
“Is Public Sociology Such a Good Idea?”

JONATHAN H. TURNER

Michael Burawoy’s call for a public sociology disciplined by professional and policy sociology, on the one side, and driven by critical sociology, on the other, exposes the ideological biases of sociology to publics. In so doing, public sociology will thwart non-ideological efforts for sociology to exert influence on broader publics and on political decision-makers. In order for sociology to be able to influence public opinion and the decisions of key players in the political and economic arenas, it will need to earn respect through a long evolutionary process of careful research and explanation without ideological fervor. To expose the ideological biases of sociology will thwart this evolutionary process. In contrast, sociology would be much better to develop an engineering mentality in addressing issues, problems, and concerns of publics in present-day societies.

It is striking that a discipline devoted to the study of human organization is, at best, a marginal player in public debates and important policy decisions. Since most public debates and policy decisions deal with problems of social organization and with proposals to reorganize some aspect of society, it would seem natural that sociology, as a discipline, should be a major player in the “public sphere,” in the halls of political and economic decision-making, and in most social arenas. Sadly, such is not the case; we are left standing on the sidelines, while presidential historians, economists, political scientists, lawyers, and even psychologists engage the public and whisper in the ears of those who have the power to make decisions that affect the organization of society and, hence, people’s lives.

American sociology appears to be embarrassed by the fact that it has very little impact on the public and on policy decisions by both governmental and economic actors. The listing of sociologists who are “In The News” with each issue of *Footnotes* is, I think, confirmation of sociology’s small impact on public and political issues. If we were secure in our position, we would not need to trumpet those relatively few occasions when sociologists are asked by the press to say something. It is almost as if we needed to say to ourselves: “See, we influence the public, really we do.” It is this sense of being marginal, if not impotent, that provides the context for Michael Burawoy’s (2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005) call for “public sociology.” Sociologists rightly perceive that as the field of inquiry that studies virtually all dimensions of human societies, we should be players when issues, debates, and decisions affecting the organization of society are being made. The call for a

Jonathan H. Turner is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Riverside. He is primarily a theorist, and his substantive interests include the history and structure of American sociology. He can be reached at jonathan.turner@ucr.edu.

public sociology, alongside other types of sociology, might signal a new strategy for getting our foot in the door that has been closed to most sociologists but open for many other kinds of social scientists and even scholars in the humanities. Burawoy is to be commended for offering a strategy and forcing American sociology as a discipline to think about why we are left out, and what can be done about our marginality.

Yet, for all its elegant symmetry, Burawoy's proposal is not likely to open many doors; and in fact, I think that the approach advocated will cause even more doors to be slammed in our faces. Moreover, the approach will further erode the only type of sociology that has any hope of being influential—professional sociology committed to the epistemology of science. I have reached this conclusion as a former activist, and as one who has written normative works that are explicitly ideological (e.g., Turner, 1972, 1976, 1977, and 1985), but I am now convinced that, as frustrating and unfair as it might seem, sociology and sociologists need to “go slowly” when entering the public sphere and when trying to knock down the doors behind which the powerful make important decisions.

Burawoy's Proposal for Public Sociology

The essence of Burawoy's argument is that there are four basic types (and various subtypes) of sociology: (1) professional sociology, (2) policy sociology, (3) public sociology, and (4) critical sociology. These four types of sociology are seen by Burawoy to “complement” each other. Professional sociology is committed to science, emphasizes peer review of work, and seeks to accumulate knowledge about the empirical world; policy sociology uses sociological knowledge to meet the needs of clients and patrons, suggesting strategies for interventions based upon sociological knowledge; public sociology engages publics (both the general public and various local publics) over present-day problems, questions and issues;¹ and critical sociology questions the moral vision and foundational assumptions of all other sociologies, but particularly professional sociology. Each type of sociology reveals its own potential pathology: For professional sociology, it is self-referentiality; for policy sociology, it is servility to the demands of clients; for public sociology, it is faddishness; and for critical sociology, it is dogmatism. For each of these pathologies, the other three sociologies provide the remedy. I think that Burawoy has correctly identified the potential problems with each sociology, but I do not think his therapy for each pathology will cure the disease of any one sociology, let alone the problems that sociologists have in getting a public hearing, in securing clients who seek our knowledge, in convincing both general and local publics of the relevance of our perspective, or in providing a moral vision that anyone will accept. Burawoy admits that the pluralism in sociology may work against success in the policy world, as clients shy away from a discipline that speaks with so many tongues, but this pluralism should, he argues, allow us to hold sway with publics.

I think that this is a wrong diagnosis for the simple reasons that, as Burawoy has emphasized, the morality of sociologists is several standard deviations from that of the publics we might influence. They are not likely to listen to left-wing ideology of sociologists; and indeed, if the public finds out that the discipline is so left and so mired in political correctness, we could permanently hurt our chances of influencing anyone—client, public, or fellow social scientists. Let me say at this point that I

share the left-wing or at least left-leaning ideological commitments of most sociologists (although I am just an old-fashioned liberal, and certainly not a Marxist), and I firmly believe that, on net balance, affirmative action and other policies designed to redress past patterns of discrimination have been effective and, no doubt, must continue well into the future. So, it is not my politics that leads me to my critical remarks on Burawoy's proposals, but my sociology. What Burawoy proposes looks good on paper, but if analyzed sociologically, I do not think that it will help the discipline. In fact, I think just the opposite: it will hurt the discipline.

As I will argue, sociology needs to re-commit itself to the epistemology of science; it needs to seek out clients for sociological knowledge; and it needs to demonstrate that our knowledge is useful. Only then will we begin to make inroads on broader publics; and rather than preaching to these publics, as Burawoy's proposal would surely promote, we need to tone the moral debate down and offer sociological analyses of the outcomes of various lines of argumentation in the public sphere. Jumping into public debate waving our moral flag might get some attention, for a short moment, but it will erode our long-term credibility. I am committed to a sociology that becomes influential because the problems of the world are far too serious to leave to economists, political scientists, psychologists, and presidential historians, to say nothing of all the "talking heads" in the media. Sociology does not need to become a discipline of "talking heads" but a respected corpus of knowledge that all sectors of society find useful. Burawoy's strategy will inevitably expose our ideological leanings to the public, an outcome that would be a disaster for the discipline in the long run. We need to downplay in our moral commitments and subordinate them to scientific inquiry. This kind of advocacy may sound "old school," but it is nonetheless sound advice. We will become even more marginal players when critical sociology and public sociology drive the public's perception of who and what we are. Now, let me backtrack and develop this line of argument in more detail.

The Public and Sociologists

For Burawoy (2004c: 5), "public sociology engages publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern," although he also offers broader definitions like (Burawoy and Van Antwerpen, 2001):

Public sociology is less a vision of than it is an orientation toward the practice of sociology. It is a sociology that is oriented toward major problems of the day, one that attempts to address them with the tools of social science, and in a manner often informed by historical and comparative perspectives. It is a sociology that seeks as its audience not just other sociologists, but wider communities of discourse, from policy makers to subaltern counter-publics.

This broader definition seems harmless enough, but in so many other places, Burawoy reveals his hand: public sociology is to be moral; it is to involve bringing sociology's critical approach to the issues of the day. True, Burawoy almost always qualifies such statements by arguing that professional and policy sociology curb excesses and the pathologies inherent in critical and public sociology, but I remain unconvinced that such would be the case. Critical sociology will be the rocket fuel of public sociology; and as it does today, public sociology will target both professional and policy sociology.

Burawoy's real program becomes more evident when distinguishing between traditional and organic public sociologies. There is a "traditional" public that sociology addresses at "arms length" when, for example, sociologists become talking heads, op ed writers, or commentators; and then there is an "organic" grass-roots public sociology that engages more delimited publics—specific organizations, neighborhoods, and communities. Engagement is to be moral; it is to propose and challenge ethical foundations of issues, debates, and decisions. Burawoy recognizes that there is a fine or fuzzy line between policy sociology—where sociological data and analysis are prepared for a client with a specific need—and public sociology—where the moral implications of situations are debated. Indeed, the examples he cites of the Moynihan Report, Diane Vaughan's book on the Challenger accident, or of James Coleman's report on school facilities and segregation were all policy reports that entered the public sphere and became the basis for moral and political discourse. Thus, almost anytime that social science knowledge enters the public sphere, it is used to buttress moral and ethical arguments, regardless of whether or not the scientists intended the work to have such an impact. This kind of infiltration of sociological knowledge into the public area is typically backed up by high professional standards of data collection and analysis. More recently, Douglas Massey and various coauthors (Massey and Denton, 1993; Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2002) have written works on ethnic segregation in America and immigration from Mexico that employ careful collection of data and reasoned analysis of the data; and these works have influenced public and political policy in ways that, potentially, can make a difference in political decisions. The data themselves make the critical case, without undo moral preaching. And while the findings can arouse political resistance, the data cannot be faulted. In contrast, if sociologists simply throw their ideological hats into the ring, spouting off their own moral judgments, their credibility will be lost; and political counterattack will be easy. We become just another set of talking heads engaged in a moral crusade.

If sociologists vent their morality, we will expose to the public our left-of-center political commitments; and we will immediately lose credibility with a public that is far more conservative. We will preach to our own choir of fellow sociologists, or seek self-satisfaction from reflexive gazes into our "looking-glass self." The one thing that we will not accomplish is to shift the debate or to influence the public in a significant way. What we will do is erode our credibility as scholars who have useful and important knowledge that can inform public issues. Let me offer an example. I have a colleague who is a self-proclaimed Marxist and who has done interesting research on the sweatshops and outsourcing in clothing manufacturing/distributing and on Wal-mart's buying and distributing practices. The data are very convincing that there is something "wrong" in these practices, and they are given a Marxist twist about the evils of capitalism. This colleague received a certain amount of public attention for this work, but I think that if the underlying Marxism is vented in the public sphere, the credibility of the data will be lost. The data, in essence, speak for themselves; there is no need to moralize about what the data show; it is far better to let publics or policymakers draw their own conclusions. Once we start up the slippery slope of moralizing, we soon lose our credibility as social scientists; and while it may make us feel better about ourselves to engage the morality of certain industries, it is not likely to increase our credibility with most of the pub-

lic—save for a more delimited public like labor unions. Recently, Massey (2005) called for a “weak politics” in which the researcher’s politics are recessive and subordinated to the collection and analysis of data; there is, as he notes, “a strength in weak politics” because it is the data and its careful analysis that is front stage, not political ideology. We do not need to poke people in the eye with ideological pronouncements; instead, we need to demonstrate the power of sociological analysis to say important and relevant things.

My view is that the public’s trust in our diagnoses of issues must be earned in a slow process of demonstrating to academics, non-academic clients, patrons, and eventually publics that the kind of knowledge generated by sociologists is relevant and useful. Burawoy implicitly agrees with this argument in his view that public and policy sociology depend upon the integrity of professional sociology, but if we start out trying to influence publics and to address moral issues with our own ethical standards, we short-circuit what needs to be a *long evolutionary process*. American sociology has had opportunities in the past to demonstrate its value, but in most cases it has fumbled the ball by either sloppy research or moralizing for its own sake (see Turner and Turner, 1990, for a history of sociology’s failed efforts at public sociology). Respectability and credibility must evolve over a long time as a wide range of publics and clients recognize that our knowledge is useful.

With this line of argument in mind, let me comment on another example that Burawoy uses—ASA’s stand against the war in Iraq. The vast majority of sociologists were, as Burawoy (2005) illustrates with opinion data, against the war, while the public was just the opposite and overwhelmingly supported the war, at least until recently. A proclamation from ASA was, first of all, hardly a very significant statement; no one is really listening to us anyway. But, it reflects a moral vision—unprovoked invasion of another nation is bad (a view I share, let me emphasize)—and let us assume the improbable event that sociologists were asked to go on the media and let fly their moral outrage. What would this accomplish, aside from allowing us the collectively vent our morality? We would have turned off the very public whom we want to influence; and we might have done further harm to the profession because the public and potential clients may come to believe that we do not produce useful knowledge. Instead, what the association should have done is have sociologists who study war, geopolitics, empires, collective behavior, and other relevant topics become resources to various publics, and especially the media. These “experts” would remain neutral in their public presentations, providing sociological insights that would allow the public to make their own decisions. Indeed, if we had been effectively doing this for the last 50 years, we might well have had insiders (in the Pentagon, Congress, and even the Executive Branch) who would have provided sociological analyses of what it means to invade and control a large territory, or at the very least, the sociological insiders could have steered decision-makers to relevant experts. As long as we keep our own politics and moral opinions in the background, while presenting data and theory that are relevant to big public and policy issues, people will be willing to listen to us; and over time, after years of successful consultation across a wide array of private clients and public debates, the credibility of sociology will rise, allowing us to have an influence on policy decisions that affect people’s lives. If, on the other hand, we impatiently leap into the public sphere, sign petitions, and shout our morality, we will turn off the public and alienate potential clients. Sociology will not be better off for such

zeal. It will be defined as yet another left-wing academic discipline whose knowledge is so corrupted by political ideology that it is not worth listening to.

This potential is aggravated by changes in the nature of publics. Small local publics may still exist, but the general public has been transformed by the media. The literate lay public that scholars like David Riesman, Robert Bellah, Daniel Bell, and my former colleague, Robert Nisbet, addressed has receded, although there is still a large reading public (with whom surprisingly few sociologists make contact). But, the public is now mediated through cable television and the Internet; and these forms of media want instant analysis in a few sound bites. There is little opportunity for a more nuanced analysis; and even if it is given, editing soon finds the best sound bites and ignores the more general and nuanced argument in which these bites were uttered. I have been amazed at the outcomes of my own interviews with the media; what may have been a one-half to full-hour interview becomes a few sentences in a newspaper. I am very careful in such interviews to avoid moral preaching; instead, I try to demonstrate the extra degrees of insight and understanding sociology can contribute to an issue. As a result, the few sentences where I am quoted are not inflammatory; rather, they are simply filler words for a point the reporter wants to validate. Imagine what a more inflamed public sociologist will say; and since controversial sound bites are more entertaining to publics, they would get reported. But extreme statements can be credibility killers when they go against the biases of the public whom we seek to influence. Sociology does not need to become like *Fox News* on the left.

As long as the public's opinions on most issues are so divergent from those of sociologists, we need to tread lightly. We need to practice a "weak politics" (Massey, 2005)—indeed, in my view, a virtually invisible politics. And such should be the case even if the general public's views or those of a specific public coincide with those of sociologists; we still need to be very cautious. It is far wiser to offer our knowledge in as an objective manner as possible; and if we do so, we will gain credibility and be invited back by the public and key decision-makers.

The Dangers of Critical Theory

My sense is that Burawoy has a not-so-hidden agenda—the further institutionalization of the critical wing of the discipline. True, he emphasizes that critical sociology can be dogmatic and needs the corrective provided by professional sociology, but in looking at his examples of exemplars of critical sociology, he clearly sees its influence on the discipline in positive terms. He constantly cites some of the common bromides: *Sociology for What? Sociology for Whom? Whose Side Are We On?* And, he is sympathetic to the argument that policy research and consulting "puts values up for sale" and "cede the discursive terrain" to clients. And he is critical of those of us—Jonathan H. Turner (1998, 2001), Irving Louis Horowitz (1993), and/or Stephen Cole (2001), to name a few—who see the infiltration of political social movements as having pernicious effects on the discipline. Indeed, he sees us as lamenting the "fall from grace" of the "putative consensus around structural functionalism" or as seeking to create a discipline around a single paradigm. He approvingly cites Alvin Gouldner, C. Wright Mills, Alfred McClung Lee, and even the late Pitirim Sorokin (see Vincent Jeffrey's article in this symposium); and he commends the early founders—certainly Marx,

but also Durkheim and Weber—for their more moralistic assessments of modern societies.

But let me ask a simple question: Has sociological inquiry been advanced and enhanced by critical sociologists and by the more critical pronouncements from theorists of the early canon? My answer is that the pronouncements of critical theorists have not tended to have “legs,” even when the figure who made these pronouncements is still revered by contemporary sociologists. In other words, these pronouncements have not significantly increased the knowledge base of the discipline in the long run. True, we still use the term “power elite,” but has this assertion significantly increased our understanding of power or has it simply biased inquiry? Or, to take ideas from the early canon, I would make what probably seems like an outrageous statement: most of the moral preaching of the early theorists was probably wrong, even if sociologists still cling to the concepts inhering in these moralistic statements. For example, Marx was clearly wrong about alienation; he had it conceptualized wrong, and his predictions about its effects were wrong. Durkheim’s analysis of anomie is very flawed, whether as a cause of suicide or as a potential condition of differentiated societies. Max Weber’s concerns about the “steel enclosure” (granted “iron cage” sounds better, even though it is not a correct translation) are obviously overdrawn. My point here is that when concepts reflect moral biases, if not outrage, they almost always miss the point. They fail to denote key processes accurately; they lose precision and nuance; and if theories and analyses are built around such concepts, they will inevitably be highly flawed. And, should it transpire that policy decisions were based upon these flawed concepts, more people might be hurt than helped by policies based upon moral ranting.

Less harmful are ideas that were once a part of at least some public’s discourse. For example, have concepts like “inner directed” or “outer directed” from *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman et al., 1950) endured?; and would we even consider these characterizations of people as accurate? I doubt it. Is Robert Nisbet’s analysis of a “quest for community” any more accurate than rather romantic portrayals of pre-industrial communities by many early founders of sociology? I doubt it. Or, closer to the present, are the pronouncements of cultural postmodernists about the dominance of culture, the overly reflexive self, the commodification of symbols, and other ills of the postmodern condition accurate? I doubt it. Is the portrayal by Jurgen Habermas—also approvingly cited by Burawoy—of the “ideal speech act,” “the public sphere,” or “colonization of the life world” accurate? I doubt it. My point here is obvious, but nonetheless fundamental: When analyses becomes interwoven with critique—and even more so when critique is packaged in attention grabbing terms—the analyses becomes not only biased but also distorted; and in most cases, it is empirically wrong at crucial junctures.

Some might argue that these concepts grab the public’s attention and encourage discourse and debate—which, after all, cannot be so bad. True enough, but what do they do to sociology? At best, we become public philosophers. At worst, we become talking heads who have only flash fame and little long-term credibility. It may be less appealing to present reasoned analysis in neutral terms, using theory and data carefully, but such an approach to public and policy issues is far more likely to have long-term payoffs for the credibility and power of the discipline to make a difference in policy, in public discourse, and, most importantly, in people’s lives.

Burawoy (2004c) argues that a public sociology, fueled by ethical critique, naturally addresses “civil society” and the “autonomy of the social” in much the same way that the object of inquiry for political science is the state, and, for economics, the market. This conception of what public sociology should be is far too narrow, and far too embedded in old philosophical arguments about the public sphere. The state and market are topics of equal or even greater importance to sociology than the public sphere or civil society. It is the state and economy that exerts the greatest influence on people’s lives; and I, for one, am not ready to cede this topic over to either economics or political science. We can study the dynamics of these institutional systems as well as any other social science; and we can use the knowledge gained in these and other arenas to influence the policy decisions made by those in power. But, first we have to get their attention; and we will not do so by moral preaching or philosophical discourse. They will listen when we have something useful to say.

Part of the agenda for critical sociology is to help the oppressed, downtrodden, disenfranchised, poor, powerless, and other publics not able to enjoy the fruits of a wealthy society. Juxtaposed to this advocacy is the view that powerful decision-makers are evil oppressors; they are the enemy of a sociology that must be committed to helping the downtrodden. This kind of polarization is counterproductive. It is laudable that sociologists might be willing to give their knowledge to the poor and others who could not afford to pay for this knowledge (after all, even greedy lawyers and doctors give their expertise away at times to those in need). But this is not what being a critical sociologist means. Rather, we are to become involved as actors in the social movement that will lead the needy to the promised land. We are to be their ideological spokespersons and advocates. There is, of course, nothing wrong in sociologists as concerned citizens doing such things (as I have done numerous times in my life), but there is a line here that has been crossed: Sociologists who are advocates soon lose their professional detachment to analyze conditions accurately; they are pulled by emotion and ideology into the cause, and almost always, they lose their sociological imagination in the process. We become foot soldiers in a war against evil oppressors.

My view is that if we want to help people, we need to get the ear of those who have political and economic power to change people’s lives. Becoming a foot soldier will not allow us to march into the halls of power; indeed, it will be a sure-fire way to remain outside these halls. The notion that sociologists who provide knowledge to those in powers are “sell outs” is absurd and counterproductive. This knowledge can be given away to other publics and groups, but if our knowledge is found useful by those with political and economic power in one context, they are likely to draw upon our knowledge on the dynamics of societies in other arenas where their decisions affect public policy. Questions like “whose side are we on?” simply miss the point. No matter what we may advocate as citizens and as moral actors, we have an interest as a profession and as people who think sociology can inform policy and public opinion in cultivating all kinds of diverse clients and in proving to them that we have important things to say. Sociologists do not have to choose; their obligation as sociologist is to legitimate our discipline in the eyes of all actors in society. Only in this way can we have the power to affect important decisions that influence people’s well-being. To man the barricades in a cause simply barricades us from the halls of power. Indeed, the highly critical story in the *New York*

Times after the year 2000 annual meeting is a likely result: ridicule for a discipline that still wants “man the barricades.”

As long as I am on the topic of critical sociologies, let me question some of the discipline’s sacred cows. From the 1960s to the present day, broader social movements revolving around civil rights, ethnic and gender equity, and concerns for other segments of society that have been subject to discrimination have moved into sociology and politicized the discipline. Burawoy makes the reasonable point that these movements have broadened sociological inquiry and added to both the diversity and vitality of the discipline. But they have also politicized and fragmented sociological inquiry. Since W.E.B. DuBois, sociologists had studied ethnic stratification, and so, it was not essential to have a social movement to alert us to this sociological question. A stronger case can be made for feminism because it is very clear that women had historically been kept out of the academy, even sociology, and that sex and gender as key forces in human relations had not been adequately studied. The same could be said for sexual orientation, since these topics had been confined to the study of “deviance” well through the 1960s and 1970s. Other, less personal topics like ecological disruption similarly came into the discipline on the crest of the environmental movement. The problem with incorporating the ideas of a social movement into the corpus of a discipline is that the justified moral zeal and outrage of those in the movement become a part of how sociological inquiry is conducted. The moral agenda increasingly dictates what can be studied and, more dangerously, what can be discovered.

From its inception, of course, American sociology was populated by those who had an activist agenda, and while many gave lip service to the importance of objective scientific inquiry, their understanding of science was limited and, more fundamentally, they did not practice what they preached (Turner and Turner, 1990). Among most sociologists, the moral agendas of social movements have been a “good thing” for sociology, but I am not so sure. There is, I feel, a tyranny of political correctness from the left which will stone anyone who dares to present findings that contradict ideologically based conclusions about what is and what is real (or what is right). Moreover, certain topics become taboo because they offend moral sensibilities. For example, I am frequently asked why I study the biological basis of human thought and action; numerous times I have been asked: Am I not resurrecting old and discredited racist evolutionary doctrines? I can only stare at the ignorance and anger contained in such questions. When legitimate modes of inquiry are questioned because they violate someone’s (ignorant) perceptions of what such inquiry involves, diversity at the expense of tolerance for the full range of sociological inquiry is not diversity; it is a tyranny by ideologues.

Moreover, I seriously question if critical theory and research has expanded our knowledge of society. Let me take Jurgen Habermas as my poster boy. In my view, Habermas is more of a philosopher than sociologists; and I do find his works interesting—and indeed fascinating, once I get past the prose—as *philosophy*. As sociology, his works (e.g., Habermas, 1981, 1984) about the colonization of the life world and the ideal speech act strike me as naïve and empirically suspect; and as noted above, I do not think that they have greatly expanded sociological knowledge about the dynamics of society. True, this is just one person’s opinion but it is based upon a complete and careful reading. The ideas are interesting for public sphere debate, but they do not advance out knowledge; and it is knowledge about

how the social world really operates that is to be critical in sociology's slow climb to prominence and political influence. Let me take, while I am at it, the case of postmodernism's critique of advanced capitalism, especially the cultural school (the more Marxist-inspired analyses strike me as much more empirically plausible). All kinds of assertions are made about culture and self, and none of them are empirically verified. Indeed, to even pose the question: Is this statement empirically true often invites the retort that I am imposing the standards of a "failed epistemology" (i.e., science) which is so preposterous that it is hard to know what to say to those who make this claim. If we cannot mobilize data to check assertions because we are being "naïve" and invoking the standards of a "failed epistemology," there is not much difference between this tyranny of relativism and solipsism, one the one side, of critical sociology to become "dogmatic," on the other side. But more than dogmatism is involved. There is a commitment to remove scientific sociology from the discipline. Fortunately, these dogmatists are not likely to be successful, but they hardly inspire creative synergy that is supposedly to come from Burawoy's call for intellectual and professional "diversity."

Indeed, Burawoy portrays the typical sociology career as often moving through the four sociologies, or at least several sociologies. Our undergraduates are drawn to sociology because they want to change the world; as graduate students, they are forced to repress or forget such altruistic motives as they learn standard theory, methodology, and statistics. Then, there is the rush to tenure where young professionals must tread lightly. And only later after tenure is granted does the critical impulse re-emerge, when it is safe. This is not an inaccurate portrayal in many cases, but it communicates the agenda contained in Burawoy's advocacy. Activism is to be beaten out of students by a repressive tyranny of scientism. What Burawoy implicitly argues, I believe, is that science—if it is to be a useful science—must nourish students' critical impulses and serve as part of the arsenal of a public sociology fueled by moral outrage at unjust conditions. This is not the constructive interplay in his typology of the four sociologies; it is something much different, and it is a subtle message that the perceived tyranny of science must end.

My experience is that the tyranny of science, if it ever existed, certainly does not exist any more. Political correctness, demographic shifts in the composition of graduate student populations, diffuse anger at unjust conditions, and heavy dose of various ideologies have all made the scientists in most graduate departments run for cover. Attack dogmatism in on the loose, and not likely to be leashed in any time soon; and dogmatism is certainly not considered a pathology by at least one-half of the students that I see in graduate school. Perhaps there are differences between elite and less elite departments, as Burawoy suggests, but I am not even sure that this generalization is true; it is certainly worthy of empirical inquiry. I would suspect that it is science that is being beaten out of students by their fellow students and by activist faculty members. The dwindling number of hard scientists in the discipline has hardly been very successful, assuming they tried, in repressing graduate student activism.

Thus, Burawoy need not worry that the critical impulses of sociologists have been unduly repressed; on the contrary, cohorts of storm troopers are being trained for moralizing in the public sphere. If there is a trend in sociology, it is for increased moralizing—mostly to our students and occasionally to the public. The only bright spot in these trends, at least from my view, is that most decision makers

and most in the public do not know about us, and hence, do not listen to what is being said in our classrooms. And, this is a good thing because unrestrained moral zeal will hurt the discipline's credibility and turn over even more influence to disciplines like economics that are singularly ill-equipped conceptually and empirically to provide useful advice on most social issues.

The Tower of Babble

Burawoy chides economics for its narrow adherence to the classical paradigm, pushing Marxist economists to the sidelines. He does note that many prominent economists, including several Nobel Prize winners, have begun to incorporate sociological variables into economic analysis. I am in general sympathy with the critique of economics which, in my view, enjoys far too much power in decision making at all levels in American society. But, although Burawoy concedes that economics is powerful because of its unity, he does not recognize an essential truth: intellectually coherent disciplines can speak with a unity and power not possible in fragmented ones like sociology. Even as economics expands its horizons—granted in a most limited way—the basic classical model remains intact. Here we have a discipline with an incorrect view of human behavioral propensities, with an isolated view of the dynamics of production and distribution dynamics (Pareto would turn over in his grave), with what seem to me to be problematic uses of mathematics, and so it goes. Their reward for this narrow-mindedness and focus: enormous political and public power. I have sat in meetings with economists at venues like the World Bank, including Nobel Prize winners, and I am typically stunned by how such brilliant scholars (and they are this, even if somewhat narrow) can be so ignorant of the broader social forces surrounding market dynamics. Yet, they dominate the discussion because they have a coherent view—also a view that conveniently reinforces cultural values in America. And, it helps to win Nobel Prizes, although it has always galled me that the Nobel Prize in economics was created so that the Swedish academy could give it to one of their own, Gunnar Myrdal who was certainly more a sociologist than an economist. The only consolation is that his wife, Eva, a true sociologist, received the Nobel Peace Prize as did the American Jane Addams whom we can claim as one of our own. None of this, however, has helped the prestige of the discipline; and I have seen, again and again, the consequences of our low prestige in the academic hierarchy, especially when sociologists and economists are at the same table. This constant reminder of the relatively low prestige of sociology compared to economics underscores my point that sociology must gain credibility and, thereby, slowly raise its standing so that we can sit as equals to economists at the tables of power.

Let me get back to what is my main point: sociology is seriously impaired by the lack on consensus over epistemology and subject matter. There appears to be a congratulatory tone in most commentaries on sociology about the merits and vitality of intellectual diversity, but in fact, this diversity is what keeps sociology from being very influential in the world. In essence, anything goes in sociology—no matter how outrageous. Burawoy's critique of economics and his inclusive four-fold scheme of the "sociologies" attests to his belief that such diversity is a good thing. Perhaps it is a good thing for people who have academic jobs because they can teach anything, find some journal to publish just about anything, and feel that

they are true professional sociologists—even if they simply emote their own identity problems onto the students and fellow intellectual travelers in narrow specialties. Burawoy paints those committed to science with a mud-laden brush by arguing that they become self-referential and anal retentive over narrow methodological techniques; and while he is not completely wrong on this point (this is a tendency among *some*, but hardly all), his implication is nonetheless clear: if sociology had only one epistemology, it would become obsessive-compulsive and impose a narrow range of theories and methodological techniques on the rest of the discipline.

When I was in graduate school, it seemed that sociology was ready to take its place at the table of science, but this was clearly an illusion. It was not just that the 1960s burst this bubble and began to politicize the discipline; it was also the case, as it had been for the founding generation of American sociologists, that there was a profound misunderstanding about how science works (Turner and Turner, 1990). Perhaps the spate of theory construction textbooks, to say nothing of methodological and statistical books (and, later, statistical “packages” for computers) attests to a sense that sociologists needed to “bone up” on how to do science. Sociology was, as Burawoy correctly points out, somewhat obsessed with “quantification,” much like Franklin Giddings’ advocacy at the beginning of the twentieth century. The advent of the computer and the ability to do multiple regressions without a room full of clerks only contributed to what I have sometimes called “quantomania.” Coupled with the fact that the dominant theoretical approach was Parsonsian action theory, which in reality was a rather large category system, it is not surprising that there was a reaction against this vision of science. Robert Merton did not help matters by arguing for “theories of the middle range” which, to my mind, simply justified what C. Wright Mills (1959) had termed “abstracted empiricism.” In Merton’s advocacy, empirical generalizations from studies at particular times and places were considered “theoretical” when, in fact, they were *explicandum* in search of a theoretical *explanas*. Symbolic interactionism, for all its merits, was too limiting; and Parsonsian action theory provided a giant category system which, to say the least, had a lot of unneeded conceptual baggage. There were no elegant theories, save for a few in social psychology (narrow but elegant), which could explain the proliferation of empirical generalizations in an ever-increasing number of specialized journals. Thus, there never has been real consensus over the nature of science in sociology; and with the explosion of identity politics and various social movements, it is not surprising that the rather fragile Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall, fracturing the discipline into so many pieces (Abbot, 2001).

We live with the result of this fall. A discipline that speaks with so many tongues is not vibrant; rather, it is in chaos. It sounds good, in the abstract, to say that we can offer a variety of perspectives on our subject matter, but when the variety is so great, we end up saying nothing that people want to hear. There must be set of common standards by which we judge competent work, and the only viable standards are those of science. If sociology wants to be a humanistic discipline, then other standards can apply—verbosity, for example—but there is no reason to think that the public and certainly those with the power to change things would ever be interested in knowledge produced in accordance with such standards.

We simply cannot have our cake and eat it, too; we cannot be ideological and intellectually chaotic, and still be influential. To be a player in the public forum, it is essential to have a common set of standards as to what constitutes good sociol-

ogy. Without such standards, we are the ivory tower of “babble.” We talk, shout, pout, criticize, emote, and do all manner of things without explaining very much; and if we cannot explain how the social world operates, few people outside the discipline are going to listen to us. We will continue to be irrelevant to the big issues and big concerns of the modern world. What strikes me, and at the same time causes me great dismay, is the impotence of sociology—the very discipline that studies the phenomena at the center of public and private debate. How can we be so irrelevant? The answer is that we are too diverse, too tolerant of any idea, too inclusive, too consumed with political correctness and identity politics, too abusive of the one approach that can save us (science), and too smug in our view that all this diversity is somehow good for the discipline.

Science does not need to be obsessive compulsive; it does not have to be only quantitative (indeed, in my mind, most of the really good empirical studies in the history of sociology have been historical and/or qualitative); it does not have to elevate empirical generalizations to the status of theory; it does not have to have grand theories that only categorize; and it does not have to become overly specialized and narrow. Indeed, the goal of science is to try to explain as much of social reality as is possible with as few principles and models as possible. When we have consensus over some basic principles or laws that have been confirmed with a wide variety of empirical tests employing diverse methodologies, we will have something to bring to the table of policy makers and to the public. If all we have to bring is ideology, few will listen to our message.

Burawoy may chide economics for being so narrow (and I agree with his critique), but look what can be done when there is some consensus over what constitutes good theory and research. Even when a discipline is this narrow, and in many cases wrong or incomplete, it can exert a level of influence that sociologists can only dream of. We need to stop celebrating our intellectual diversity, and find ways to develop common scientific standards for good sociology. My own feeling is that the discipline is now hopelessly diverse; and as a consequence, it needs to be broken into two parts—humanistic sociology, which can go over to the humanities, and scientific sociology, which can stay in the social sciences.

If this differentiation occurred, let us see which branch will exert the most influence on those who make the critical decisions affecting people’s lives and on the public debates on critical issues. I think it will be the scientific wing, but not the science of Merton and Parsons. All of the problems addressed by critical theory and identity politics can (and should) be studied scientifically; and the outcomes of such studies and deductions from more general theories to explain generalizations from these empirical studies will contribute far more to public debates than moralizing and preaching by sociologists with their own ideological agenda.

In Defense of Sociological Practice, with a New and Perhaps Outrageous Twist

Recently, I have argued for an engineering wing of scientific sociology (Turner, 1998, 2001). The notion of “social engineering” has unsavory connotations, but all mature sciences have engineering applications of their knowledge. There is no reason that this cannot be true of sociology. Perhaps the idea of social engineering will offend many or most sociologists, but quite frankly, most ideologues in the

discipline do not shrink from asserting how the world should be structured. Such assertions are clearly efforts at engineering, albeit in different clothing. What I propose is far less scary than what the critical ideologues in our discipline advocate. I would not be so arrogant as to tell a client or the public about what *they should do* to be morally and ethically pure (I certainly have opinions but this is different than giving advice or demanding that my opinions be the center of public debate). My proposal is much more modest: use sociological knowledge to solve problems that clients bring to us. Most problems in the social world concern how activities are organized; and as the science of social organization, sociologists can provide informative advice that a client is free to use or discard.

Now immediately there will a chorus, which Burawoy appears eager to join, that we are “selling out.” Indeed, in his typology, he sees the pathology of policy sociology as its “servility.” This is not a wholly wrong-headed diagnosis because a sociology that is oriented to seeking clients runs the danger of pandering and subordinating analysis to the perceived desires of a client. We become a new breed of ambulance chasers. But serious engineers—at least, most of the time—are not servile because they have codes and standards of conduct and because, if they cut corners, things fall apart and lead to lawsuits. There is no reason that an engineering wing of sociology cannot have the same kinds of professional standards; and moreover, social engineers can turn down work that, for whatever reason, is unappealing.

There is also a critique of social engineering that borders on hysteria, arguing that if sociologists are engineers we will somehow be parties to state oppression—a view of Big Brother in an Orwellian world. I have had people tell me that Nazi doctors experimentation on Jews is an example of social engineering and that engineering of the social is inherently evil. Such experiments were not the result of engineering but of ideological mobilization and political abuses justified by this ideology. I suspect that most sociologists would feel quite comfortable in imposing their ideological diagnosis of society’s ills, if they had the power to do so, imposing this diagnosis on members of society. The danger is not engineering, *per se*, but abusing power legitimated by extreme ideologies. Public sociology is by its nature ideological because, in the end, it inserts morality (of the sociologist) into public discourse; and, in my view, extremist ideologues are far more dangerous to society than sociological engineers.

Let us now turn to some details of what I have in mind for an engineering wing of sociology. First, we should ask what engineers do. For the most part they provide knowledge that allows for the building of things—from computers and highways to bridges and airplanes. Engineers have a bad reputation as insensitive nerds with pocket liners, but in fact, they do creative things: they make it possible to build new things that, for the most part, make life better. True, engineers often build bombs and weapons as well as structures like intrusive freeways that can tear people’s lives apart, but on net balance, we are better off for having engineers. They should, therefore, deserve more respect. Social engineers should similarly have respect. The reason that sociologists fear them is, perhaps, a classic case of projection: assuming that engineers would be like radical sociologies and impose their beliefs on the world, except in this case there is often the presumption that engineers would be political conservatives (as opposed to being the liberator of the oppressed). Why, I ask, would engineers be this way? Indeed, if they are good engineers, their

politics and ideology are irrelevant; there is a problem of organized labor faced by a client, and it is the sociological engineer's job to analyze the problem and then suggest to the client the way to build a structure that solves the problem. We have a considerable body of knowledge that is relevant, but we do not make it available to people who could use it. For example, we as a discipline know the conditions that generate solidarity and commitment. A client comes in with a problem of worker turnover because workers do not seem committed to their jobs. We could be ideologues and say that such is the case because the client is a "capitalist pig" who refuses to pay workers enough or provide benefits. Or, we could review the structure and culture of the workplace and suggest a series of options that, to varying degrees, would increase commitment and solidarity (perhaps including the points made by the ideologue). But there is more to solidarity than just pay and benefits, and we can impart this knowledge to our client. Now, the ideologue will say that we are contributing to the workers' oppression which, to my mind, is the height of arrogance because if workers are happier and more satisfied in their jobs, who has the right to tell them that they should be unhappy because they are, in the eyes of the sociologist, "oppressed." But, the ideologue might say: What if Wal-mart comes to you and asks how to get workers to take less pay and benefits? I would not take work from this client (for ideological reasons; I do not like what Wal-mart is doing to American society and, indeed, the world). But note, the ideology affects my choices of clients, not my actual engineering of social structure and culture. Others might take on Wal-mart as a client and that is their privilege

It is through engineering applications that abstract knowledge is made concrete and relevant to specific situations or problems. To have an engineering wing of the disciplines assures, if we can find clients, that there would be a constant flow of theoretical knowledge to the real world; and conversely, when theoretical knowledge is put into practice, such practice offers one more empirical test of its plausibility and utility (Turner, 2001). The critic might argue that applied sociology, clinical sociology, and sociological practice already do this, and so, my talk of engineering is simply inflammatory. But, in fact, if you look at much of sociological practice, it is a mixture of advocacy (for a local public), descriptive analysis of some situation, and only rarely, the application of theoretical ideas to a concrete problem of a client. Moreover, much sociological practice is another name for what Burawoy advocates: organic, grass-roots public sociology, or moral advocacy for a local public. This is not engineering, and it is not good sociological practice. It may be a worthy task as part of our role as morally engaged citizens, but it is not a particularly good sociology. Another part of applied sociology revolves around intuition or seat of the pants experience, thus making sociological practice more clinical than scientific. Still another part of sociological practice involves extrapolation from current trends or from other cases, and here again, there is a considerable amount of guesswork involved.

In contrast, what I have in mind is an engineering that is more rigorous than most applied sociology; moreover, it involves a systematic effort to use theoretical principles and models of social processes to intervene in a problematic situation, to tear down a dysfunctional social structure, or to build a new kind of social structure. Engineering is not description, or census taking; it is not ideological advocacy; it is about building something useful or tearing down something that is not useful.

If you look at the curriculum of an engineering school, students are taught a mixture of theoretical basics and applications of abstract ideas to concrete situations. Often, engineers are given “work formulas” derived from more theoretical knowledge; and the engineering consists of applying these formulas to specific problems. The theories from which these formulas are derived may be unknown or pushed to the background, but the point is that, ultimately, engineering is based upon theories that explaining the properties and dynamics of various domains of the universe. Since human behavior, interaction, and organization are part of the universe; they should be understandable by theories that have been tested. In turn, these theories can suggest basic “rules of thumb” that can serve sociological engineers. For example, we could rather easily list the basic conditions that make people feel a sense of injustice (there are clear theories and lots of empirical verifications); the same would be true for various kinds of emotional arousal, alienation, commitment, trust, solidarity, and many other conditions which are often problematic and which require engineering (not ideological/political) solutions.

Despite all the carping by critical sociologists about the lack of verified knowledge (and indeed on the very prospects for such knowledge), sociology has made enormous progress over the last forty years. If we compare present-day sociology to the supposed hegemony of functionalism, it is clear that we know so much more, by a larger factor. There has been a steady accumulation of knowledge that can be used to address real-life problems faced by people. To use this knowledge, it needs to be better consolidated and boiled down to basic engineering rules of thumb, but this is relatively easy once one is committed to the task. Sociology knows a great deal, even if many of its practitioners do not because it falls outside their critical worldview. These critics simply refuse to believe that we have knowledge that can be used to make people’s lives better in engineering application; instead, they wish to castigate the current capitalist system, bemoan the fate of some subpopulation, fire up students over real and, in some cases, imagined injustices, and in general light the ideological fires. To the extremists, everything is politics, and scientific sociological knowledge is irrelevant to their cause. If there is a public sociology, which will inevitably be fueled more by critical sociology than professional or scientific sociology, any effort to be a sociological engineer will be considered illegitimate.

My alternative to this polemical world is to re-establish science as the core of the discipline and to work toward an engineering subdiscipline that can use theoretical knowledge that explains social processes to solve real problems brought to us by clients and the public. If we become social engineers, we can chose our clients in terms of many criteria—money or ideology, for example—but we need to remain engineers, pushing our personal ideology and politics out of analysis as much as is possible. We have to be committed to using what we know, not what we feel and believe in our ideological incarnations, to advise clients. If we do not like the morality of a potential client we can “suck it up,” “hold our nose,” or quit, but we should not become moral preachers and ideologues.

If sociology could serve clients over many years in this manner, we would demonstrate to virtually all sectors of society that we have useful knowledge. And we would increasingly be called upon to comment on public issues. By examining issues from a sociological perspective—bringing theory and data to bear—we can challenge the simplistic analyses inevitably offered by economists and even politi-

cal scientists on complex, dynamic issues. And we can counter the even more simplistic analysis of talking heads in the media.

We can become public sociologists of another kind: experts who can provide knowledge that can lead the public and the powerful to look at important issues in a different light and to make decisions that can benefit more people. If we enter the public arena as self-conscious ideologues, we will not “energize” public debate; we will turn off those we hope to influence, especially given the disparity in political leanings of most sociologists (including me) and the public. We may pat ourselves on the back for our political correctness, but we will have done little to turn the terms of public debate. We will be just as impotent as we are now, at least in most cases.

I recognize that what I propose is not likely to transpire, at least across the whole of the discipline. It occurs today among relatively small numbers of sociologists who are considered to have expertise that clients seek. My goal is to get more sociologists engaged in social engineering, albeit labeled by another name. At present, we cede too much of this work over to other disciplines that are not as knowledgeable as we are about the dynamics of the social world. But, I am a realist; this will not happen in my lifetime, except on a person-by-person basis; and hence, sociology will not have the impact that it should on public affairs.

As noted earlier, I increasingly believe that sociology should be split apart into a humanistic/activist discipline and a scientific discipline. There is no easy reconciliation between these two sociologies, although many such as I are both scientists and, I trust, humanists in that they want to make people’s lives better and to construct a more just society. But, unlike Burawoy’s neat four-fold table, we cannot live in peace. We get in each others’ way; and rather than serve as a source of synergy, we drain out respective energies. The interdependence implied by the four-fold table on the four sociologies is reification or, worse, utopian; it cannot occur. It has never occurred in the history of the discipline, and it is not going to occur with the advent of a new public sociology.

A much better template for sociological engagement in public debates is the model provided by the Union for Concerned Scientists who often comment on public, political, and moral issues. As social scientists, we could join such a group and enjoy its protective shield. Or, we could create a Union of Concerned Social Scientists to enter the public debate as a coalition of scholars who are morally concerned and who, based upon their *demonstrated expertise* in theoretical, empirical, and engineering science, is likely to have credibility with the public. If sociologists go it alone, they will confirm the public’s rather suspicious views of who and what we are. An umbrella group gives us “cover,” but more importantly, such groups are given credence because their members are scientists, and science carries a credibility that gets a foot in the door with the public. A screaming sociological ideologue will get the door slammed in his or her face.

Conclusion

It is clear that I do not think that Burawoy’s proposal is viable. I do appreciate the effort because it addresses one of the central issues that has confronted the discipline since its founding—the connection between science and advocacy. No matter how hard we try, we can never make this two-headed monster work. To be a

scientist, it is necessary to suspend biases and beliefs in order to understand how the *world actually works*, whereas to be an advocate is not let science get in the way of biases and beliefs about how the *world should work*. These two incompatible goals cannot be reconciled by an armistice, or by a four-fold table. We simply must accept the fact that we must choose one path between the two options, not to the total exclusion of the other but to its subordination. I have chosen the path of science, even given my activist background (that probably exceeds that of most sociologists) and despite having written sociological works that mix science and ideology. But, I do not think that open activism or a mix between science and activism is the way to go. In my 40 years as a sociologist, we have not made great headway in penetrating the public or the halls of decision-making. We have dramatically increased what we know about the operation of the social universe, but we have not made significant inroads in those areas where Burawoy sees public sociology as taking us. I think that his proposal would have the exact opposite effect on sociology; it would isolate us more from those areas where we should have more influence.

We will penetrate the public's consciousness and places where important decisions are made when we demonstrate again and again over a period of some decades that we possess an important body of knowledge. The only way for sociology to become more influential is to be a discipline committed to science and engineering, however you want to re-label the latter. Sadly, the years since I received my Ph.D. have seen just the opposite trend: inclusion of politicized social movements and their attendant ideology as not only subject matter (a quite legitimate activity for a scientist) but also as epistemology and as a world view. We have critical this and critical that; many sociologists do not educate students as much as they seek to indoctrinate them into their identity politics or their moral vision of how the world should be. Of course, not all sociologists do this. I would guess that the discipline is split right down the middle between those who use the lectern as a pulpit and those who teach knowledge in an objective manner and let students decide for themselves how they will use this knowledge to frame their own beliefs.

Given this even split, the best solution is to institutionalize this split into two sociologies—humanistic/activistic sociology (or some such label) and scientific sociology (or some alternative label, with my preference being “social physics”). Burawoy's solution is inclusive, and on first glance it really does seem reasonable and reasoned, offering a strategy where we don't have to echo Rodney King and wonder, “can't we all get along?” We can perhaps get along in a personal sense, although surface politeness and, in a few cases, genuine friendships, represent an uneasy armistice. But, my experience is that the tension is always there between the scientists and activists; we really do have different worldviews and priorities about how sociology can inform the outside world. Drawing a four-fold table, and extolling the virtues of interdependence and synergy sounds good (I only wish it were so), but it is not a viable roadmap to our future.

Our future would be better served by separating the discipline; I am even willing to give up the name sociology to critical and activist sociologists, if this will facilitate the separation. We spend far too much time in faculty meetings, in professional debates, in competing for students' minds, and in so many activities revolving around a battle that will never end. We have our own version of Dante's *Inferno*, but we have a way out. Many sociology departments are in this inferno; true, they

may have peace for a while, but the conflict will erupt again and demonstrate to all that they have not escaped the hell in which they find themselves. We would be much better off to spend less energy in fighting rear guard battles with those who do not accept our epistemology; instead, let us spend our energies collaborating with those who do share our views on what sociology should and can be. Both sides of this conflict will be happier.

Seeing public sociology as one mechanism for integrating the two sides of the conflict—ultimately critical sociology vs. scientific sociology (I won't say "professional sociology" because critical sociology can be professional)—will not work. It did not work at the beginnings of American sociology in the first decades of the twentieth century, and it will not work at the beginning of twenty-first century. Let us simply part ways with a certain amount of mutual respect and move forward with less rancor and acrimony.

Note

1. Burawoy presents several definitions of public sociology. At times, he makes clear that public sociology is about moral issues; at other times, he argues for public sociology to be civic engagement in the "public sphere"; and at other places, he sees public sociology as assessing the values of society and of sociologists. No matter the definition, public sociology becomes a version of critical sociology, and this outcome will be harmful to sociology.

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