

Public Sociology

Research, Action, and Change

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Foreword

C. Wright Mills famously defined the sociological imagination as linking personal troubles to public issues. He thought it was sufficient to trace personal misfortune to social forces and people would throng the political arena. Thus, knowing that unemployment was not the result of bad luck or individual sloth but of the operation of the labor market, workers would demand state protection against unemployment. Knowing that domestic violence was conditioned by male power, women would demand laws and services that would empower women.

Knowledge, Mills assumed, was power. Maybe. But not in quite the sense he intended. Faced with those daunting forces beyond their control, but forces certainly within their intellectual grasp, the dominated throw up their hands in despair, paralyzed by their impotence rather than empowered by their understanding. Sociological imagination may expose social structure as the source of our malaise, but it is not sufficient for political action. We also need a *political imagination* to turn personal troubles into public issues, which is precisely what suffuses this collection of public sociologies edited by leading figures in this field. Whether they are writing about community development, environmental justice, access to education and health, overcoming inequalities, or tackling crime, the authors are found not only in the classroom but also in the trenches of civil society (or in the classroom as a trench of civil society), exercising their political imagination in galvanizing the public will. Outside a few elite research universities—those rapidly disappearing islands of insularity—carrying sociology into the community is neither rare nor controversial. In fact, for the authors of these case studies, and so many others, it is a way of life that needs to be made more known, more public.

An effective political imagination depends on an organic connection between sociologists and their publics. But such “organic” public sociology is not just a form of sociological practice suited to the social justice foundations

of sociology; rather it is an essential intervention, necessary to save the university under siege from state and market. Bereft of public funds, the university is rapidly becoming a capitalist machine, servicing corporations with research and demanding escalating fees from students-become-consumers. Living in a fool’s paradise, we have been accustomed to take for granted public funding of universities. Those days are definitively gone. In the end we may have to accept the corporatization of the university, in which everything is reduced to the bottom line, but for now we can put up a fight, building and extending collaborations with communities, themselves under assault. This book shows we still have a choice, albeit one that is rapidly receding, to defend the public university—public in the sense of being accountable to broad public interests. In this regard sociology leads the way in alliance with other academic disciplines. It has, after all, its roots and its standpoint in civil society, defending the latter’s integrity against the predatory state and the tyrannical market. Thus, in defending civil society sociology is not only defending its own existence, but that of wider humanity too.

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