

## Why Public Sociology?

As sociologists we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation: the world's problems require a sociological imagination for their solution but that imagination is losing ground as an academic discipline and as public knowledge. The struggle for public sociology is both an expression and an answer to this paradox.

What are the issues of today? Simply put the survival of the human race. As we plunder nature – whether it be land, water or air – for profit so we not only jeopardize long term planetary existence (global warming, toxic waste, pollution of every sort), but displace enormous populations, dispossessing them of access to their means of existence, and thereby creating enormous reservoirs of labor. Wage labor becomes the privilege of ever fewer, themselves subject to ever greater insecurity. Instead of a proletariat we create an expanding, frightened precariat, rising into ever higher rungs of the socio-economic ladder. Unable to find consumers for the goods and services it produces, capitalism extends credit to all and sundry – individuals (mortgages, credit), communities (micro-finance), nations (structural adjustment loans) – but when payments can no longer be postponed, the bubble bursts, bankruptcy follows upon bankruptcy and financial crises ensue, and ever more people are expelled onto the streets.

The commodifications of nature, labor and money are intimately related to one another, but in different ways in different countries. As sociologist we need to map out the interwoven patterns of market intensification and expansion. But each commodification is also connected to a more recent commodification, the commodification of knowledge. The extension of the market turns the university into a commercial enterprise, turning a public good into a private good. To finance itself the university sells the knowledge it produces, building close ties to corporations (cheap research) and the state (propaganda), charging for the dissemination and certification of knowledge (student fees), begging for funds from the rich and super-rich in exchange for symbolic capital. In some places the university becomes a shadow of its former self or simply withers away. The survival of disciplines within the university increasingly depends on their market value whether they render useful research for industry, ideology for the state or jobs for students. As the membrane separating the university and society becomes thinner academics can no longer assume autonomy, so we have to decide whose side we are on, whose values we support.

Within the social sciences, economics – conventionally neoclassical but with notable dissenters – develops the technologies for new markets while providing the ideology that justifies the destruction of the planet. Political science, again with notable dissenters, is its accomplice, establishing the conditions of market expansion while contracting the meaning of politics, separating it from power, dispossessing people of control over their own lives. These are the social sciences that can make claims to pay their way -- unlike sociology whose long-standing defense of civil society against market fundamentalism and state despotism is increasingly out of favor with the dominant forces in society.

There are states – fewer and fewer – that seek to contain the destructiveness of the economic tsunami, and even fewer that are successful. They include the welfare states of Northern Europe which still recognize the social dimension of problems and policies. Here sociological

perspectives have legitimacy, particularly as a form of policy science. There are other states that erect barricades against the market, holding it at bay through authoritarian means. Here sociology's defense of an open civil society is seen as politically threatening and sociology's existence is precarious, as it is easily labeled an enemy of the state. Whether sociology survives at the national level will determine its survival at the global level – the level most critical to saving the planet for human habitation. A global sociology, not a false universalism, not a hegemonic projection of a singular, particular sociology, has to be our goal.

What is to be done? Sociology cannot insulate itself within the academy watching its support dwindle, but must advance into the public sphere and there excite debate about the direction of society, educate citizenry about the dangers of market commodification and political rationalization. This can be done in two ways – as a traditional public sociology which uses various media – print, audio and visual – to stimulate conversation. This is never easy. Often, journalists have neither the patience nor the interest in critical commentary. Independent opinion pages are limited in space and readership. Television and radio are either carefully monitored or subject to arbitrary market criteria. Occasionally, a sociology text that links personal troubles to social issues captures the public imagination. Social media do provide an alternative outlet, but the competition is relentless, and so we have to be innovative in attracting attention. Whatever the challenges, even as a professional discipline, we cannot abandon the public sphere to conglomerate sponsors or to political propaganda.

There is a second way forward – organic public sociology. Here there is an unmediated relation between sociologists and their publics that can be social movements, social organizations, local communities. The publics concerned are active rather than passive, thick rather than thin, narrow rather than broad, counter rather than mainstream. Like traditional public sociology, organic public sociology requires enormous patience, eliciting the trust of others, resisting pressures to sacrifice intellectual autonomy, but also refusing a vanguardist role that condemns the subaltern voice to oblivion. Organic and traditional public sociologies are not mutual exclusive but complementary.

Public sociology has perhaps its greatest and most enduring potential in the classroom where most of us spend most of our professional lives. Indeed, just as public sociology is a form of teaching – in which the teachers and are also the taught – so teaching can be a form of public sociology. It calls upon us to see students as a public with whom we can engage traditionally or organically, raising to a sociological plane their understanding of themselves and their connection to others.

Public sociology cannot be carried out in isolation. It has to be a conversation among sociologists about their conversation with publics, which are themselves involved in their own conversation. The lone public sociologist quickly gives up the mission, and retreats into cynicism or martyrdom. A collective esprit de corps is all the more necessary where public sociology is a matter of life and death as it has been in countries of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and even under the by-gone Soviet order. It requires collective support, collective imagination, and collective organization. It cannot be a marginal moment of our discipline but integral to its very being, especially as the university is decisively inside society, buffeted by social, political and economic forces.

Very different from political activism, public sociology is accountable to the field of professional sociology, to its scientific norms and its accumulating body of research. As a discipline sociology takes the standpoint of civil society (with all its warts), locating lived experience within its broader macro determinations, specifically state and economy – and to this scientific body of knowledge public sociology must be accountable. This is the body of knowledge that has to be translated into a language accessible for broader publics. Critical sociology is important in steering professional knowledge toward engagement with public issues, and its independence has, therefore, to be ferociously guarded.

Political activism, on the other hand, is accountable to the political field, to the logic of its institutions – legislatures, assemblies, parties, laws, etc. The trouble begins when the fields of the academic discipline and of politics overlap or in the worst case scenario when the latter envelopes the former. Here, independent of the will of the sociologist, public sociology becomes political activism or is defined as such by the state. Here the struggle becomes one of carving out an arena of professional and critical sociology independent of the political field, perhaps an underworld of dissidents, or daring the state to politicize scientific activity and thereby risking its own legitimacy. Without connection to a thriving professional sociology, public sociology is a lame duck.

Public sociology draws strength and inspiration from social movements. They are an expression of and a demand for a new sociology -- propelled by an enduring commitment to values of freedom, equality, justice but increasingly concerned with human survival in the face of the Third World War declared by markets and state on society.