

## **Much Ado About Nothing?** **Remarks on Michael Burawoy's Presidential Address**

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**Abstract** We can only welcome the discourse that has been initiated in our professional community with the concept of public sociology in the focus. Undoubtedly, Michael Burawoy has indisputable merits in fuelling this international dialogue. I find, however, that his position and conceptual framework is debatable at several points, therefore my review is on the side of those who criticize his ideas. My paper is divided into three parts: in keeping with the idea that the drop mirrors the ocean, I will start with the detailed critique of a single paragraph—the one which makes comments on his table entitled *Types of sociological knowledge*. It will be argued that by switching his viewpoints and using vaguely defined notions without empirical evidences he often tackles his subject inconsistently. Secondly, I intend to offer an alternative, three-dimensional conceptual model in which the social scientist's prestige, influence and position on the action chain is taken into account as the main analytical aspects of the relationship between her/him and the public. Finally, based on this model, I propose to identify some strategies in order to find a better balance between the public and professional activity of social scientists.

**Keywords** Burawoy · Public sociology · Critique · Alternative model

We can only welcome the discourse that has been initiated in our professional community with the concept of public sociology in the focus. This discussion helps us in refining our key concepts and in elaborating adequate new strategies toward

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My remarks target Burawoy's '2004 American Sociological Association Presidential address: For public sociology', *The British Journal of Sociology* 56 (2): 259–294.

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our publics. Undoubtedly, Michael Burawoy has indisputable merits in fuelling this international dialogue. I find, however, that his position and conceptual framework is debatable at several points, therefore my review is on the side of those who criticize his ideas.

Presuming that the reader is familiar with both Burawoy's texts on public sociology and the related lauding or critical remarks by colleagues, I refrain from discussing the precedents and start *in medias res*. I intend to prove that Burawoy's argument is more problematic than earlier comments suggest. If—unlike most of his former critics—we examine his manifesto thoroughly, it can be realized that there are fundamental problems with the conceptual framework and the author's reasoning to such an extent that sometimes it is hard to make out what he actually means.

My paper is divided into three parts: in keeping with the idea that the drop mirrors the ocean, I will start with the detailed critique of a single paragraph—the one which makes comments on his table entitled *Types of sociological knowledge*. Secondly, I intend to offer an alternative, three-dimensional conceptual model in which the social scientist's prestige, influence and position on the action chain is taken into account as the main analytical aspects of the relationship between her/him and the public. Finally, based on this model, I propose to identify some strategies in order to find a better balance between the public and professional activity of social scientists.

## I

“Public sociology”—writes Burawoy—“brings sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation. It entails, therefore, a double conversation” (Burawoy 2005: 263–264). Public sociology has two “complementary” sub-types, the “traditional” and the “organic”:

“With traditional public sociology the publics being addressed are generally invisible in that they cannot be seen, thin in that they do not generate much internal interaction, passive in that they do not constitute a movement or organization, and they are usually mainstream. The traditional public sociologist instigates debates within or between publics, although he or she might not actually participate in them. (...) There is, however, another type of public sociology—organic public sociology in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public. The bulk of public sociology is indeed of an organic kind—sociologists working with labour movement, neighbourhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant right groups, human right organizations. Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education.” (ibid)

Burawoy distinguishes four types of “sociological knowledge” (see the table below).

### Elaborating the Types of Sociological Knowledge

	Academic	Extra-academic
<i>Instrumental</i>	<i>Professional sociology</i>	<i>Policy sociology</i>
Knowledge	Theoretical/empirical	Concrete
Truth	Correspondence	Pragmatic
Legitimacy	Scientific norms	Effectiveness
Accountability	Peers	Clients
Politics	Professional self-interest	Policy interventions
Pathology	Self-referentiality	Serility
<i>Reflexive</i>	<i>Critical sociology</i>	<i>Public sociology</i>
Knowledge	Foundational	Communicative
Truth	Normative	Consensus
Legitimacy	Moral vision	Relevance
Accountability	Critical intellectuals	Designated publics
Politics	Internal debate	Public dialogue
Pathology	Dogmatism	Faddishness

He starts his comments on the table with the following phrase:

“The knowledge we associate with professional sociology is based on the development of research programs, different from the concrete knowledge required by policy clients, different from the communicative knowledge exchanged between sociologists and their publics, which in turn is different from the foundational knowledge of critical sociology” (Burawoy 2005: 276)

Unfortunately, he does not define any of his concepts, although it is far from being evident why, for example, the empirical/theoretical knowledge of professional sociology is not “concrete” or, for that matter, “foundational”. What is empirical knowledge like if it is not “concrete”? Moreover, why is theoretical knowledge not “foundational”? May not “concrete” policy sociology or “communicative” public sociology be based on the “development of research programs”? Isn’t “critical sociology” “communicative”? Why do Goudner’s *Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* or C. Wright Mills’ *Sociological Imagination* mentioned as the typical specimens of “critical sociology” represent the “foundational” form of knowledge? In addition, why are these masters “critical” and not “public” sociologists?<sup>1</sup> If labels are used galore but the standard dictionary meanings of the terms are resorted to, would it not be more justified to call the knowledge belonging to “critical sociology”—“critical”?

Nevertheless, let us accept that knowledge “associated” with public sociology is more communicative than are the three other forms of knowledge, and bring together

<sup>1</sup> Of course, I do understand why: unlike Riesman’s *Lonely Crowd* or Myrdal’s *American Dilemma*, they are not addressed to the wide public but first of all to sociologists. So far so good, but then why cannot sociologists constitute a “visible” and “thick” community?

this statement with the examples brought by the author. This would imply, for instance, that the PhD-dissertation “on the way race swamps the effects on criminal record on the employment prospects of youth” (264) represents communicative knowledge. What arguments can be put forth to prove the close relationship between the author of a PhD-dissertation and his/her publics if, by the nature of the thing, the dissertation cannot be known by more than a few dozen people? Who constitute this public? Does the author mean perhaps that it *would be desirable* for the sociologist to communicate with the public?

Burawoy continues with these sentences:

“From this follows the notion of truth to which each adheres. In the case of professional sociology the focus is on producing theories that correspond to the empirical world, in the case of policy sociology knowledge has to be ‘practical’ or ‘useful’, whereas with public sociology knowledge is based on consensus between sociologists and their publics, while for critical sociology truth is nothing without a normative foundation to guide it.” (ibid.)

It would have helped if he had supported his statements with examples here because for want of them, we are fumbling about in the dark trying to guess what the text means. Furthermore, he does not use homogeneous criteria for his classification, with the result that his categories are hanging like empty verbal balloons in the matrix. In the first case, he takes the subjective *goal-orientation of the actors* as the basis for categorization (he states “the focus is on *producing* theories”). In the second case, he concentrates on the institutions appearing as *structural constraints* for the actors (he writes “knowledge *has to be* ‘practical’ or ‘useful’). The truth-concept associated with public sociology further muddles up the logic of the analysis: the text does not make it clear whether we have goal-orientation or structural constraint here, but it is apparent that Burawoy conceives of the category as one on empirical foundations: he makes a simple factual statement (“the knowledge *is based on* consensus”). Presumably, the author deems it *desirable* to have some communication between the sociologist and his/her public, but the formulation of this clause as factual statement, especially in the context of the other three empirically legitimate statements, is questionable.<sup>2</sup>

Let us proceed further. The next sentence reads:

“Each types of sociology has its own legitimation: professional sociology justifies itself on the basis of scientific norms, policy sociology on the basis of its effectiveness, public sociology on the basis of its relevance and critical sociology has to supply moral vision”. (ibid)

This sentence is logically correct. However, for want of examples and definition of the concepts, it is hard to interpret, for example, that public sociology justifies itself “on the basis of its own relevance”. Why does this not apply to all the other types (provided, of course that we know what to mean by “relevance”)? Moreover,

<sup>2</sup> It is also debatable that professional sociology produces theories that “correspond to the empirical world”. Just think of the Parsonian structuralist-functionalism also apparently influencing the structure of Burawoy’s thinking (including the commented table)

in my understanding<sup>3</sup>—the basis of legitimacy for critical sociology is not (or not primarily) the moral vision but the belief in the incorrectness of the criticized phenomenon, plus the moral *and scientific* conviction of the correctness of the critic's own alternative.

Burawoy continues:

“Each types of sociology also has its own accountability. Professional sociology is accountable to peer reviews, policy sociology to its clients, public sociology to a designated public, whereas critical sociology is accountable to a community of critical intellectuals who may transcend disciplinary boundaries.” (ibid)

Without definition or examples, we are now free to attribute meanings to “accountability”. We may also ask why critical sociology is put under the heading of academic knowledge if critical intellectuals as its main producers and consumers may transcend disciplinary boundaries, i.e. inhabit extra-academic spheres, too? Just to make the matrix symmetrical? There is another methodological problem here, namely that while in case of the other three types both the institutions and the actors of accountability can be identified and taken for granted<sup>4</sup>, as far as public sociology is concerned there are no empirical evidences supporting the authors' accountability-thesis. Partly because the “invisible”, “thin” and “passive” public of “traditional public sociology” can hardly impose external constraints upon the sociologist (the more so, as the latter “might not actually participate” in the debates instigated by him/her). It is also difficult to identify the target groups of “organic public sociology”, as well as to determine what institutional guarantees there may be of accountability.

Who are, after all, the target groups of (organic) public sociology? The question is relatively easy to answer when we have a university lecture, a survey about a civil organization or a dispute with a Christian Fundamentalist sect. It is much less clear what enforcing institutions the civil organization or the sect may have to assert their accountability-claim.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, who can be regarded as the target audience of a lecture by some students at an *ASA* conference?<sup>6</sup> In my opinion, first of all the sociologists, since it is a scientific meeting among specialists (therefore it would also be well grounded to classify this example under the category of professional sociology). But, on the basis of the author's argument this public may equally

<sup>3</sup> We do not understand the same by the concepts because for me, the concept of critical sociology as a distinct category is untenable since all professional articles are in some regard the critique of earlier articles. Isn't Burawoy's manifesto itself is the best example to prove that a text can belong to several knowledge types at the same time?

<sup>4</sup> These are the peer review of the colleagues, the report of the sociologists for the clients and the debate between critical intellectuals.

<sup>5</sup> This has been crystallized relatively well in the student-teacher relationship, while it is far less obvious in a research concerning a civil organization. It could also be an interesting research topic to see what possibilities a sect has when confronting a sociologist who pursues a polemic with it. There is little chance for the emergence of consensus apropos the truth-ideal. It is evident that the chances of the target groups of public sociology to assert an accountability-claim are unequal.

<sup>6</sup> When defining public sociology, Burawoy mentions a research paper of three Berkeley graduate students presented at the 2004 *ASA* conference who “studied the plied of low-paid service workers on campus, bringing them out of the shadows, and constituting them as a public to which the university should be accountable.” (264)

include the black cleaner, the Mexican driver, the kitchen staff of the campus, the rector of the university, the professors, the students, the members of the financing bodies, the government officials in charge of educational and labour affairs—and so on and so fort. In other words, anyone can be taken for target public who the given study may touch on.

But what is to be understood by the accountability of the sociologist in such a case? Is this claim justified from the angle of all those concerned including the representatives of the state and the market? Or the state, market or bureaucratic actors, i.e. the “oppressors” may not have the right to form such a claim while the (exploited) cleaner and driver may? If they may, on what grounds? On grounds of everyone’s own interest? Or rather on the actors’ knowledge, or their truth-ideal or legitimacy-principle? And what to do with the fact that the rector and the members of the university senate have a much greater chance of realizing this claim than the poor, immigrant workers? Hence, as against the empirical evidence of the accountability concerning the other three knowledge-types, the accountability of public sociology to its target audience is not an empirical fact. To put it in another way: while the categorization of the other three knowledge-types is correct at a *descriptive* level, for public sociology it becomes *prescriptive*, i.e. the coherence of the scientific logic is disrupted.

The last two sentences of the passage reads:

“Furthermore, each type of sociology has its own politics. Professional sociology defends the conditions of science, policy sociology proposes policy interventions, public sociology understands politics as democratic dialogue whereas critical sociology is committed to opening up debates within our discipline.” (ibid)

In this sentence, the different types are conceived coherently as action-directed knowledge positions. This kind of argument would be perfectly justifiable if it prevailed throughout the whole text. This is not the case, so the cognitive consistency of this sentence only further exposes the *cognitive inconsistency* of the other sentences. Had Burawoy handled the four types of sociological knowledge as goal-oriented throughout, then, for example, their truth ideal would have led him to construct the following classes: academic—correspondence *seeking*; policy—pragmatism; public—consensus-*seeking*; critical—normativity. (NB: this does not mean that I accept Burawoy’s categories. I would only like to suggest that it would have been more appropriate to make like classifications within his own realm of thought.)

In sum, it can be said that Burawoy tackles the subject inconsistently, switching viewpoints, using, in most cases, undefined notions without enlightening examples. He does not interpret his table but rests content with reiterating what we can read in the matrix cells anyway. Regrettably, the more closely we read the manifesto, the more convinced we become that take whichever passage we want, it will mirror the vagueness of the entire text, just as a drop implies the ocean.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Among the vaguely worded sentences the following thesis stands out: “In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology – and in particular its public face – defends the interests of humanity” (287) Which state is meant? American, Peruvian, Indian, or Russian? What market, what despotism does the author speak about? What does “humanity” as such have to do with all this?

## II

In his dual model of public sociology, when taking into account whether there is or there isn't a "dialogue" between the knowledge-producer (the sociologist) and the knowledge-consumer (the public), Burawoy makes a distinction between his two types on the basis of the single activity/passivity factor. Let us see what possibilities we have to refine the conceptual framework! I would like to stress that what follows is no more than a thought-experiment, the sketch of a model.

The first analytic dimension by which the relationship between the sociologist and his/her public can be analysed is the scientific *prestige* of a given activity. It is easy to see that there is, in this regard, a considerable difference between publishing the *Lonely Crowd*, sending papers to peer-reviewed journals, writing a PhD-dissertations, preparing case studies for civil organizations, addressing the larger, non-professional public in the opinion pages of national newspapers, or participating in television shows. There are several indicators that may measure scientific prestige: from the institutionalized status (working position) of the social scientist via the rank of the knowledge-transmitting forum to the character of the language used - only to name a few. Needless to say: the wider the target public (and more popular the language), the greater the chance that the prestige of an activity would decrease. (It is to be noted, however, that in a more sophisticated analysis this statement can be refined since, just to give a simple example, it is easily possible that a prestigious book may be written in an easily intelligible language.)

The next analytical dimension, which can serve as the measure of the size and composition of the public that the sociologist reaches, is the *influence* of a given activity. There is no denying that, say, *The Lonely Crowd* will have a bigger influence compared to a PhD-dissertation or to a publication in a professional periodical. Similarly, the thoughts of a sociologist aired in a popular TV-show will reach a larger public than her/his statement in the opinion pages of a daily newspaper—not mentioning the influence of a case study ordered by an environmentalist organization. And so on and so forth... It is important to note that we can gauge the size and the composition of the groups that the PhD-dissertation, *The Lonely Crowd*, a publication in a daily newspaper or in a TV-show (etc.) reach.

The third analytical aspect, which may measure the relationship between the sociologist and his/her public, is the *action dimension*: the activities of social scientist can be positioned on the action chain (Etzioni 2005), i.e. on a bipolar passivity-activity scale. Around the passive pole there are activities the outcomes of which are not directly convertible into social action (e.g. theoretical and methodological researches), while around the other end we find instances imbued with social responsibility—such as signing petitions, involvement in social movements, etc. (Needless to say, again, that in a more differentiated analysis the political orientation, the social embeddedness of a civil movement, as well as the sociologist's position both in the civil movement and in his own professional field can be measured and discussed in detail.)

Based on the above-said, a three-dimensional space can be constructed in which several sets of institutionalized sociological activity-types can be represented. Let us start outlining them with the type we may call *researcher*. The researcher is active within the borders of his/her professional field, the selection of his/her themes



issuing primarily from the logic of the progress of the discipline. Her/his main aim is professional communication in a limited sense, hence (s)he lays less emphasis on influencing a wider public. (S)he has a good chance of having relatively great prestige and high professional position at the peak of his/her career; his/her acts are primarily directed at gaining acknowledgement within the academic field. Thus (s)he is placed close to the passive pole of the action chain. (A subcategory of the researcher is the *university lecturer*. They share most of the parameters. However, by the nature of the job, the lecturer is more in touch with non-professional audiences hence her/his influence is usually greater than that of a researcher.)

The *expert* represents the next activity type. (S)he also works within the frames of a limited influence or publicity, but, unlike the researcher, his/her themes are usually not dependent upon the progress within a given scientific field but upon the interests of a non-professional client (like the state and a market- or civil organization). The data (s)he supplies are usually only available to the client, and are often confidential. His/her results—unlike the researcher's—are usually not transparent, that is, they are not controllable by the members of the scientific community. His/her acts are directed at satisfying the client's requirement and/or earning money. Consequently, her/his scientific prestige is usually lower than that of the researcher. His/her place is also marked around the passive pole of the action chain.

The next type, the *intellectual*, is an educated person who feels responsible and authorized to articulate his/her ideas in several fields including, among others, science, arts, politics, public life and morals. As a result, her/his social influence is wider than those of the above types are. The cost of the wide profile of his/her choices is the lack of control by a clear-cut professional community. Owing partly to this, his/her prestige (and often position) in the professional field is lower than that of the above categories (as far as (s)he works in one of these fields—which is not at all obvious). Her/his acts are basically conditioned by the dispositional patterns of a self-conscious citizen and a consumer of high culture: (s)he is active in various spheres of public life, so (s)he is placed around the middle of the activity chain.

The representatives of any of the above types may decide, for several reasons, to take a more active public role. For example, a researcher may wish to popularize his/her results, or feel obliged to enter a public polemic concerning his/her research topic. It is also possible that the expert's client (say, a trade union or a civil organization) is an active social agent and the expert may find him- or herself in a situation in which (s)he is expected to identify with her/his client before a wider public or act in a radical way (e.g. participate in a demonstration). An intellectual may regularly tell his/her opinion in the media, take the side of the oppressed in public, sign petitions, and (s)he is not averse to the role of the activist. In such cases the researcher turns *public researcher*, the expert *public expert*, the intellectual *public intellectual*.

A special type of *public brain worker* is the *public scientist*. (S)he is usually a social scientist (i.e. not necessarily sociologist) of great prestige, author of important and influential works, who transgresses the boundaries of her/his discipline—(s)he is *above* disciplines. (S)he is an important reference-person not only for the representatives of other social sciences but also for the wider intellectual public. His/her acts are primarily motivated by a selfless delight in scientific work. It is mostly owing to her/his charismatic authority (and not a



narcissistic drive) that (s)he cannot resist the demands of public tasks; his/her manifestations often tilt over to the active pole of the action chain. It is to be noted, however, that his/her influence and popularity owes mainly to the effect of such a person's works and personal charisma rather than an ambition to redeem or change the world (though the latter can also be exemplified, just take Noam Chomsky's efforts, for example). Among sociologists, I range, for example, C. Wright Mills and Pierre Bourdieu in this category.

Another type of public brain worker—the antithesis of the public scientist in several regards—is the *pop sociologist*, the pseudo-sociological private entrepreneur who pursues, first of all, his/her activity for popularity and private material gain, pretending to have the required expertise to cultivate the discipline. Although in most cases (s)he does have an adequate diploma that can be used to legitimate his/her activity, (s)he is usually not bound to academic institutions, and fails to tap research funds, so—taking considerable risks—(s)he has to finance his/her work him/herself. The language (s)he uses—although it includes certain elements of the special lingo—is basically popular and manipulates with several bombastic and startling elements. (S)he often becomes a well-known actor in the media, but usually beware of taking an unambiguous position on definite political or social questions. In the professional community, it is customary to despise and undervalue him/her. At the same time, the activity of the pop sociologist is an excellent indicator: it throws light on the themes that interest the public (see Fig. 1).

The public lecturer, public researcher, public expert, public intellectual, public scientist and pop sociologist are all public social scientists. These types are to be envisioned as mobile, overlapping sets in a multidimensional space; the boundaries of which are permeable from all directions and are to be continuously redefined. A researcher may also perform tasks of an expert or lecturer, and in certain situations the work of a researcher may be financed by a market actor. That is, not only the researcher acting as “quasi expert” can fulfil the needs of the client, but the situation may also be reversed. Needless to say, the activities and positions may vary according to the life cycle, and the representatives of any type may manifest themselves at any time as incumbents of any public role.

### III

I agree with Burawoy: public sociology must spare no effort to take part in the disputes of the public sphere and to prove its social worth. At the same time—similarly to Calhoun (2005)—I think that this is a “task for sociology in general, not for a special subfield or quadrant”. My model also suggests that the boundaries between public and non-public sociologists are very pliable; hence a sociologist easily turns public sociologist and sociology public sociology. Contrary to Burawoy, I think that in the greater part of the world, the borders between the positions of sociologist and public sociologist have been practically permeable for the past thirty or forty years, thus *Burawoy is forcing an open door* with his manifesto. An eloquent proof is that the statutes of nine of the Research Committees of the International Sociological Association (ISA) include objectives concerning public policy, or are related to the social responsibility of sociology. Most remarkably, such

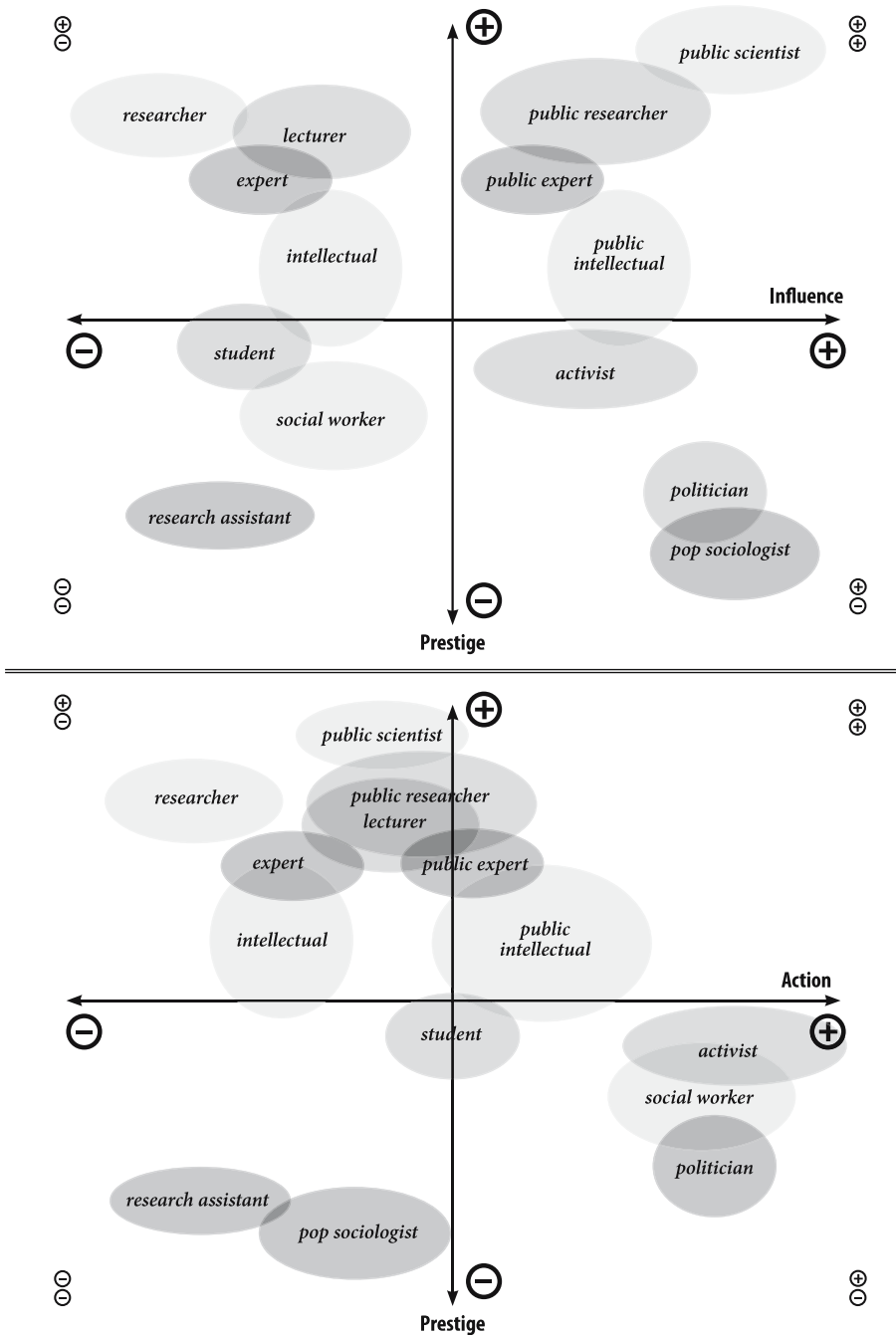


Fig. 1 The types of sociological activities

a goal was first formulated back in 1959 (!)<sup>8</sup>, and over a third of the research committees founded in the seventies expressed such aims.<sup>9</sup> This fact is evidently connected to the so-called “cultural turn” in the 1960s–1970s and—as part of it—to the ascendancy of various *studies* (gender studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, etc.) imbued with a sense of social responsibility and open toward social activism.

I think it is important to stress the relationship between sociology and the other social sciences because Burawoy’s model—though, in my view, often referring to the related disciplines in a fairly oversimplified way<sup>10</sup>—envisages sociology in a vacuum not ascribing due weight to the fact that among social sciences there have been interactions for centuries with a claim to redefine scientific boundaries, and these interactions have gradually intensified after the cultural turn. (Concerning this aspect it is palpable how Burawoy fails to utilize the potentialities of Bourdieu’s sociology to which he frequently refers in his manifesto.<sup>11</sup>) However hard it is to grasp from a European viewpoint, it is possible that in the United States the isolation of sociology is indeed so powerful from both other social sciences and from “society” and “social problems” in a broad sense that Burawoy’s attitude finds explanation here<sup>12</sup>.

So in order that sociology might fulfil its public tasks, it is desirable that the sociologist pursue expansive strategies in as many dimensions as possible, that is, (s) he should aim at achieving high academic prestige, public influence and activity-rate. Perhaps the most important task of every sociologist and social scientist in general is to create works that may elevate them to the level of a public scientist. Of course, only few of the hundreds of thousand social scientists in the world have the chance of becoming public scientists. But even without achieving this status, the ambition itself has a lot of gain for the sociologist and sociology alike. The most important dividend is that if the sociologist, driven by her/his high-flying ambitions, tries to create works that may be of importance for other social sciences and for the wider intellectual public too, this effort may largely decrease the chance of being locked within the walls of his/her own discipline.

When, however, the gloomy morning arrives and the sociologist realizes that (s) he will not be the Merton King of the future, not all is lost for (s)he may still face several realistic (and satisfactory) alternatives. The most obvious of these is that (s)

<sup>8</sup> One of the objectives of the Research Committee on Sociology of Health (RC 15) declares that the committee “encourages the generation of sociological knowledge that enables health professional administrators, officials, and planners to improve the delivery of health services in the domains of prevention, management, cure, and rehabilitation.” (<http://www.isa-sociology.org/rc15.htm>)

<sup>9</sup> In seven of twenty research committees established at that time, such a goal was spelt out in their foundation charters. <http://www.isa-sociology.org>

<sup>10</sup> For example, he speaks about the “balkanized” political science, anthropology, or geography (286).

<sup>11</sup> *Mala fide*, Burawoy’s sociology-centricity might as well be taken for a form of *sociological imperialism* as it devours some other occupations (journalist, activist, social worker) and also overvalues the importance of sociology to the detriment of the rest of the social science disciplines. In my opinion, he is particularly unjust to economics.

<sup>12</sup> It is characteristic that 26 out of the 53 *ISA* research committees laid down in their statutes that interdisciplinary approach was one of their aims. <http://www.isa-sociology.org>

he tries to face up to the challenges of the researching/lecturing/expert work as honestly as possible. In my opinion, the majority satisfies this expectation. Honest scientific work, however, is not enough to turn a sociologist into public sociologist. To achieve this goal, (s)he would have to introduce and represent scientific ideas to a fairly large and mixed public. Relatively few representatives of our discipline satisfy this latter requirement, so several untapped possibilities are at the disposal of the sociologist in this regard.

Let us start with teaching.<sup>13</sup> I deem it a minimum requirement for the lecturer/researcher to set her- or himself the task of disseminating his/her own knowledge among ever larger groups of students. In other words, in addition to researching and elite training, the sociologist should participate in BA-level education too (also to get to know the way of thinking of the laity, which may help the redefinition of research-hypotheses and -questions). What is more, (s)he should be prepared to hold an “introduction into sociology” course for students of other disciplines!<sup>14</sup> Similar to health and sexual education, sociology should have a far greater role in secondary schools as well! It should be an important part of public sociological “action plans” to stage a series of projects for working out and upgrading manuals and textbooks for secondary education, *by sociologists of high prestige*, on important social issues (drug abuse, poverty, racial discrimination, family violence, etc.), using a popular, widely intelligible language.

I find it also desirable that the sociologist feel it his/her professional duty to join public polemics touching on her/his themes, to be ready to rectify misconceptions and false statements. The professionals ought to take up the gauntlet frequently flung at them by pop sociologists, and instead of grumbling in the university canteen, they ought to unveil the hotchpotch of the pop sociologists to the wider public. Nor would it do any harm if they proved that they were capable of creating better works of a wide appeal on themes cast into the focus by pop sociologists. In other words: the sociologist should not find it beneath his/her dignity to popularize the discipline. I even risk suggesting that it should become the gauge of scientific excellence if we are capable of transmitting our results to representatives of other disciplines and the lay public in an understandable way. I am convinced that the doubts about the scientific competence of a colleague who is incapable of popularizing his/her discipline at a high level are thoroughly justifiable.

It would be a worthy cause if the sociologist with public responsibility asserted the viewpoints of the professional sphere in the teeth of institutions with greater weight in the media. No miracles can be expected here, but modest results might be achieved if there were more sociologists who would not be content with being invited to a radio- or TV-show where they accept the moderator’s preconceived viewpoints and the roles they are cast into, fitting smoothly into the structure of the show. It would be salutary if social scientists – not shrinking even from lobbying – tried to promote the creation of new media programmes, daily columns better mediating the worldview of social sciences.

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<sup>13</sup> I find Gans’ (1989) presidential address very appealing, so in the following I am often following in his wake.

<sup>14</sup> It is not as easy as many tend to believe! That is why I think it is a mistake to leave this task to beginners.

Burawoy writes that “public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology. It can as well support Christian Fundamentalism as Liberation Sociology or Communitarianism” (Burawoy 2005: 266). I do not think this relativistic position is acceptable. Nielsen (2004) quite rightly asks where the critical standard of public sociology is found in this case—especially in view of the fact that “civil society” used by Burawoy as a magic category but actually having a vague meaning (see Brady 2004) – may easily become the source of oppression. Burawoy (2006) appears to sense this contradiction because in the *Public Sociology Reader* and the introduction to it he clearly puts the so-called “Global South” into the position of the universal subject from whose vantage point the (national, supranational, state and market) institutions of the western world become the target of criticism.

Undoubtedly, this approach—which may be called “*critical globalization studies*”—is more easy to defend and more attractive (empirically more easily supported and better suited to our sense of justice, etc.) than the above relativistic viewpoint. However, it also runs risks. By overemphasizing the suppression of the Global South by the Global North, it may easily underestimate the importance of an other tension—namely between South and South. (In other words, it acts as second wave feminism did when at first it refused to acknowledge that the suppression of women was not solely attributable to masculine domination or the “patriarchy”.) I do not assert, of course, that this risk cannot be fended off (as illustrated by the developments of the past forty years of feminism and gender studies), but I do state that Burawoy has not settled the interrelation between public sociology and knowing subjects convincingly.

Whereas, in my view, this is not a very difficult task: a sociologist should not seek universal subjects but construct the subject relationally and discern who the oppressor and the oppressed is in a given historical/cultural power relation. When that is defined, it is safe to formulate the value postulation: notably, one that tries to represent the oppressed or underprivileged as against injustice and suppression. In this regard, the first step is to choose as research topics inequalities fuelling social problems. In addition, we should also do our best to translate the exposed injustice to as wide a public as possible in an intelligible manner.

In principle, there can be no objection to the active role of a sociologist in exposing social injustices and supporting social movements. The main question is how far (s)he can go in the action chain without risking his/her own and the discipline’s legitimacy. As a person of thoughts, (s)he may go to great lengths in promoting the favourable development of a public cause: write background studies, sign petitions, participate in public disputes (in which, needless to say, (s)he must adduce scientifically well grounded arguments). I think it is desirable that the sociologist try to reshape the professional field so that the change is beneficial to the cause he deems important. For example, it is in his/her right to initiate the training of more experts (e.g. social workers) for the handling of certain social problems; I also accept that as an activist, the social scientist may lie down at the entrance of a military base or tie her- or himself to a tree selected for felling. Only, if (s)he does so, (s)he must do it as a private person and not as the lecturer of that-and-that university. Agreeing with Tittle (2004), I believe that a social scientist participating in public affairs and assuming an active role in the action chain must strive, however

difficult it may be, to separate clearly his/her self as citizen and as public sociologist. Otherwise (s)he might risk the impeccable legitimacy not only of him- or herself but also of his or her profession.

To sum up, I think the sociological community must be grateful to Burawoy for undertaking the role of the generator in sparking this important self-reflexion. Unfortunately, his efforts are disputable in several regards. He could have made a greater contribution to our discipline with a less contradictory, theoretically coherent program including ideas that are more new. Knowing their novelty-value, I feel his efforts are disproportionate<sup>15</sup>, and I find the response by the professional community overdone also. Therefore, the title of my comment, though admittedly exaggerating, is not quite unfounded.

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<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to comprehend why he published so many papers on the theme in the past two years!