of “fat-cat” sociology), “the corruption of academe by money and power,” racism, gay rights, the War in Iraq—and a conviction about the importance of taking a stand on these issues. Indeed, heart and limb seem to be reversed by the end of the article, where “public sociology” emerges as the higher calling—or, to use Burawoy’s terms, “the best possible terrain for the defense of humanity” (p. 25).

One wonders what is behind this conflicted attitude toward “professional sociology.” Is this an Oedipal conflict writ large? Is it an effort to supply academic legitimacy for the ideological passions of the left? Is it a peace treaty constructed by a diplomat representing one party to the argument? Perhaps all of the above are true. But one conclusion that seems doubtful is that Burawoy truly finds “professional sociology” central to the content and mission of “public” and “critical” sociology. I doubt that more than a handful of articles published in the pages of the *American Sociological Review* have been as severe in their criticism of the “heart” of the discipline.

Thesis IV: Public Sociology Is A Political Orientation in Non-Partisan Clothing

Burawoy’s conception of “public sociology” has a distinct political orientation. As he presents it, it would be more accurately described as “left-liberal public

sociology.” Burawoy uses the term “public sociology” in much the same manner as Russell Jacoby (1987) used the term “public intellectual”—to criticize the narrowness of academics and to re-align the adjective “public” with a left-liberal agenda among writers interested in broad issues of political and social import.

Burawoy’s own preferences regarding the orientation of public sociology are evident in the passages quoted above, and in others such as the following: “(During the Vietnam Era) campuses—especially those where sociology was strong—were ignited by political protest for free speech, civil rights, and peace, indicting consensus sociology and its uncritical embrace of science...” (p. 5). By my count, he mentions ten examples of “public sociology.” Nine involve advocacy of left or liberal positions. He fails to mention “public sociologists” who do not easily or consistently fit on the contemporary liberal left, such as Daniel Bell, Amitai Etzioni, James Davison Hunter, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Orlando Patterson, Pepper Schwartz, or Paul Starr, and he remembers only the more “critical” or dissenting efforts of earlier “public sociologists” whose entire body of work is not easily categorized by political orientation. David Riesman, for example, is remembered for his critique of the “other-directed” personality (1950), but not for his opposition later in life to “sunshine laws”³ and affirmative action.

Burawoy is understandably concerned about the relationship between the term “public,” which still carries non-partisan connotations for many, and his advocacy of a political agenda in the name of “public sociology.” In response to this concern, he offers a number of improvements on Russell Jacoby. First, he distinguishes between two kinds of “public sociology”: “traditional public sociology” (writing popular books and magazine articles) and “organic public sociology” (working with community organizations of various types). Second, he asserts that no one “public” exists, but a multiplicity of “publics”—and public sociologists are free to address any of these “publics.” Third, public sociologists are expected to address these publics through Habermasian (1984) methods—“open dialogue ... free and equal participation of (the) membership ... (and) deepening ... internal democracy” (p. 8). Fourth, public sociology has “no intrinsic normative valence” other than “the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology.” He writes that public sociology can “as well support Christian Fundamentalism as it can Liberation Sociology or Communitarianism” (pp. 8-9).

This last point would seem crucial in that it retains the formally non-partisan expectations we have of the word “public.” But, fatefully, he veers: “If sociology actually supports more liberal or critical public sociology that is a consequence of the evolving ethos of the sociological community.” Instead of throwing his weight on the side of pluralism—or, better, the well-investigated insights and findings of the discipline—he aligns with the party politics of the sociological community’s “evolving ethos.” The use of sociological knowledge in public life is turned into a matter of majority opinion. Public sociology is formally plural and non-partisan, but it can become singular and partisan, if those who identify as “public sociologists” want it to be.

Thesis V: The Public Recedes; Political Coalitions and Market Segments Persist

Burawoy draws on a Habermasian image of “the public”—or “publics,” as he prefers. The realm of the public is the realm of discussion and deliberation. Burawoy

acknowledges the warnings of Habermas (1973 [1989]), Skocpol (2003), and others “that publics are disappearing—destroyed by the market, colonized by the media, or stymied by bureaucracy” (p. 8). But he dismisses these doubts: “The existence of a vast swath of public sociology ... does suggest there is no shortage of publics if we but care to seek them out” (ibid.) Let me suggest that the concerns of Habermas, Skocpol, and others merit further investigation. Money, technology, and power—and the networks that connect them—are strong forces shaping public discourse in the United States (see e.g., Ganz, 1994).

Who are the publics? It seems unlikely to me that Burawoy is interested in the entire range of voluntary associations—from church ritual committees, to book clubs, to gardening clubs, and youth sports clubs. These are not the kinds of associations that sociologists have traditionally engaged. And, if sociologists did begin to engage them, what would they have to offer that participants themselves cannot supply? Problem-solving does not always require professional expertise (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979). Instead, by “publics” I think Burawoy has in mind mainly community groups that are challenging the power structure in some way (the domain of his “organic public sociologists”). He implies as much when he writes: “The bulk of public sociology is indeed of an organic kind—sociologists working with a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations” (p. 8).

Do discussion and deliberation prevail in these arenas? Many groups struggle to work out issues collectively. At the same time, deliberation frequently takes place in the context of an active, well-organized leadership and a more passive, less well-organized membership. Indeed, I would add another (albeit minor) reason for the disappearance of “publics”: the tendency for members of voluntary associations to “free ride” on the efforts of a minority can create conditions unfavorable to broad participation in collective decision-making (Olson, 1971; Swidler, 1979). As in the military, challenging groups are often most effective when a small circle around the leader makes most of the tactical decisions (Gamson, 1990; Michels, 1911 [1962]; Jankowski, 1991). In many challenging groups, the leadership consults when it knows it has the votes to prevail or for purposes of consensus-building. When the leadership is ineffective, it is opposed by an alternative faction, usually running under the banner of “greater democracy.” Sociologists can try to bring reflexivity into community groups struggling against a power structure, but it will not be easy (see e.g., Polletta, 2002).

Burawoy is also interested in the readership of the more intellectually oriented periodicals and books (the domain of his “traditional public sociologists”). Something short of deliberation also characterizes the book and magazine trade. In the early 1990s, a graduate research team and I coded the content of some 300 articles in periodicals aimed at “educated general readers.” These periodicals included *The New Republic*, *Dissent*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. I concluded that the dominant cognitive frame of the majority of articles had nothing to do with taking stances on public issues, but rather could be characterized as “particularistic refinement.” This frame required close observation and analysis of particulars on a subject, event, or person—without appeal to values, theories, or ideologies. Indeed, explicitly political comments were rare. Even authors in periodicals of the left rarely mentioned labor, the poor, or provisions for basic social welfare. Not surprisingly, professors from particularizing disciplines,

such as history and literature, were far more common among authors than social scientists (Brint, 1994: Chapter 7).

The orientation of public taste is a constraining factor. We are a long way here from the idealized coffee house discussion of the eighteenth century. Editors ask themselves: “What will be interesting to the people our work reaches?” Most of the few sociological pieces that make their way into the marketplace fit a mood of the time (concerns about conformism for Riesman; worries about the individualism of the “me generation” for Bellah and his co-authors). They appeal to the preoccupations of Americans with effective interaction styles (as in Goffman’s dramaturgy of everyday life), or with the application of utilitarian ideas to new fields (as in Putnam’s social capital). They offer a strongly defined conceptual grid (as in Erik Erikson’s seven stages of identity). Sometimes they attempt to forecast the future (as in Bell’s post-industrial society). They are often written in a journalistic style—with characters and identifiable narrative structures—as well as quantitative patterns.

Is Burawoy’s treatment of the contexts of “professional” as opposed to “public” sociology sufficient? One institution, the university, is described as drowning in red tape and irrelevance, while two others, community organizations and the book and magazine trade, are described as invitingly open vistas for collective reflection. It is clear to me that these images are developed more for rhetorical effect than analytical purposes.

Thesis VI: Civil Society is Not the Only Arena and Social Justice is Not the Only Tool for the “Defense of Humanity”

Burawoy identifies sociology with civil society (as opposed to markets and states), and he associates civil society with the “interests of humanity” (p. 24). Because public sociology addresses the various publics that constitute civil society, it too is associated with the “interests of humanity.” The argument goes as follows: “(W)e can define (civil society) as a product of late-nineteenth-century Western capitalism that produced associations, movements and publics that were outside both state and economy—political parties, trade unions, schooling, communities of faith, print media, and a variety of voluntary organizations.... For the last 30 years ... (the) three-way separation (between market, state, and civil society) has been undergoing renaissance, spear-headed by state unilateralism on the one side and market fundamentalism on the other.... (S)ociology’s affiliation with civil society, that is public sociology, represents the interests of humanity—interests in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny” (p. 24).

But sociology is not the study of civil society. It is the study of all forms of social structure, cultural structure, and social relations. Social control is as much a part of it as voluntary interaction. Sociology looks at markets as a form of developing social organization, and it looks at states as a developing form of social organization. Of the institutions mentioned by Burawoy in the passage quoted above, none are completely separate from state or economy. Indeed, most schooling comes under state control during the course of the nineteenth century, while print media is clearly, among other things, a product of commerce by the eighteenth century.

Civil society, as Burawoy recognizes, is as much an arena of power and inequality as state and economy: “Civil society, after all, is not some harmonious communalism, but it is riven by segregations, dominations, and exploitations. Historically,

civil society has been male and white....” (pp. 24-25). Still, he argues, “in the present conjuncture (it) is the best possible terrain for the defense of humanity—a defense that would be aided by the cultivation of a critically disposed public sociology” (p. 25).

Is civil society truly the best possible terrain for the “defense of humanity”? As currently constituted, civil society is an arena of material and ideal interests voluntarily pursued in a relatively autonomous way outside market or state institutions. As nearly anyone who has spent time in labor unions, neighborhood associations, religious organizations, youth sports clubs, or other community organizations can attest, these arenas can be at least as rife with prejudice, indifference to the lot of distant others, self-interest, inequality, and power-factions as any other realms of humanity. They are often arenas of discussion and human community, too, I agree, but they can lack the formal equity of access of market structures, and they sometimes lack the self-correcting mechanisms of democratic governance, because they rely so much on the activation of personal bonds and obligations. It is a bit distressing to see civil society treated with such gauzy romanticism, while the state is described as “despotic” and the market as simply a “tyranny.” Here again, rhetoric is stronger than analysis.

If we think more about the issues, we can see the arbitrariness in the connection Burawoy draws between civil society and “the defense of humanity.” A number of answers are plausible to the question of how to build a “defense for humanity,” but few philosophers would limit themselves to civil society as the singular ground for improving human social relations, or social justice, even if defined well (not an easy task), as the primary discourse.

What institutions and discourses might figure in the “best possible” defense of humanity? Here is a one (highly conventional) answer that I will offer only to suggest how much is left out by Burawoy’s focus on civil society: First, start with a good constitution, with checks and balances between and within the major branches; and protection for the people’s rights and liberties, with special attention to the rights of minorities. Second, provide an acceptable level of social provision for all in the absence of available work, living wages, and economic opportunities for all to the extent possible. Third, as a source of judgment and productive skill, provide a high quality education to all. (As John Adams wrote: “I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any man judge, unless his mind has been opened and enlarged by reading....” See McCullough, 2003: 223.) Fourth, design social institutions—from family and religion to the democratic state—to support discourses that are conducive both to the continuity of society and the autonomy of individuals. Finally, encourage a vital civil society, with high levels of participation and strong Habermasian norms of discussion and deliberation. Markets and states can work well within the framework of such a design, though of course they will not work well in every instance.⁴

At the ideological level, Burawoy’s conception of the best possible defense of humanity can be criticized on similar grounds; he focuses too narrowly on the pursuit of social justice (and a few other values connected to the contemporary left). In addition to social justice, we might wish to maintain discourses about compassion, open-mindedness, rationality, persistence, honesty, independent thinking, and courage, among other desirable qualities.⁵

Thesis VII: “Critical Sociology” is Essential, but Ardent Passions Will Not Necessarily Stay Put in Their Assigned Boxes

Burawoy writes of a circumscribed “role” for “critical sociology”. The “role” of “critical sociology” is to “examine foundations” and to provide a “conscience” for the discipline. This phrasing suggests that “critical sociology” is meant to be an inquiring and correcting superego, more polite and reserved than some superegos. But the role of “critical sociology” in Burawoy’s scheme is not quite as clear as it seems at first. He also enthusiastically recounts Martin Nicolaus’s “fearless attack” on “‘fat-cat’ sociology” during the “turbulent” annual meeting of 1968 and the “forthright demands” of radical sociologists of the time (p. 6). And he expresses elsewhere his emotional allegiance to the insurrectionary spirit of “critical sociology.” For example: “Feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory have hauled professional sociology over the coals for overlooking the ubiquity and profundity of gender, sexual, and racial oppressions” (p. 10).

Perhaps Burawoy can cheer on “critical sociology” because he assumes the unchallenged structural centrality of “professional sociology.” Professional sociology is, he writes, “larger and better differentiated” than the other sociologies; and they are “less internally developed” (p. 12). Elsewhere, he writes, professional sociology constitutes, with policy sociology, “the ruling coalition,” while critical and public sociology form a “subaltern mutuality” (*ibid.*). The superego may be as unruly as the id at times, but the ego nevertheless remains firmly in charge.

Like Burawoy, I see an important role for “critical sociology.” Sociology has undoubtedly gained valuable new perspectives and new research programs from the insistence of “critical sociologists” on the importance of gender and racial inequalities, sexual orientation, and the global division of labor. We have learned a tremendous amount about how subordinate identities are simultaneously enacted and challenged, and the complex ways they are related to social control and economic experiences (see, e.g., Fenstermaker and West, 2002; Scott, 1990; Thorne, 1993).

“Critical sociology” often supports an activist orientation in the name of greater social justice. American society is heavily skewed toward the wealthy. It can use more activism on behalf of the poor and the marginalized—and, more generally, it can use organizations designed to provide alternatives to conformity and passivity. But here we also run into a serious problem. The drive for social justice and the drive for social explanation are far from the same in principle. By encouraging a larger role for “critical sociology,” Burawoy’s program will amplify the role of activism within the discipline. In my view, this is unlikely to prove a positive development.

I doubt that anyone will deny that the activist spirit of “critical sociology” is already an important presence in many departments. We now often hear testimonials from colleagues about the close connection between the “new,” the “innovative,” the “fundamental,” the “critical,” and the “first-rate.” Burawoy might also agree in the end that the passion for social justice among “critical sociologists” will not necessarily stay put within the neat box he assigns to it. It is an ardent passion; and it is, as he indicates, morally righteous. If it finds sufficient support among elites, the chances that “critical sociology” will be content with polite inquiry and examination are slim.

More broadly, we should consider the extent to which the outlook of science and scholarship is being challenged on many fronts by the resurgence of faith-based activism, which demands far-reaching change and has little interest in judiciously weighing evidence. Even in the natural sciences, a critical school, intelligent design, which is closely linked to the Christian conservative movement, has challenged evolutionary theory. The advocates of intelligent design have published nothing in the leading peer-reviewed scientific journals, and, yet, the President of the United States has gone on record as suggesting that schools “teach the controversy.” If evolutionary theory now totters in the face of a political-intellectual mobilization of the faithful, why should we imagine that professional sociology is less susceptible? Instead, we should realize that the centrality of the scholarly and scientific mentality is an achievement, not a given, and one that requires constant, deliberate reproduction based on excellent standards, outstanding appointments, and careful buffering of the intellectual core.

Thesis VIII: Burawoy’s Peace May Encourage Conflict, Rather than Prevent It

“For Public Sociology” is, among other things, a proposal for peace. Burawoy writes: “As a community, we have too easily gone to war with each ‘other,’ blind to the necessary interdependence of our divergent knowledges. We need to bind ourselves to the mast, making our ... sociologies mutually accountable” (p. 17). Relations between the four sociologies are spelled out in four-fold boxes, which, as Burawoy notes, bear “an uncanny resemblance” to the work of Talcott Parsons (1951).

To review, neither “policy” nor “public sociology” can exist without “professional sociology” to supply knowledge, methods, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks. “Professional sociology” addresses an academic audience. Both “policy” and “public” sociologies use “professional sociology” to address extra-academic audiences, but “policy sociology” is based on “instrumental” knowledge, while “public sociology” is based on “reflexive” knowledge. Finally, “critical sociology ... examine(s) the foundations ... of the research programs of professional sociology.” It addresses an academic audience, and is “reflexive” rather than “instrumental.” The level of complexity in Burawoy’s system is actually higher than this, with each one of the four sociologies having “moments” involving the other three types and each sharing a tendency to stereotype the others. Each of the four also has its own distinctive forms of knowledge, truth, legitimacy, accountability, politics, and (in good functionalist style) also its own pathology. Mutual critique, he argues, can trim the worst excesses of each of the sociologies.

Burawoy is exceptionally talented as a systems theorist. The layering of boxes within boxes is original in content and ingeniously executed. The theorist in me appreciated this part of the paper, and particularly his comments on the “pathologies” of the “professional” and “critical” sociologies: “In the pursuit of puzzle-solving, defined by our research programs, professional sociology can easily become focused on the seemingly irrelevant.... (C)ritical sociology has its own pathological tendencies toward ingrown sectarianism—communities of dogma that no longer offer any serious engagement with professional sociology....” (p. 17). (The characteristic pathology of policy sociology is “servility” and that of (traditional) public sociology “faddishness”—also fair enough.)

But how does this section accord with what we know about the world? To Burawoy's systems approach, we might juxtapose the different illumination provided by a conflict theory approach. For a conflict theorist, the real world is ordered by dominant groups and organizations, backed up by supporting rules and resources (and, not infrequently, by the coercive powers of the state) (see e.g., Collins, 1975). Social movement organizations mobilize to challenge these dominant groups, and are not very much interested in respecting their "centrality." Indeed, their centrality is precisely the problem.

"Critical sociologists" and "organic public sociologists" are very nearly one in the same in membership and goals. They could be considered to constitute the challenging group in our arena. For a Robert Park-influenced conflict theorist, the original source of change is competition. Where a stable and reproducing structure of domination exists, no real competition occurs. However, at some point, the system breaks down sufficiently to allow people from rising groups to begin competing for some scarce rewards. Inter-group competition leads over time to the formation of conflict groups and, after a period of increased tension and (sometimes) an overt conflict, either the re-establishment of the dominant structure, or the creation of a new accommodation. The latter frequently includes the succession of the new group into some positions of the old (Park and Burgess, 1921: 505-510). Burawoy's article can be interpreted, again in the Park framework, as an attempt to bring about a new accommodation. "Professional sociology" is acclaimed as the heart of the discipline, while "critical" and "public" sociology are encouraged to take a larger role. Professional sociologists have the satisfaction of *structural centrality*, and the others are granted a more widely appreciated legitimacy—and, more important, *moral centrality*.

Burawoy's peace is intended to reduce conflict, but it may have the opposite effect. Burawoy's emotional identification with "critical sociology" and his emotional distance from "professional sociology" tell us at least as much as the formal architecture of his system. Formally, "professional sociology" has the dominant role in the system, but, reading between the lines, we can readily see that its true value is in doubt. "Public" and "critical" sociologies have subordinate roles in the system, but their moral value is higher.

The tensions in Burawoy's article reflect, in my view, important tensions in the discipline itself, with both "professional sociology" and "critical sociology" claiming moral centrality. For all his efforts as a peacemaker, Burawoy does not resolve the issue. In fact, he creates a symbolic universe in which moral centrality is divided from structural centrality. As any reader of genre fiction knows, this is a recipe for an unstable literary order. Although it may not be his intention, Burawoy contributes in other ways to an uneasy peace: through his derisive comments about professional sociology, through his enthusiasm for moral passion as a singularly important source of intellectual energy, and by providing reasonable-sounding, but emotionally uncommitted formulations about the roles of "professional" and "critical" sociologies.

Thesis IX: New Lines of Division Develop in Universities; and University Administrators Are Not in a Position to Resolve Disputes

Why do new schools of thought come into being? I accept it as axiomatic that for schools to grow, they must illuminate parts of the world that were previously obscured from view. Once they are institutionalized, of course, they will attempt to reproduce themselves. Moreover, new schools are not required to subscribe to "tra-

ditional” norms. Indeed, part of their appeal may come from their rejection of traditional norms. If the work of “traditional” professionals has been found to leave important features of social reality out of the picture, it is reasonable to conclude that this may be because professionals are biased (and would not admit to it). If so, the field definitions, academic purposes, epistemologies and methods of “traditional” professionals will be of little interest to new schools.

The question is how different are “professional” sociologists and “critical” sociologists? Scholars have complex views, and few fall neatly along a set of distinguishing dimensions. Yet our experience suggests that some colleagues identify more closely with the “professional” and others with the “critical” ideal of scholarship. In ideal-type contrast, how would we describe the distinguishing characteristics of these two types of scholars?

“Professional sociologists” subscribe to the ideal of theory-guided empirical research in which any conclusions related to social change require quite a bit of data analysis first. They pursue their work in a scientific or scholarly spirit; but far from being naïve positivists, most acknowledge that concepts and ideas play an important role in social life. Their major goal is to understand social phenomena. They try to keep their political views out of their research procedures and interpretations. And, while they might be active in community social action outside of work, their interest in activism on campus is likely to be limited.

By contrast, “critical sociologists” work from a self-consciously critical perspective on human social organization, in which empirically existing social life is seen as highly problematic, because it reflects the oppressions and inequalities of the world. They are distrustful of established research methodologies, because these methodologies tend to accept as given the oppressions and inequalities of the world. “Critical” scholars look at social relations as culturally constructed within a framework of power. They are less interested in explaining patterns of variation in the empirically existing world than in exposing the injustices created by inequalities of wealth, status, and power. A major goal is to help bring about social change in the direction of greater social justice. “Critical” scholars are less likely to accept a strict separation of political commitments and scholarly engagements. Their support for activism on campus is likely to be high.

When people differ from many of their colleagues along such important lines as underlying field definition, the purposes of academic inquiry, and in their epistemological assumptions and methodological preferences, they naturally look for support from others whose views resemble their own. In the contemporary university, both “professional” and “critical” scholars find allies across departmental lines. The structure of university advancement—with its continuous counting of publications, awards, lecture invitations, and all the rest—ensures that “professional” sociologists will be well supported within the university community. But the university’s interest in “creating the future” (Brint, 2005) and its increasing emphasis on “social embeddedness” (Ramirez, 2005) ensures that “critical” scholars will be well supported, too.

Often, “professional” and “critical” scholars can get along, dividing hiring and specialization fields in ways that avoid controversy. Academic politics, like all politics, searches for a middle ground. But tensions can also crystallize—often over new appointments and promotions. In these instances, we do not find the “roles” and “reciprocal interdependencies” of Burawoy’s system, but rather the mobiliza-

tion of network ties and the formation of what Max Weber (1921 [1946]) would call “parties”—vertically organized groups pursuing power. We should therefore supplement Burawoy’s systems theory, with an analysis of the potential for conflict and party politics in academe.

We should also consider the capacity of university administrators to resolve disputes between parties. Indeed, university administrators are placed in a difficult position. Most administrators will not take sides in conflicts between “traditional” professionals and “critical” scholars. Instead, they will try to manage the conflicts—leading to a “split the difference” outlook, or, even, to an assessment of which side can do the most damage to the university’s reputation. No administrator will want an incident to occur on his or her watch. University administrations are not capable of solving disputes over field definition, the purposes of inquiry, and the other matters that divide “professional” and “critical” scholars. The most they can do is to try to ensure that ethical norms are respected and that scholarly contributions, rigorously examined, continue to be decisive considerations in personnel cases. They can also try to ensure that decisions are made within the context of an abiding and serious concern for diversity. These are tough, case-by-case assessments that no peace treaty can resolve.

It is difficult to imagine that, as a sociological community, we will easily escape the many possible conflicts in the future between “elitism” and “new approaches,” or between empirical science and the activist spirit. We can hope to make these oppositions into our strength as a discipline, but we must recognize that they are not mutually reinforcing in principle. In the natural sciences, the leadership of elites and skeptical empiricism go essentially unchallenged. Progress has depended on them, and no one doubts that progress will depend on them in the future. The case is different for sociology. We are now well beyond the time when the discourse of scientifically oriented elites held an unrivalled position. But relatively few dispute the pre-eminence of theory-driven empirically grounded social science as the foundation for disciplinary strength. This is a position with which Burawoy, in fact, agrees in principle. More important, I think a strong case can be made that “professional” sociology is both the *structural* and the *moral* center of the discipline.

Thesis X: The Core Departments in Sociology Are Strong, but the Periphery and Semi-Periphery May Be in Danger

Like Burawoy, I believe sociology has rarely been stronger. The discipline has benefited from a number of intellectual breakthroughs in recent years, ranging from the elaboration of world-systems theory (Hall and Chase-Dunn, forthcoming) to the maturation of neo-institutionalism in organizational studies (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) to the continued development of network analysis (Watts, 1999). We have had methodological breakthroughs as well, from hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1990) to sequence analysis (Abbott, 1995). NSF has recognized sociology in a unique way, by bestowing the Alan T. Waterman award for the first time on a sociologist, Dalton Conley, who has already told us several things we did not know before—for example, that many families pick winners among their children for unequal investment, and that middle children have a particularly difficult time gaining parental attention due to their structural position (Conley,

2003). Sociologists are appearing more frequently in the press, and efforts to solve social problems, which have accumulated over a quarter century, may at long last be coming back on to the public agenda. Intellectually, sociology's successes have been built on the critical mass of high quality graduate programs, creative research programs, and the growth and integration of specialized knowledge.

To continue to succeed intellectually, sociology must take the whole social world as its object: men as well as women; whites as well as people of color; heterosexuals as well as homosexuals; religious identities as well as gender and racial identities; rich and middle-class as well as poor; suburbs and exurbs as well as inner cities; markets, corporations and states, as well as civil society. It must continue to look at the relationships among people and the structure of social and cultural organization, writ both large and small. It must continue to look at social structures in comparative and historical perspective, rather than concentrating solely on the problems of our own time. Above all, it must continue to tell us surprising things; things that we would not have known without it. If it becomes a mere partisan tool, it will no longer attract talented thinkers or train its new recruits competently. In some universities the discipline will die intellectually, even if it continues to find a home due to institutional inertia, or for other reasons.

One hundred research universities conduct more than 85 percent of sponsored research; the next 100 conduct nearly all of the rest (National Science Board, 2004: Chapter 4). Every institution teaches sociology to potential new recruits to the discipline—and to thousands of others who can use it to illuminate their lives and the lives of those around them. Professional sociology will be strong at the top graduate departments, but its continued strength in institutions below the top 25 to 30 must be considered uncertain. Those committed to the centrality of “professional sociology” should realistically gauge the nature and extent of the challenge presented by “critical sociology,” and they should make their judgments about the desirability of Burawoy's program for peace accordingly. Burawoy's peace will be empty if it cannot truly renew the discipline where it is most in need of renewal.⁶

We must ask ourselves, what benefits can the sociological community derive by agreeing to Burawoy's half-open, half-hidden attack on “professional sociology,” or his half-open, half-hidden encouragement for “critical sociology” and (organic) “public sociology” to assume larger roles than they have? As more “critical sociologists” enter the discipline, I suspect that others who could contribute may be deciding that sociology is not for them. Certainly some important research areas are not as visible as we might expect them to be, at this point more than 150 years into our collective project of understanding. Do we have sufficient breadth and depth in our studies of the social changes wrought by new technologies, of the middle and upper classes, of exurban communities and cultures, of religious believers, of organizational successes, of societies other than the United States, of the growth and development of human societies from the beginning to our own time?

Thesis XI: Toward a More Productive Peace: Building a Curriculum for the Future and Emphasizing the Moral Centrality of “Professional” Sociology

As we look for solutions to our problems, we can begin by embracing Burawoy's four sociologies as legitimate expressions of the discipline. We can appreciate the important work Burawoy has accomplished in defining and showing the ideal relations among these four sociologies. We can try to use our insights and research for

the public good. Sociologists address vital issues of social concern, such as crime, family problems, substance abuse, unjust authority, war and destructive conflict, and many others. Neither “public” nor “policy” sociology represents any threat to the discipline, if they are based on strong research and the legitimate insights of the discipline. Therefore, let us have more organizations—foundations, think tanks, and policy institutes—that use sociological work, and let us have more sociologists who are comfortable working in the public arena. In all of this, I stand at Burawoy’s side.

Critical sociology is essential, too. A passion for social justice can inspire good research. I do not deny this for a second. Moreover, the university is a place for questioning “all aspects and all values of society.” A leading statement on the role of criticism and dissent in the university is the University of Chicago’s Kalven Committee’s “Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action”: “A university faithful to its mission will provide enduring challenges to social values, policies, practices, and institutions. By design and by effect, it is the institution that creates discontent with the existing social arrangements and proposes new ones. In brief, a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting” (Kalven Committee Report, 1967: 1).

Nevertheless, to preserve what is *much more* essential in the discipline, we will have to find ways to direct some of the activist energies of “critical sociologists” outward into the institutions of society, while focusing the largest part of the energies of all professors and graduate students on the teaching and further development of the discipline in a scholarly and scientific spirit. Again, the Kalven Committee Report makes this case eloquently: “The mission of the university is the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge.... The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic. It is, to go back once again to the classic phrase, a community of scholars. To perform its mission in the society, a university must sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures. A university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community. It is a community, but only for the limited, albeit great, purposes of teaching and research. It is not a club, it is not a trade association, it is not a lobby” (ibid.).

An activist faith can be important in social change, but it can be harmful to the definition and methodology of social science. The characteristic weaknesses of “critical sociology”—dogmatism, tendentiousness, overheated rhetoric substituting for evidence—can threaten essential tenets of scholarship. To the extent that Burawoy’s program encourages a new definition of the discipline—“Sociology equals social justice,” in the words of a young colleague—I predict it will have a pernicious effect. It could open sociology to external attacks, and it will bore away at sociology’s “heart,” even as it declares its fealty to that weakened muscle. This waste of culture is not the outcome Burawoy intends, but it is the outcome his peace would likely render.

To strengthen the heart of the discipline, sociologists may need to rethink undergraduate and graduate education. Sociology must continue to be an inclusive discipline that welcomes everyone, but we must then transform people so that they can become, in their role as sociologists, agents and creators of the discipline’s knowledge base. The electrical charge of knowing new things and the thrill of conducting research should be at least as much a part of the student experience as the passion

for social change. To encourage a passion for learning and for conducting research, we might try to focus, first, on fruitful ideas and intellectually inspiring texts, rather than on drier fare, and we might try to get students started right away on research. We can expose them from the beginning to competing explanations for outcomes that are of interest to them. Formal courses in theory and methods might come later in the process, and be supplemented by their integration into research projects.

Equally important will be the restoration of professional sociology to a position of centrality in the moral sphere. I say this a bit reluctantly, because I am no fan of moral righteousness, and I believe the whole issue of morality has been badly corrupted in the United States by the efforts of some conservative religious groups to claim status and power on the basis of their “moral values.” Nevertheless, the issue must be addressed in some way. Burawoy has created a system in which structural centrality and moral centrality are set at odds to one another. I see no reason for “professional” sociologists to accept this separation, and I see many reasons to question it. Professional sociologists should appreciate that their work has deep moral roots.

In the first place, work that meets craft ideals is a form of moral life. If a sociologist likes her work to be done precisely and well, does not cut corners, and puts her full concentration into her work, she is acting morally in the profession. Teaching is a moral activity. For “professional” sociologists in their capacity as teachers, moral passion is directed primarily toward teaching the leading ideas of sociology’s sub-fields and doing so with the conviction that comes from knowing that reaching receptive students really matters for how they see and live in the world. Research is a moral activity. For “professional” sociologists in their work as researchers, moral passion is directed primarily toward discovering truth; and it is based on methods that allow the truth to be known; and for the fair assessment of competing explanations. If a sociologist searches for the truth, even in places he might prefer not to go, he is embodying the very expression of morality in research.

What is “moral passion”? I would define it as the energy that drives us toward the accumulation of symbolic credit for pursuing a higher social “good” through devoted (often misrecognized as “selfless”) activity. Some say the morality of the teacher-scholar is an abdication of a larger responsibility to society. I disagree. As students and professors, we have a responsibility to the vigor and autonomy of reason. Our legitimacy and our strength flow ultimately from the hard work of generations of sociologists who have created the conditions for intellectual freedom and progress. From the shielded, competitive places they have created—places in which ideas can be nurtured, and can encounter and clash with one another and grow stronger—we have built the social structure and the tools we need to bring the benefits of sociological ideas and social research into the larger world.

From this, the last follows: our learning communities and their interests in understanding are the angels of our history.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Andrew Abbott, Michael Edward Brint, Vincent Jeffries, John Christian Laursen, Neil McLaughlin, Raymond Russell, Michele Renee Salzman, and Jonathan H. Turner for comments that helped to improve the quality of this essay.

2. Some founders of sociology—Comte, Spencer, Simmel, and Mead, for example—disappear in Burawoy’s foundation story. Others—such as Marx and Durkheim—are presented as moralists, when in fact they mixed moral concerns with purely descriptive and explanatory interests. Weber’s efforts to “extract the meaning from disenchantment” are commended, but Burawoy ignores the remaining 1,400 pages or so of *Economy and Society* (Weber 1921 [1987]), and much else in Weber.
3. “Sunshine laws” guarantee public access to previously confidential meetings of administrative or selection committees. See McLaughlin and Riesman (1990).
4. Many of the outcomes of modernity that sociologists (and other people) like—from personal liberties, to popular culture, to new technologies, to the expansion of economic resources—are connected to markets. Market productivity and market freedoms are as important to sociological analysis as market “tyrannies.” This was once widely appreciated. At the time of the revolutions of 1848, two early “critical sociologists” wrote: “The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?” I wonder how many “critical sociologists” today would agree.
5. One philosopher, Michael Oakeshott (1991), has written: “Too often the excessive pursuit of one ideal leads to the exclusion of others, perhaps all others; in our eagerness to realize justice we come to forget charity, and a passion for righteousness has made many a man hard and merciless” (p. 476). Indeed, a passion for social justice has sometimes devolved into populist authoritarianism, as in the cases of Jacobinism, Bolshevism, Maoism, and Peronism.
6. The engagement of the teaching staff in any of Burawoy’s “four sociologies” is an important issue at some institutions. Some professors (and many part-time instructors) teach and do committee work, but do not give issues in the discipline or ASA a second thought. Can these professors and instructors be drawn into a deeper engagement with issues in the discipline, or will they become “de-professionalized” workers? The ASA and the regional associations might consider appointing task forces to discuss ways to increase the involvement of these disengaged instructors in the life of the discipline.

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