

Going public with Polanyi in the era of Trump*

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What are the implications of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (1944) for public sociology in the era of Trump? This question calls for defining the era of Trump, the meaning of public sociology and how *The Great Transformation* can connect the two.

Traditional public sociology in the era of Trump

What should we mean by the 'Era of Trump'? One might think of the era of Trump as the era created by Trump and his endeavor to 'Make America Great Again' and put 'America First.' To be sure, as a white supremacist in the White House, he may have galvanized white nationalist movements. But such movements have always existed, although not necessarily encouraged by the highest levels of power. Still, President Obama, as an African American in the White House, did as much to stimulate collective racism, if unintentionally. Trump's attempt to subvert the rule of law, his pretensions to dictatorship and his isolationist foreign policies may have created a certain political turbulence, but so far, he has been unsuccessful in shaping the world according to his own image. Indeed, he has galvanized opposition into defining and defending liberal democracy and the rule of law.

Trump is not as unique as he thinks; he's just head of an imperial power that strides the world like a colossus. He is a member of an increasing band of right-wing nationalist leaders: Putin in Russia, Orban in Hungary, Kaczynski in Poland, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Duterte in the Philippines, Erdogan in Turkey, Sisi in Egypt, Xi in China, Netanyahu in Israel, Modi in India, Johnson in Britain and the list goes on. While some have been around for a decade or more, others are new. These regimes have their national specificities, varying in their authoritarian propensities from outright dictatorship to illiberal democracy to discursive manipulation. They may control the media – visual, print and digital – and limit freedom of expression that can interfere with the autonomy of the university but also deepen self-censorship. In many countries this has grave implications for the very possibility of public sociology. As the Russian sociologist Elena Zdravomyslova once said of her own country: public sociology is the public defense of professional sociology.

Another feature of the Trump era is the political use of social media. President Trump has turned his twitter feed – with its 63 million followers behind former President Obama's

108 million followers – into rule by fiat through spurious claims and abrupt reversals that largely serve to stoke support and provoke opposition – that is, polarize politics. More broadly, we can say that social media does affect public sociology, but not quite as one might expect. As more sociologists use social media in disseminating their research, Kieran Healy (2017) notes that sociologists are increasingly writing *in public*, but, he asks, who is listening? There may be more intense communication among sociologists themselves, but this is not necessarily transmitted beyond the discipline. Social media tends to consolidate fragmented publics of like-minded believers, which is a barrier to transmitting research beyond a narrow band of converts. Sociologists deceive themselves in thinking that digital media give them access to publics. They, therefore, don't develop the art of public dissemination painstakingly cultivated by Herbert Gans, Bob Blauner, Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Robert Bellah, Matthew Desmond, Erving and Alice Goffman, Arlie Hochschild and many others who had to work with the printed page.¹

Just looking at keyword searches in the *New York Times*, Healy shows the marginality of sociology's presence, less than the competing disciplines of psychology and political science and, of course, much less than economics. In a recent article, Hallet, Stapleton, and Sauder (2019) trace references to seven social science ideas over the last 30 years in 12 major US newspapers. For all the fascinating variation they analyze, the most significant finding is the miniscule media presence, both of social science in general and of sociology in particular. While the public face of US sociology, *Contexts Magazine*, may enable us to learn what fellow sociologists are up to, is it spreading the word beyond academia? Even when we think we are doing public sociology, are we but talking to ourselves in public? We need to make sure we are actually talking to publics beyond the academy.

So far I've only considered one type of public sociology, mediated public sociology, or what I call *traditional public sociology* that is registered through the media, digital or print. In this paper, I will turn to a different form of public sociology, *organic public sociology*, OPS for short, in which publics and sociologists face each other in an *unmediated* way. Here we definitely reach a public, one that is thick rather than thin, active rather than passive, narrow rather than broad, homogeneous rather than heterogeneous, often oppositional rather than mainstream. Understanding the potential of OPS requires specifying the contemporary political and social context within which we engage publics and their discontents. Enter Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*.

Commodification and the counter-movement

Why is *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944, useful in thinking through the potential of OPS? First, it offers a way to connect the lived experience, OPS engages, to, on the one side, its source in national and global political economy and, on the other side, to the social movements it generates. Second, Polanyi is concerned with the political consequences of market fundamentalism. He argues that unregulated markets tend to destroy society, which reacts politically in self-defense, erecting regimes of regulation: from social democracy and the New Deal to Stalinism and Fascism. In other words, he prefigures responses to marketization from both the Right and the Left. While *The Great Transformation* may be a canonical work with deep resonances to the present world conjuncture, resonance is not enough. *The Great Transformation* requires reconstruction.

Polanyi thought that humanity would never again experiment with an intervention so dangerous as market utopianism. Well, he was wrong, largely because market fundamentalism is an effective treatment to save capitalism from itself, temporarily putting off recurrent crises of overproduction and profitability (Streeck 2014). For 50 years we have been witnessing a third wave of marketization, usually called neoliberalism, driven by such self-assured political leaders,

Reagan, Thatcher and Pinochet; justified by economists in the Hayekian tradition; energized by the collapse of communism and accelerated by the economic recession of 2008. This third-wave marketization shows no sign of abating even though it has generated diverse reactions from social movements and political regimes.

Polanyi examines the first wave of marketization in 19th-century England as a process of commodification of factors of production – labor, land and money. He calls them fictitious commodities – entities, he says, that were never ‘intended’ to be subject to unregulated market exchange. There is, indeed, a profound truth here that we too easily miss in a world where commodification is taken for granted. We have come to assume that labor power exists to be bought and sold. Indeed, we are desperate to sell our labor power even if it so often diminishes us. We too easily forget that labor is about human flourishing as well as human survival. We have come to assume land, too, is there to be bought and sold, even as its price soars, forcing so many to scramble for a plot to keep a roof over our heads. We forget that land was once the foundation of community. We take for granted that money is to be bought and loaned at an interest, and that credit becomes debt. Finance capital, the making of money from money on a gigantic scale, despite all the distortions it brings, is like the weather, part of our surroundings, most of its machinations entirely invisible to the population it subjugates. Governments, at least powerful ones, don’t worry about debt financing even though it destroys weaker countries. And, as individuals, we love our credit cards. We forget that money was simply supposed to facilitate exchange rather than a vehicle for helping to destroy labor and nature.

The violation of the essential purpose of the fictitious commodity has the potential to arouse deep moral outrage if it has not been normalized. The outrage becomes palpable when we discover commodification extending to new entities, whether knowingly (body organs) or unknowingly (personal data). Indeed, we should extend the list of fictitious commodities to include knowledge that once was shared as a public good, but now is being extracted as ‘behavioral surplus,’ as Shoshanna Zuboff (2019) calls it, via our digital extensions and then converted into a private good sold to corporations, governments and parties that become a power over us.

In addition to the essentialist conception, there are two other ways to approach fictitious commodities. The first is what I call a *structural* conception in which the pursuit of exchange value leads to the destruction of use value. The unregulated commodification of labor power means that the laborer is so abused and exploited that wages fall below the level of human replenishment. And as Silvia Federici (2004) has shown, the commodification of labor power also required the subjugation of women within the household, again limiting their use value. Nancy Fraser (2013) has elaborated this ‘social reproduction’ perspective by showing how the commodification of labor power leads women to enter the labor market, thereby creating a care deficit. The same may be said of land in which unregulated commodification confines use value to the point of waste, as in land erosion, desertification and toxification (Sassen 2014). Money, too, when subject to unregulated commodification loses its use value, as in the post-Soviet Russia when the value of the ruble became so erratic that barter relations were restored. In the same way, the commodification of knowledge means producing it for narrow interests, thereby losing its public character.

Taken to its limit, commodification of fictitious commodities leads from limited use value to exhaustion and destruction – that is, the commodity becomes waste, a process I call *ex-commodification*. Labor power becomes redundant, waste, cast out into the reserve army of labor. Land becomes so despoiled as to be useless or dangerous, and in extreme cases, even money can become worthless. And when knowledge is so targeted to specific ends, it is no longer cumulative as in relatively autonomous research programs, no longer available in the public arena, no longer subject to conventional tests of truth. The university as an engine of knowledge

production loses its value, degrees are increasingly worthless, signifying credentials without content.

Ex-commodification can generate its own protests, but they are often difficult to organize because they are based on degradation and waste. It's difficult but not impossible to mount protest against unemployment and land destruction. Protest has to take on novel forms. Thus, Alex Barnard (2016) describes the Freegan Movement in New York as one that publicly protested in rather dramatic fashion the systemic overproduction of food that every day loaded up restaurants, bakeries, supermarkets. In their public rituals, Freegans showed how it was possible to live off capitalism's excrement, until access was forcibly prevented.

In addition to the essentialist and structural concepts of the fictitious commodity, there is a third notion of fictitious commodity, what I call the *genetic concept*. Polanyi does not emphasize enough what is entailed in the production of the fictitious commodity. He writes of the English enclosure acts that denied peasants access to crucial means of subsistence, but he presents this in gradualist or evolutionary terms. One of the most significant developments in political economy during this period of third-wave marketization draws on Marx's idea of primitive accumulation, but instead of confining it to the genesis of capitalism, it is viewed as a perpetual feature of capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg (1968 [1913]) was the first to make this central to her theory of capitalist accumulation, leading capitalism to search out geographically new markets that would eventually be exhausted. It turns out she had a limited view of what could be commodified. David Harvey (2003) elaborates the idea, calling it accumulation through dispossession, Klaus Dörre, Lessenich, and Rosa (2015) calls it *landnahme*, Saskia Sassen (2014) sees the same process as 'expulsions.' A more neutral concept is 'disembedding,' separating land, labor, money and knowledge from the social relations in which they are embedded so that they can be commodified. This is often a violent process that elicits strong protest, the prototype being peasant protest against land dispossession. But it doesn't have to be violent; the appropriation of personal data through our enthusiastic participation in digital worlds is silent and invisible. If dispossession is so widespread and occurring in such different modalities, we need to develop what Mike Levien (2018) calls *regimes of dispossession*, the mode of dispossession.

Democracy and capitalism

In his account of 19th-century Britain, Polanyi largely focuses on how the commodification of labor power gives rise to a succession of social movements that seek to repair a ravaged society – the factory movement that sought to regulate the length of the working day, the development of collective control of production through cooperatives, the building of self-organized communities such as Owenism, the advance of trade unions, the rise of the Chartist movement for political rights and eventually, the appearance of the Labor Party. We have proposed more elaborated and nuanced notions of the fictitious commodity – essentialist, structural and genetic – to account for these reactive social movements.

When it comes to the 20th century, however, Polanyi offers a different response to what we might call second-wave marketization that takes off after World War I. He traces the development of state regulation of the market, but curiously, without much attention to popular movements (Dale and Desan 2019). The dialectic of commodification and counter-movement now turns into the dialectic of capitalism and democracy. There are two possible outcomes: either capitalism overrules democracy and we get some form of 'fascism' or the opposite, democracy overrules capitalism and we get some form of 'socialism.' What Polanyi failed to anticipate was a compromise equilibrium between capitalism and democracy that was sustained in advanced

capitalist countries for those three glorious decades after World War Two. We have to understand first, why Polanyi didn't anticipate this great reconciliation and, second, why it is now unraveling, so that his original diagnosis becomes ever more pertinent.

The first step is to recognize the significance of Polanyi's shift from *exploitation* to *commodification*, the shift from the sphere of production to the sphere of exchange, from the labor process to the market. Marx's theory of class formation rested on the idea of the dependence of capital on labor even as and because it was exploited. Although the working class is subject to degradation, despotism and homogenization within the productive process, capital is still dependent upon it for the realization of profit. The working class has leverage with capital, so that the withdrawal of labor threatens the survival of capitalism. Even if individual capitalists don't recognize that their future lies with compromise, the state enforced such compromises for the sake of the survival of the capitalist order. Indeed, an argument can be made that through its organization, the working class forced the state to regulate capitalism – in other words, the working class was not the 'grave digger' but the 'savior' of capitalism.

Today, the working class has lost its leverage with capital. The shoe is now on the other foot, as labor becomes ever more dependent on capital, making concessions to capital, fearing redundancy. This is the meaning of Guy Standing's (2011) shift from proletariat to precariat – labor power that had secured certain guarantees through de-commodification has been re-commodified and then ex-commodified. At least in the United States, with the exception of some public sector workers, such as teachers, labor is in retreat. As in other countries, strikes have all but disappeared and are too easily turned into lockouts. Where there have been labor struggles, it is the commodification of labor power that has driven them, as in local political struggles for a living wage. Contestation in the workplace has moved to wider struggles for de-commodification.

The empowerment of capital and the disempowerment of labor, aided and abetted by an offensive from the state, have weakened liberal democracy as a vehicle of redistribution. The dominated classes had been drawn into democratic politics because of the possibility of advancing their material interests (Przeworski 1985). When that possibility evaporates and democracy is hijacked by capital to advance its short-term interests, then democracy becomes a vehicle of upward redistribution, what Streeck (2016) calls oligarchic redistribution. Struggles from below move, therefore, from parliamentary politics to the extra-parliamentary terrain, where positions condense around Left and Right populisms. Political parties are not irrelevant, but themselves become terrains of contest between a bureaucratic consensus politics-as-usual that had conventionally moved toward the center and a politics rooted in social movements that move in opposite directions.

Chantal Mouffe (2018), Nancy Fraser (2019) and others recognize the importance of fighting Right Populism with Left Populism through the appeal to some abstract radical democracy, but they offer an incomplete analysis of the material forces driving these populisms – namely, the forces of commodification. Whereas the Marxian focus on exploitation led to an imagined working class unity, the Polanyian focus on commodification of nature, money, labor and knowledge leads to the fragmentation of struggles. Their unity lies in their origins in third-wave marketization, but that is an elusive unity often invisible to participants. Once one leaves exploitation behind and the immediate threat becomes commodification – whether this be to do with labor, education, housing, the environment, health and so on – any idea of solidarity is difficult to sustain. The divisions consolidate themselves around two distinct politics, those who focus on the vertical direction against the class power behind re-commodification and those who suffer ex-commodification and focus resentment on the invasion 'outsiders' – the so-called great replacement.

The challenge of third-wave marketization

So far we have pointed to the centrality of fictitious commodities, especially labor power, in Polanyi's account of local counter-movements to first-wave marketization in 19th-century England, movements that would finally lodge themselves in the state that set limits on capital. In the second wave, the commodification of money in the form of the gold standard led states to withdraw into autarchic regulation of commodification. It was now the tension between democracy and capitalism that shaped the counter-movement, understood as forms of state regulation that ranged from Stalinism and fascism to the New Deal.

I have argued that third-wave marketization has led to the deepening and widening of commodification of money in the development of finance capital, of labor in the development of a precariat, of nature (land, air, water) in the impending ecological catastrophe and of knowledge in the form of surveillance capitalism. While there are reactions at the local and national level, in the final instance, third-wave capitalism will be contained only at the global level.

Whether any such global counter-movement will be successful is still an open question. The autarchic responses of the Trump era – at best, second-wave responses to third-wave marketization – are not promising. Failure to move toward global solutions could lead to the sort of cumulative decay anticipated by Wolfgang Streeck (2016), although his deeply depressing scenario of anomie – the collapse of system integration and reliance on ad hoc micro-processes of social integration – reminds me more of the interregnum of the 1990s in Russia after the post-Soviet collapse or aspects of post-apartheid South Africa or Mona Abaza's (forthcoming) descriptions of Cairo after the January Revolution. Such states of anomie can easily end up in the imposition of dictatorial rule as they have in Russia and Egypt. At the same time, in a Polanyian vein, if there were to be a successful global counter-movement, it is as likely to be reactionary as progressive, let alone democratic socialist.

In this context, what should we do as sociologists? Undoubtedly, there is much to do within the academy, persuading one's colleagues and one's students of the dire circumstances to which we may be headed, questioning the misguided economics that sees the problem as the over-regulation of the market rather than *laissez-faire* commodification. Alternatively, we can move out into society armed with a neo-Polanyian vision and engage specific publics that are wrestling with commodification, what I have called organic public sociology. I will consider two types: one aimed at Right Populism that I call an empathic public sociology, here represented by Arlie Hochschild's engagement with Tea Party followers in Louisiana, and the other aimed at Left Populism that I call affirmative public sociology, here represented by Erik Wright's engagement with activists stemming the tide of commodification.

Hochschild's empathic public sociology

Arlie Hochschild, author of such classic works on commodification as *The Managed Heart*, *The Outsourced Self* and *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, spent five years in deep conversation with Tea Party followers in Louisiana. She began her research in 2011 at the end of the first Obama administration and ended her research in 2016 when Trump became the Republican candidate for president. Her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, published in 2016, just before the election of Trump, garnered a huge audience at home and abroad, making it a very successful traditional public sociology. Here I want to focus less on the reception of *Strangers in Their Own Land* and more on its making – an organic public sociology forged in collaboration with people of Right Wing persuasion, likely to have supported Trump who got 58% of the Louisiana vote in the 2016 election.

Hochschild adopted what she called a ‘keyhole issue’ – one that would open up the political habitus of her interlocutors – namely, environmental degradation. The economy of Louisiana – one of the poorest states in the country – is dominated by the oil industry that has established a powerful position with local and state elites, thereby securing favorable taxation and limited regulation. In a classic case of resource dependency, Louisiana’s development is distorted by its dependence on the oil industry. You might even say that Louisiana is an internal colony within the United States, hostage to oil but also to the federal state that supplies over 40% of the state’s budget. The result is an environmental catastrophe, as oil companies go ahead with seemingly unrestricted and unregulated exploration.

Hochschild’s account interrogates her subjects’ awareness and understanding of the very real devastation in their own region: petrochemical pollution of Lake Charles; pouring of toxic waste into the bayou that kills livelihoods based on fishing; the enormous BP spill into the Gulf or, more locally, Texas Brine’s drilling creating a sinkhole and polluting the atmosphere with methane, requiring the community to flee. For Hochschild (2016), the ‘great paradox’ is the community’s opposition to regulations that would limit destruction of the environment. For the Tea Party followers do not see the state as the solution but as the problem. More regulation, more intervention only hampers the economy and the well-being of the population. If only the state would get off the back of the oil companies, the environment would be better preserved.

In Mouffe’s (2018) framing, this right populism is attached to the liberal side of liberal democracy – the reduction of the state and expansion of freedom – that is, individual and market freedom. The other side of what Hochschild calls their ‘deep story’ is the critique of the democratic side of liberal democracy, the state’s redistributive role. In their view, the state is facilitating outsiders – racial minorities, immigrants, gays – cutting ahead of them in line. They are being pushed back to make way for the undeserving; they are subject to the ‘great replacement.’ It’s a deep story because, like Evans Pritchard’s (1976 [1937]) account of witchcraft among the Azande, every effort to dislodge their beliefs not only fails to sow doubt but actually confirms their beliefs. The deep story becomes an ideological lens, a common sense through which they see the world.

Hochschild tirelessly tries to pierce the armor of her interlocutors and, in so doing, brings into relief the architecture of their belief system that ties together individual freedom, religious conviction and sense of injury. At times, she is able to spark dissent among her companions when the culpability of the oil industry stares them in the face, when destruction is in their backyard. But still they doubt the state will ever come to their rescue or arrive only when it is too late. Searching for local allies, Hochschild discovers General Russell Honore of Katrina fame, an avid environmentalist, but he, too, is frustrated that his Green Army can make only very limited inroads into the anti-environmentalism of local communities.

Hochschild searches for crossover issues where differences between her own liberalism and Right Wing populism might be transcended, when both might converge on shared interpretations of the destructiveness that follows processes of commodification and ex-commodification. She chose as her keyhole issue the commodification of land and water with its obvious destructive consequences for local communities, thinking there must be a road to a common perspective. By immersing herself in Louisiana and scaling the empathy wall, as she calls it, she discovers the resilience of the ‘deep story’ that defines their interpretive universe. She shows why Trump’s message of white nationalism, anti-immigrant hostility, xenophobia and the nostalgia of ‘Making America Great Again’ is deeply resonant with the feelings of exclusion and suffering that arises from third-wave marketization.

It is not hopeless. After all, Hochschild does discover a few cracks in the ‘deep story,’ and by her example, we see the dividends of an empathic organic public sociology, wading into worlds

so different from her own. It gave rise to a best-selling book, a traditional public sociology that dissolves stereotypes of other Americans and how they experience third-wave marketization. In this research program, she is accompanied by a number of other social scientists, including Robert Wuthnow (2018), Katherine Cramer (2016) and Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson (2012), exploring the lived experience of exclusion and thus, the possibility of crossover issues.

Erik Wright's affirmative public sociology

Not surprisingly, *Strangers in Their Own Land* has only a limited critique of the standpoint of Right Wing populism and its followers. Given that her project is ongoing and she continues to return to her communities in Louisiana, she has to present herself as an empathic interpreter. An alternative approach is to start out from a perspective critical of capitalism and its third-wave incarnation. This is where I place Erik Wright's project on real utopias. You might not think of Erik Wright as an organic public sociologist, but he was, especially in the last two decades of his life.

What is a real utopia? Perhaps it is better to start by saying what it is not. It is not a blueprint that emerges from the head of a dreamer – to be realized in some unknown future in some unknown place by some unknown people. To the contrary, Wright traveled the world as an archaeologist unearthing institutions, organizations and movements that might pose some potential challenge to capitalism. He engaged with their practitioners to understand how they work, what their dynamics are, their internal contradictions, their conditions of existence and their potential dissemination. He collaborated with the practitioners to produce an analytical paper, organizing conferences at his home, University of Wisconsin, with commentators from different countries, both academics and non-academics.

The projects included participatory budgeting; cooperatives; public banks; democratization of cooperation; Wikipedia and, perhaps the most fundamental of all, the universal basic income grant. In *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), he rooted real utopias in the collective self-organization of civil society – social empowerment against the state or the economy. In *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century* (2019), he relates real utopias to a set of values that challenge capitalism: equity/fairness, democracy/freedom and community/solidarity. Here I want to situate them in relation to the counter-movement to third-wave marketization and the commodification of labor, nature, money and knowledge. Thus, we might say the universal basic income grant contests the commodification of labor power; public banks and participatory budgeting contest the commodification of money; peer-to-peer collaboration, Wikipedia and open access software contest the commodification of knowledge; agricultural cooperatives contest the commodification of land.

For Wright, the goal of real utopias is to challenge capitalism. In *Envisioning Real Utopias*, he thinks of these in terms of three strategies of transformation: ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic. He is skeptical of ruptural transformation that involves 'smashing' the old order – how can one build anything from the ruins of the old? The second, interstitial transformation, refers to institutions that emerge in spaces created within capitalism, while symbiotic transformation involves more collaborative arrangements based on class compromise in which both capital and labor benefit – for example, the gradual encroachment of capital's monopoly control over investment through the creation of wage earner funds. In *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*, he examines four strategies. Two strategies from above – 'dismantling' capitalism (installing elements of democratic socialism from above) and 'taming' capitalism (neutralizing

its harms) – are complemented by two strategies from below: ‘resisting’ capitalism and ‘escaping’ capitalism. The articulation of these four strategies brings about the ‘eroding’ of capitalism.

Wright offers activists, trying to advance specific real utopias, a broad framework, an ideology if you wish, with which to connect their own day-to-day struggles to those of others and to the broader transformation of capitalism. He presents the transformation of what he calls the capitalist ecosystem as a gradual process of the expansion and re-articulation of real utopias, slowly moving toward a democratic socialism. Rather than framing real utopias in terms of the appealing but abstract idea of anti-capitalism, I am proposing, however, that they be framed by the concrete capitalist experience of commodification of fictitious commodities, proposing strategies of de-commodification that oppose re-commodification and ex-commodification.

In this broad vision, we have the source of discontent and potential solutions, but who will be the agents of transformation? Wright (2019) abandons the idea of a transformation driven by the working class that was so key to his early work. It is too weak, too divided and too defensive to be working toward a notion of democratic socialism, drawing in allied classes. Rather than coming down on a particular agent or combination of agents, Wright analyzes the conditions for such struggle – the importance of *identities* that can forge solidarities, *interests* that lead to realistic objectives and *values* that can create political unity across diverse identities and interests. Instead of a particular agent of transformation, he offers a vision, which will create its own agents of realization – an ideology in the Gramscian (1971:126) sense, ‘expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorizing, but rather by a creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will.’ This is what Wright’s program offers disparate social movements fighting against commodification: a unifying vision.

There is a dilemma, however: is the elaboration of real utopias a mechanism for transforming capitalism or saving capitalism? We know that time and again capitalism is saved by oppositional forces. Working class struggles, for example, not only advanced the material conditions of the working class, not only made organs of the working class recognize and fight for gains within capitalism, encouraging reformism, but also, by absorbing more of the surplus, they saved capitalism from its self-generated crises of overproduction and also propelled capitalists to invent new labor-saving technologies.

Closer to home, leaders in Silicon Valley, including Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, have endorsed the idea of universal basic income (UBI). Indeed, it has been the central plank of the presidential candidate and entrepreneur, Andrew Yang. But note: he wants to give every adult \$1,000 a month; because that is not a subsistence income, workers cannot exit the labor market, and so, it effectively becomes a cheap labor policy. Workers remain dependent on employment as wage laborers – making it a very convenient policy for capital. As a real utopia, UBI should assure every adult, not \$1,000 a month but \$3,000 a month, or access to the basic services and material provisions that would enable people to live independently of wage labor. Capitalists will then have to develop new strategies of organizing consent.

As Marx declared, cooperatives by themselves, far from being a threat to capitalism, actually support capitalism, provide a safety valve for disgruntled workers and encourage self-exploitation. On the other hand, if cooperatives are part of a social movement to transcend capitalism, then they can indeed pose a serious challenge to private ownership and alienated labor. We come back to the importance of an ideology threading together real utopias around the challenges of commodification. Supplying such an ideology was Wright’s role as an affirmative organic public sociologist.

Conclusion

We live in the era of third-wave marketization in which exploitation continues, even deepens, but no longer shapes struggles. Indeed, in the eyes of many, it has become a privilege to be stably exploited. Workers in the gig economy, for example, demand to be wage laborers rather than independent contractors. Feeding into the declining strength of labor, liberal democracy is hijacked by capital, becoming a vehicle for enriching the already wealthy. Democracy, thereby, loses what legitimacy it had, and popular classes turn to extra-parliamentary movements, polarizing between Left Wing and Right Wing responses to the commodification of labor, nature, money and knowledge – responses to dispossession necessary to produce commodities or expulsions that result from commodification. Movements against dispossession struggle for de-commodification, while movements against ex-commodification, paradoxically, demand a return to commodification – that is, re-commodification.

In this context, I suggest public sociology works with a theory of commodification based on the reconstruction of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*. Engaging Right Wing Movements that focus on exclusion, empathic organic public sociology wrestles with pro-market and anti-state dispositions. Engaging Left Wing Movements opposed to commodification, organic public sociology develops real utopias within a broader anti-capitalist vision. Given the common source of their discontent, there is a certain fluidity, movement, between populisms – both from Left to Right and Right to Left. Indeed, it might be said that the failure of the anti-capitalist movements of 2011 to register themselves in substantial gains made their supporters and sympathizers open to capture from the Right, just as renewed socialist projects today might capture those disillusioned with the politics of authoritarianism.

Even if its audience is limited, traditional public sociology remains important in the era of Trump, correcting distortions in a world of fake news, providing broader and deeper portraits of the devastation of everyday life. But that traditional public sociology develops a compelling alternative politics if and only if it is also rooted in the lived experience of concrete communities. Such organic connections also infuse sociology with new missions, keeping its research programs in touch with reality and upholding a flourishing discipline.

Notes

- * Presentation to the Conference: “The Great Transformation at 75,” Bennington College, October 26, 2019.
- 1 Social media has, of course, made it possible for companies, such as Google or Facebook, to assemble and analyze massive amounts of personal data in order to target specific groups with specific messages with the aim of changing behavior – whether to buy a particular good or vote for a particular party. This is a policy science in which information is deployed on behalf of a client – the antithesis of a public science that is open and dialogic without instrumental goals.

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