

# The Contradictions of Public Sociology: A View from a Graduate Student at Berkeley

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**Abstract** Reflecting on my experiences as a graduate student, I argue that the terminology of public sociology should be dropped. The public sociology rhetoric is at odds with the fundamental professional reality in the discipline. Sociology, as a “hyper-professionalized” endeavor, primarily values abstract, explanatory theories, even if those theories make the world less descriptively comprehensible to people seeking to act in the world. Moreover, I question whether sociologists, as a professional class, should or can take on the public position as the partisan representatives of civil society and marginalized peoples. Instead, I argue for a greater openness within professional sociology to descriptive work, as well as more departmental supports for graduate students to pursue careers outside of sociology. Sociologists interested in public engagement should focus primarily on cataloguing and practical evaluation of engaged research tactics and community oriented teaching strategies, rather than theoretical discussions of what sociology can or should be.

**Keywords** Public sociology · Sociological training

This article is written from my perspective as a graduate student who began my sociological studies in 2002 at the University of California, Berkeley, just as the recent swell of public sociology discourse became visible on the horizon (Boyns and Fletcher 2005; Hutter 2005; Miller and Perrucci 2004; Nichols 2005b; Turner 2007). My understanding of what public sociology is and what the Berkeley department stood for was shaped largely by Michael Burawoy, the 2003 ASA President and the most active global intellectual proponent and theorizer of public sociology. I was most particularly influenced by his vision of organic public sociology, a type of research produced when sociologists work with advocacy or

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community organizations. Burawoy described this organic public sociology as the bulk of public sociology in practice.

Burawoy's vision of organic public sociology is not the only one—indeed it is not the only one in the Berkeley department—but it was the one which dominated my understanding of public sociology and of the Berkeley department as a new graduate student. I was particularly attracted to this vision, especially its social movement oriented dimensions, because I had entered graduate school after having been a street organizer with homeless people. I was amongst what Adler and Adler (2005) describe as the group of students who decided to come to graduate school in sociology because they felt the discipline fit into their idealistic dreams of changing the world.

Specifically, my decision to enter graduate school was inspired by my desire to figure out new ways and tools to serve homeless and social justice organizations. The up-swelling in discussion of public sociology stimulated by Burawoy seemed a favorable wave I could ride with towards my envisioned destination of scholar-activist. This wave, however, is a turbulent one, filled with cross currents and undertows. I have found that the realities of graduate school and the sociological discipline as a whole, even with the rhetoric of public sociology flying high, do not facilitate publicly engaged research. As a graduate student the primary way that I have been able to directly serve society has been by living a double life of long work hours, split between the academy and volunteer work with community organizations. I have undertaken engaged research work, but it has often been through independent studies and volunteer research activities with no formal or structural support from my department. Moreover, the only reason I have been able to undertake this work is because I have been on a full fellowship every year of graduate study. It was my good fortune that allowed me to volunteer the time needed to engage in research with community organizations.

In this short essay, I will describe some of the turbulences and contradictions of the current public sociology movement from the perspective of a graduate student. Before turning to more directly discuss public sociology, however, it is important to mention the two basic contexts in which the reflections I offer here are situated. The first context is the pressures upon the discipline of sociology as a resource dependent member of the academic field. Departments of sociology do not exist in a world of their own, but in the organizational context of a university in which struggles for resources and legitimacy are sometimes fierce. Sociologists face the risk of being called “unscientific” by other disciplines and of losing their institutional support. This means that while in this essay I critique sociology as not being able to actually live up to the rhetoric of public sociology, this is not a criticism of individuals who are not trying to change the world, but an analysis of sociology as an academic discipline that is locked into particular dynamics. Even if sociologists in mass chose to rush full speed ahead into a revolutionary activism devoid of scientific professionalism, they could be substantially cut off from the resources of the academy and disregarded as ideologues. Some critics of the current wave of public sociology worry it has already begun heading in this direction (Hausknecht 2002; Tittle 2004).

The second and most immediate context shaping the reflections in this essay is the process of graduate training. The summer 2005 issue of the American

Sociologist was dedicated precisely to this topic. Special editors of this issue, Shulman and Silver (2005), pointed out that the contributors to it broadly agreed there has been surprisingly little public discussion examining the “norms of informal professionalization” that occur as part of graduate studies in sociology. Shulman and Silver (2005: 6) also claim that “for all involved, graduate school is a filter of professional stratification in sociology, in which some students advance to more desirable rewards than others.” The reflections I offer in this essay stem from my experiences in which my desires to undertake publicly engaged scholarship came into conflict with the professional norms, standards, and ingrained goals of the sociological discipline.

### **What am I Doing?**

Sociological graduate students have three basic tasks: 1) to figure out what sociology is, 2) to figure out how to do sociology, and 3) to do some piece of sociological research. It seems like a fairly straightforward set—except for one problem, sociology does not know what sociology is. The debates over public sociology are basically a disciplinary identity crisis. There is still no clear path as to how to go about doing sociology as a public sociologist; and there are, of course, those who dismiss and resist public sociology entirely (Deflem 2004, 2007; Tittle 2004). In a discipline as diverse as sociology and with as many different methodologies and isolated sub-disciplines as sociology, this added uncertainty makes training as a graduate student all the more complicated.

The most fundamental difficulty I found in figuring out how to do sociology, however, is that there seems to be an underlying disconnect between the rhetoric of public sociology and the realities of how sociology functions as a discipline. Public sociology rhetoric creates a glimmer of hope that sociology can be about active pursuit of social change, social justice, and social engagement, but that glimmer is still at distinct odds with the fundamental nuts, bolts, and settings of the sociological machine—at least in the United States. Take for example, the most basic pragmatic question of what gets rewarded within the discipline. One of the first recommendations of the American Sociological Association’s (ASA) Task Force on the Institutionalization of Public Sociology was to suggest rewarding public sociology professionally, especially in tenure and promotion guidelines. In the task force’s 2007 draft of recommended guidelines for personnel reviews, it suggests that departments evaluate sociologists by an expanded portfolio of production including “research reports completed for, and used by, non-academic organizations; evaluation research instruments and outcomes; documentation of involvement in community-based research and educational activities; transcripts of public testimony at government policy hearings; published op-ed columns and other commentary in media outlets; or visual media substantially utilizing a candidate’s research” (ASA\_Task\_Force 2007). This sounds very promising. But as a graduate student, looking at the academic market, can I bank on it? I doubt it.

As a graduate student, I can only speak from the perspective of what I see in my own department’s hiring process. It appears to me that the simple reality of job hiring at Berkeley is that nothing comes close to the importance of candidates having

publications in the highest ranking journals of sociology. Public scholarship, such as advocacy reports written with community organizations—even if they required as great an effort in terms of time and mental energy as an academic paper may take—pale in comparison, if they register at all. I have been the primary author and coordinating researcher on community based and policy reports as a graduate student, and served as the voluntary research coordinator for a coalition advocacy organization (COHSF 2004; Noy 2003; WRAP 2006, 2008b). Because this work involved community based research reports and not academic publications, I do not think they would have much credence even in the hiring process of my own department, a self proclaimed center of public sociology—and despite the fact that one of these reports has had thousands of copies distributed and well over 20,000 downloads. Alongside this community research, I have also created works of academic sociology geared towards public concerns placed in specialty journals addressing those concerns, as well as theoretical pieces about public sociology (Noy 2007, 2008a, c, 2009a, b). But again I do not think these public sociology works would have much credence in the hiring process of my own department. Only thoroughly abstract pieces of professional sociology placed in top ranked academic journals matter.

So to the question of, what am I supposed to be doing as a graduate student, the explicit answer in the current milieu of the discipline and my department is public sociology, with rousing calls for a more just and humane world. The implicit answer is scrape my way up the professional sociological hierarchy, by devoting my energy to publication in top ranking journals through projects of professional sociology. In this implicit answer, public sociology is what you do once you have made it to the top, and are looking for new ways to enhance your power and influence in the world—as a respected sociologist. And here we get to one of the most important motivations of the swell of public sociology: the quest for relevance. Sociologists generally recognize that we are irrelevant, something that numerous commentators about public sociology have mentioned as a defense for the idea of public sociology (Beck 2005; Burawoy 2005b; Rinalducci 2007). To position public sociology as a way to assert the importance and relevance of sociology to society as a whole, is in a sense a way to try to project power from the departments of sociology into the world. Burawoy has framed this quest for power as one on behalf of civil society. He contrasts sociology as the partisan champion for civil society, with economists who represent market forces, and political scientists who defend the perspective of the state (Burawoy 2005b).

I will return to this theme of sociology as the representative of civil society below. For now, however, it is important to note that this pitting of sociologists against economists and political scientists in a grand battle for the future of humanity is more than an analysis of the intellectual foci of the different disciplines. Rather, this pitting of sociologists against economists and political scientists is at the core of the proposition of public sociology. The current irrelevance of sociology to the world is not a fact in itself, but a fact in relation to the power that these two disciplines hold in shaping policy and public attitudes. Sociologists are towered over by these two near cousin disciplines. Compared to the Jeffrey Sachs, Amartya Sen, Samuel Huntington, and Robert Putnam's of the world, sociologists—with the exception of the late Pierre Bourdieu—have few international shining stars. Perhaps the closest to

a global figure, at least in the realms of activists and social movements is Immanuel Wallerstein. And, of course, our position compared to our cousin disciplines is also reflected in wages. According to the 2006–2007 U.S. Department of Labor Occupational Outlook Handbook, the annual median salary of sociologists (\$57,870) ranked well below both economists (\$72,780) and political scientists (\$86,750) (DOL 2006). The rivalry between sociologists, economists, and political scientists which seems to pervade sociological disciplinary discussions are not simply about intellectual and theoretical questions, or about social transformation—they are as much as anything self-interested rivalries over power and money.

As a graduate student who came to sociology seeking to find ways to change the world, the public sociology wave at first seemed to be exactly what I was looking for. I was initially excited by it and sought to contribute to it (Noy 2004). Over the years of schooling, however, I have started to see this wave not as a real break from the ivory tower or from the self-referential intellectualizing of sociology, but simply another version of it. My doubts about public sociology are multiplied by my experiences specifically as a graduate student at Berkeley, a self-proclaimed center of public sociology. The reality of Berkeley sociology is that many of its faculty and students generally conceive of the place as the theoretical center of sociology. A fellow student once expressed to me that Berkeley has the big ideas and sets the theoretical tone that all the other departments of sociology painstakingly prove. This comment and the reality it represents of Berkeley's own self-image has lead me to question the underlying meanings and dynamics of the public sociology movement: Could it be that the public sociology call issuing forth from Berkeley is as much about a professional project trying to exert elite hegemony over the field and theory of sociology, as it is about a movement that will really transform the world and protect the citizens of Earth from tyranny and exploitation? Is the public sociology movement at Berkeley sincerely trying to engage in publicly useful activities, or is it just trying to define the latest and newest epistemological trend in sociology, and in doing so to promote Berkeley as a cutting edge of sociology?

### **The Description Problem**

The first obstacle to the discipline of sociology truly engaging in widespread, meaningful public work is that the type of research and writing that can really address public problems is often not rewarded by the discipline's top journals or by the academic job market. This is not to say that there are not proponents of public sociology truly committed to using sociology as a vessel for advancing positive social change. A good number of sociologists are indeed seeking to wage Gramsci's war of position in the trenches of academia (Gramsci 1971). And it is true as Burawoy points out that many sociologists tend to share progressive political values and activist ideals (Burawoy 2005b).

My own graduate cohort was a dedicated, idealistic, progressive group. In our very first semester we began a process of collectively meeting together to envision how we can change the discipline of sociology, in order to make it useful and to pursue our own dreams of changing the world. This process, however, quickly fizzled out as the time constraints of graduate student life and the pressures of

professionalization seeped in. With our required classes over, we gradually went our separate ways—myself, perhaps, more than most.

Alder and Alder describe the “splitting” of the graduate school cohort as “the first time that students could define themselves, find their calling, and seek out intellectual buddies who could help them navigate through the often troubled waters of substantive specialties and departmental politics” (Adler and Adler 2005: 16). For myself, I found that the intellectual community I needed to support and mentor me as I sought to conduct publicly engaged research was not in the walls of the academy at all. It was in the streets with organizers and homeless people; people with whom I could critically discuss strategies and tactics for developing publicly relevant, engaged, and useful research. These people were not simply my subjects—as they are for much public sociology—rather they functioned as advisors in a sort of parallel graduate school. I have spent much more time in the community offices and living classrooms of this parallel graduate school than I have on campus. I realized by the start of my second semester that my energies would be better spent working with organizations in the community than trying to envision or debate the contours of an alternative type of sociology. I realized that there is a big difference between studying social change and doing social change; and there is a difference between the type of research that sociologists do and the research that social movement or community based organizations do. I do not think that these differences can be reconciled easily.

One crucial problem is the disdain that sociology as a discipline has for description. The de facto goal of sociology is not to examine the world and help to make it more clear and comprehensible—rather the goal of sociology is to generate explanatory theories, even if those theories make the world less comprehensible to people seeking to act in the world. A social science professor from Cambridge I recently met explained to me (I am paraphrasing from memory here), ‘The purpose of academics is to confuse people and create obfuscating writings, so that they can keep a job for themselves and keep others out. Most tenured faculty in the social sciences and humanities who are genuine about what they are doing know this privately.’

I first stumbled across the disdain of sociologists for explanatory description during my second year in graduate school. I had conducted my master’s research in conjunction with homeless community organizations who were seeking to understand their political reality better. The master’s research sought to use sociological tools to create network mappings and political data which would allow organizations to act more strategically in their efforts to address homelessness. The project was set up primarily to answer their real world questions, rather than sociological theoretical questions. The time came, however, when I needed to put together a committee for my master’s thesis beyond my primary advisor. So I went knocking on doors, expecting that I would receive warm welcome from the public sociologists of Berkeley. My first stop was with a faculty member, who I guessed would be very receptive to my project because of their own projection as a public sociologist. I showed this faculty member some of the data and results of my research. This person looked it over and then told me that they could see how the research would be incredibly useful for people and organizations on the ground, and how it could help them to understand the context

of their social world. However, this faculty member went on to say, this research tells us nothing sociologically.

I left the office with my head spinning. I found different faculty members for my committee, who were indeed incredibly supportive. But I remembered this comment. It was not until a few years later that I really understood it. I had finished my research and used it extensively in workshops with policy makers and community organizations, indeed to help them understand their world better using the tools of sociology. As I began to shape this research into substantive sociological journal articles, it became clear to me that my findings were descriptive. They just used already established sociological concepts to understand a particular case—and as such, looking from the vantage point of the sociological establishment, added nothing new to sociological literature. My research took sociological tools and theories and used them to help a specific public group to understand their world. It was classic public sociology.

In the current milieu of sociology I was able to write and publish articles reflecting on this research as an act of public sociology and trying to generalize it as a basic approach to public sociology (Noy 2007, 2008b). However, the actual substance of the research and its findings was too descriptive to count as a contribution to the sociological literature. To make it something resembling acceptable to the discipline, required that I reformulate the substantive research through a series of abstract intellectual contortions, which basically made it applicable to a particular theoretical debate in sociology, and meaningless to the original public context and need it served. Indeed through the review process of top ranked sociology journals the article was transformed into something that took on components which verged on ridiculously arcane. And yet it was this framing and reframing of the article to address a convoluted dance of unnecessary theoretical distinctions that allowed it to finally pass through review in a well regarded journal (Noy 2009c).

Of course, the abstract disciplinary work of sociologists can indeed be very important—even from the public perspective. Was it not this type of abstract variable creation and testing which lead to Putnam's (2000) immensely popular and influential theories on social capital? But more broadly, the point here is that there still remains a large disconnect between the type of work which sociologists reward in reality, and the type of intellectual orientation which the public sociology movement is encouraging graduate students to pursue. Perhaps one of my favorite journal reviews epitomizing this contradiction came in the form of a rejection letter from the editor of a top sociological journal in which the editor explained to me that while my work was “eminently readable and interesting,” it did not belong in a sociology journal, but in the *New Yorker*.

Sociology remains at its core a self-referential discipline. Sociology is produced by looking at a particular sociological literature and then asking a question which can either 1) make an argument with some theory in the literature, 2) fill in a gap in the literature, 3) show how a different set of sociological literature can bring insights into this literature, or 4) try to change the attention of the literature. All of this is self-referential. To not self-reference within the discipline is to be un-academic. And to use sociological theories to simply examine the world and try to understand a particular piece of the world in more detail, is dismissed as journalism. Sociology

has fallen deeply prey to what Shapin calls hyper-professionalism. Shapin (2005: 238) defines hyper-professionalism as “a disease whose symptoms include self-referentiality, self-absorption, and a narrowing of intellectual focus.”

Even much of the recent writings theorizing public sociology have been hyper-theoretical texts, written in abstract, self-referential terms—precisely the approach to scholarship which makes sociology so insular. If we really want to have public impact with our work, however, we cannot start with sociological literature as the basis for asking our questions. Rather we must start by asking what questions are important to particular publics and how can we use sociological tools to solve them. Or, as I have argued elsewhere, if we are to truly be counterhegemonic agents, we should begin by directly working with community organizations and social movements to use our research skills on behalf of the questions and agendas they have (Noy 2007).

### **Who are we Accountable to?**

This brings us to Burawoy’s idea of sociology as partisan of civil society (Burawoy 2005b). As a graduate student at Berkeley, I have been involved in a series of research partnerships with community organizations developing both internal and external research for them (BOSS 2008; COHSF 2004; Noy 2003; WRAP 2006, 2008a, b). This happened not through any program offered by the department, but through the connections I developed during years of involvement with radical social movements in the San Francisco bay area prior to enrolling in graduate school. Despite my work as a sociologist engaged with social movements, however, I still find many of Deflem’s criticisms of public sociology insightful (Deflem 2007). Like Deflem, I also am skeptical of the move to have sociologists constitute a coherent political block which should have a political intention or agenda of its own. This is not because like Deflem, I have a particular dislike for the radical vision of sociological Marxism which underlies Burawoy’s call for public sociology. Rather, my hesitance is that I am not certain whether sociology as a discipline has a membership base which could constitute a radical movement. Sociologists are professionals, and collectively our material and economic interests boil down to things like how to increase salaries, how to expand sociology departments in universities, how to increase likelihood of sociology degrees being valued in government and industry workplaces. Sociology professional associations, like ASA, undertake many of these tasks already as part of their career and professional advocacy programs.

It is true that a sub-group of sociologists—maybe even the majority—form a critical intellectual community seeking to envision ways of moving towards a more just, humane, and ecologically sane world. But my experience working with grassroots homeless movements provides me with a skeptical distrust of professionals seeking to represent the interests of poor and marginalized people. One unfortunate result of this arrangement can be what are often referred to on the streets as “poverty pimps”—organizations or individuals who make their living by analyzing, categorizing, managing, or writing about poor people. One of the most direct solutions to this problem, as I mentioned above, is developing our research



questions in response to the needs of community based organizations. Rather than being the “voice of the voiceless” or the “spokesperson for civil society,” we could use our skills to help the voiceless speak for themselves. This, however, returns us again to the dilemmas of the contradictions between public sociology as an ideal and what is valued as sociological work within the discipline.

Even within public sociology discourse, it seems that sociologists will be most rewarded when they can convince publics to adopt the sociologist’s own concepts and statements, rather than when the sociologist helps publics to articulate the public’s own analysis. As Burawoy (2005a: 55) portrays public sociology in the context of graduate training, it is about replacing “the accumulation of academic capital for other forms of recognition” and about converting “academic capital into political capital.” From this angle, public sociology is about exerting power over the world as expert professionals, rather than about building the power of marginalized groups. Moreover, even while describing public sociology in this way, Burawoy acknowledges that there is some truth to the assertion that graduate students “will not get jobs if they design their dissertations to reach publics” (Burawoy 2005a).

Given these deep-set tendencies within the logic of sociological production and the institution of sociology, creating a sociology that significantly works to transform the world will be a major struggle. As a graduate student interested in social change, I must ask myself, would I rather spend my time struggling to change sociology so that sociology can then struggle to change the world? Or should I seek employment in an NGO, government agency, business, or social venture that is already, directly actively seeking to change the world? Or if I want to remain an academic, why should I even bother to stay within the discipline of sociology, when there are plenty of applied, pragmatic, social change oriented majors like Peace Studies, Community Studies, or even professional schools of Urban Planning and Public Policy where I can work with committed students looking to build skills to use in solving real world problems?

Such questions, especially questions about leaving academia, are considered by many students to be taboo in my department. While my own advisors have been incredibly supportive and open-minded about whatever future I may choose for myself, it is commonly believed amongst students that you should never tell professors that you may not want to be an academic, because it could potentially ruin your relationship with them. Yet, as Nichols points out, the majority of job opportunities for graduates of academic sociology programs already exist outside of the academy (Nichols 2005a). Perhaps then, the direction of departments interested in engaged sociology should be to foster questions about leaving academic sociology, to encourage students to plan careers outside of sociology, and then to provide training tracks for graduate students wishing to engage in work outside of the academy. In this way trained sociologists could bring the skills, techniques, and concepts of the discipline to work in the real world in organizations whose bottom lines involve political or economic goals, rather than the symbolic status goals and “academic capital” which is the primary aim of departments of sociology (Burawoy 2005a).

Training public sociologists to take careers outside of the academy could involve preparing them for positions in government, corporations, social movements, non-profits, and non-academic research centers. It is not important that they take one

partisan side or another in their job choice, only that they are able to make use of sociological knowledge in the real world. Ironically, for sociologists to be successful in these endeavors, insuring a clear, strong, rigorous professional sociology along with real world career preparation may be a much more productive use of energy than waging an internal battle for a public sociology. At the same time, building up the type of dense networks of interconnection that would occur if sociology departments actively promoted careers and career training outside of the discipline would probably do more to change professional sociology, than any theorization about what public sociology should be.

At the core of the academy are the processes of producing knowledge and teaching knowledge. Academic employment combines those two tasks with service to committees in one's department, university, and discipline. Rather than focusing on creating a "public sociology" out of this core, we might be better off creating clear and meaningful professional sociological knowledge, and then on fostering the skills of people trained in sociology to use that knowledge in the world.

## Conclusion

One of the most notable aspects I have found in different occasions where I transformed my community based research into sociologically acceptable academic articles, is how the research went from relatively interesting and exciting to most people involved in the issues I addressed, to something that was totally obscure to them. As the director of a community organization with whom I have conferred over these articles, often tells me, "Send me a copy when you write it in English." This may have been a result of my own lack of skill as a writer, but I think it is also a result of the necessary framing of the research in terms of an obscure sociological literature.

Again, this is about self-reference. What is perhaps most ironic about this self-referencing process in sociological production is how frequently sociological framings and citations are tacked onto projects in the aftermath of the research. How many times are there papers in search of a framing or a hook? I have seen among myself and my peers, findings reframed and citations added, not out of devotion to truth, much less out of public concern, but simply in order to fit into a particular journal's scope or to stroke the ego of a potential reviewer. Too often the underlying driver of this process is the publication game, not some lofty intellectual dialogue.

Like many proponents of public sociology, I do agree that it would be good to have a sociology which addresses more useful questions clearly related to pressing concerns in the world. Perhaps *Contexts* magazine which was indeed stationed at Berkeley during part of my graduate career is a good example of this. Like many proponents of public sociology, I also believe we need to be connecting our work as sociologists with actors in the real world to insure its relevance to them; as well as with academics of other disciplines, as part of issue focused transdisciplinary research projects. However, I believe that making a relevant sociology is a much different task than a public sociological program in which sociology sets out to be the mover and savior of a lost world (Burawoy 2004).

What I envision is a more humble project in which a clear and comprehensible professional sociology pays greater attention to the needs, concerns, and questions of real world actors. At the same time, such a humble project would require a more fundamental restructuring of what sociology is and the type of knowledge it produces than is evidenced by the current abstract discourse on public sociology. Two key dimensions of this I have described in this essay are a greater openness to descriptive work, as well as more support for graduate students to pursue careers outside of sociology.

Despite all the talk of public sociology and despite the move by some departments to try to promote it, the primary disciplining forces of sociology have not substantially shifted to make the public sociology rhetoric a reality. Little has changed for the criterion of hiring in the hierarchical labor market, or as Burris (2004) calls it, the academic caste system. As a graduate student, looking from within one of the self-proclaimed centers of public sociology and an elite location of the academic caste system, the talk of public sociology at Berkeley often seems to me like false advertisement. I do not doubt the sincerity of many of those who propose public sociology. I doubt both the impact that proposition has had, and the capability of the discipline and department to take the real stretches needed to make itself publically relevant and driven—especially given the constraining forces and pressures placed on sociology as part of a broader field of academic disciplines.

When I first chose to attend school at Berkeley, I did so because I was told it was a center of publicly relevant, engaged sociology. I quickly came to see that Berkeley relishes its self-image as the elite of sociological theory and its self-perception as the premier trendsetting center of intellectual production, much more than it does public sociological engagement. The self image of Berkeley is evinced by its internet home page which currently has only two sentences of text: “The Berkeley Sociology Department is an extraordinary center of scholarly production and education. It has the highest concentration of sheer intellectual firepower of any sociology department in the world.”

I found that the public sociology movement at Berkeley is just another extension of its theoretical emphasis—more about an epistemological, theoretical argument of what sociology can be than it is about developing tactics of real world engagement. After years of practicing engaged sociology, I have come to the conclusion that we should drop the whole terminology of public sociology. Discussions of engaged sociological research must move beyond abstract theorization which has made up much of the public sociology literature and focus instead on best practices. Sociologists interested in public engagement should work primarily on cataloguing and practical evaluation of engaged research tactics and community oriented teaching strategies. And they should focus more on creating relationships in the community than in creating divisions amongst sociologists. Unfortunately, the public sociology movement has already contributed to the solidification of rival intellectual camps in the discipline. It has created a battle waged by sociologists with other sociologists about the meaning of sociology. It is drawing us deeper into a self-referential quagmire.

Let us remember, however, that this is not because of malign individuals, but because of the dynamics of sociology as a discipline within the broader context of

the academic field. None of the analysis offered here is meant to discredit any sincerity in the public sociology movement. Moreover, I am not trying to deny the importance and success of a good number of academics engaged in tireless community research and community organizing work with students. Indeed, the public sociology movement has made their work more visible and legitimate—which it should be. Rather, I am claiming that the dynamics of the sociological discipline, especially as I experienced it at Berkeley, makes the type of work they do very difficult, with extraordinarily high time demands.

Moreover, I think we should drop the whole terminology of “public sociology” because it carries an inherent moral critique of “professional sociologists” as uncaring. Since the first year of my graduate career at Berkeley there are two main faculty members with whom I have primarily worked. One fits the bill of “professional sociologist;” the other is a sociologist who is highly accomplished in both professional scholarly work and in conducting engaged research with on the ground actors. Both of them have been incredibly helpful, supportive, and caring. Both supported me emotionally and intellectually in conducting research with homeless organizations. Both are friends who made possible the work I did in service of society. The care they gave me as a student transcended the boundary of public and professional sociology.

To be honest, a more important category in the lives of graduate students is cruel sociologists versus kind sociologists. When it comes to engaging in the type of community research I did, I think it would be much better to have as an advisor a kind professional sociologist willing to support me to follow my heart, than a demanding and cruel public sociologist trying to shape me into their image. A cruel public sociologist would only add to the stress and time demands of an already heavy work load of simultaneous academic and community engagement.

But even this is an unfair dichotomy. Ultimately, I believe that for sociology to become useful for the world, rather than focusing on carving out boundaries and distinctions within the discipline, sociologists ought to be trying to transcend them. This means transcending both the academic caste system across departments, and the systems of false separation which we weave in order to differentiate into our own fields of specialization as scholars. It means transcending even the divisions which separates sociology from other social and physical sciences, and which separates science from spirituality. Ultimately, we must learn to engage as transdisciplinary researchers in collaboration with community actors in order to create and apply holistic knowledge on behalf of global well-being. The public sociology wave which I have experienced over the last 6 years at Berkeley does not get us any closer to this. Instead, it further divides us, keeps us caught up in irrelevant self-referential theoretical debates, reinforces divisions amongst sociologists, and creates a rhetoric about sociology that is at odds with the reality of the discipline. It is an attempt to dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools.

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