

Editor's Introduction: Public Engagement and Hope

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In this issue, we present a set of papers that continue the still fascinating conversation about “public sociology,” particularly in response to the conceptual model articulated by Michael Burawoy around the time of his presidency of the American Sociological Association (2003–2004), but also moving independently in new directions.

The initial paper, by Steven Ortiz, provides a first-person account of the experience of communicating sociological research via mass media. Here, the sociologist moves from the well defined role of academic researcher to the unfamiliar position of public figure playing a very different game that involves high-profile risks. Ortiz offers reflections on how sociology departments, as well as graduate training programs, might better meet these challenges.

Lina Hu extends the conversation on public sociology into Asia, in her account of an intensive intervention in the People's Republic of China. The focus here is on nontraditional public education for workers. The relationship of these efforts to Burawoy's conceptual model is significantly different from those considered in earlier papers in this journal.

Gabor Scheiring presents a friendly critique of Burawoy in his reflections on public sociology and the late modern turn, with particular reference to the European experience. Working from the premise that the gap between professional and public sociology can be overcome, and that public sociology has not been suppressed, he offers his own perspective for pursuing the project, based on what he calls a “self-anthropology.”

Miklos Hadas likewise engages the Burawoy model and seeks to articulate an alternative strategy that is based on three dimensions of social-scientific work, namely, the prestige of scientists, their influence and their position on what is called the “action chain.” Citing the longstanding engagement of many sociologists in public policy, as evidenced by the research committees of the International Sociological Association, Hadas raises the question of whether Burawoy—with the best of intentions—is applying a battering ram to an already opened door.

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Michelle Lueck, in the final paper, raises an issue that has emerged in recent sociological discourse, namely, hope or hopefulness as embodied in social change efforts. Her particular focus is on the subfield of environmental sociology, which seems bifurcated between two opposed and arguably inadequate approaches: pessimism and utopianism. In Lueck's view, a perspective based on hopefulness offers a third and far more promising way forward. This discussion has links to other proposals for a broadened sociological perspective that have been considered in this journal, including Sorokin's "integralism" and Vincent Jeffries's treatment of "the virtues" (which itself is linked to recent work on "character strengths" by those in the "positive psychology" movement associated with Martin Seligman and Carl Peterson).

Lueck's article has implications for an issue often debated in the field, namely, the negativism that critics believe has dominated sociological discourse since the 1960s. In recent decades, many people have been attracted to sociology because of its potential usefulness in efforts to create a more just society characterized by greater equality, inclusiveness and empowerment of traditionally disadvantaged or oppressed groups. Some have seen a stark choice between complicity in oppression and resistance (perhaps best captured in the title of a former journal, *The Insurgent Sociologist*). Nevertheless, the question has been raised as to the consequences of organizing an academic field around righteous anger and relentless critique, combined with a mandatory liberalism or left-wing radicalism. Can it be that, while "fighting the good fight," sociologists have largely destroyed their own hopefulness and joy? Moreover, if all is corrupt, and if power elites are ever triumphant, what basis is there for hope? And how shall any field endure, if it is largely devoid of joy and devolves into a grim state of "permanent warfare"? Perhaps the moment is now ripe to develop a more hopeful perspective and vocabulary, to focus on the altruization of society proposed by Sorokin more than half a century ago, and, in our efforts for change, to keep in view the "Francisan gaiety" of a Mohandas Gandhi.