

## Why Public Sociology May Fail\*

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When first confronted with this year's ASA theme of public sociology, I thought there was nothing controversial. I figured "public sociology" would be a positive, if vacuous, theme — one we could all agree upon. The early indications were that my hunch was correct. Much of the public sociology rhetoric seemed to be preaching to the choir. Most sociologists would agree that sociology should have a larger public role in society. While other ASA presidential addresses (e.g., Gans 1989) have raised this topic before, Burawoy could rally the troops and boost our morale. One of the most important things that public sociology might accomplish is to undermine the pessimistic view that the discipline of sociology is in steep decline.<sup>1</sup> In some of Burawoy's recent work, this is, in fact, what we find.

If those are Burawoy's goals, I think he might succeed.<sup>2</sup> By other criteria, however, I am afraid public sociology will fail. The failure of public sociology will be driven mainly by serious shortcomings in its agenda and program. In what follows, I begin by clarifying the value and meaning of public sociology. Then, I discuss five reasons why I anticipate that Burawoy's public sociology may fail.

### The Value and Meaning of Public Sociology

To clarify, I am positive about the idea of sociology becoming a more public social science (Wilson 1993). I would be delighted to learn that I was wrong about Burawoy's public sociology. Nevertheless, some elements of public sociology need to be clarified. The confusion over some of these elements has, in my view, been a major source of the skeptical reactions. So, the first part of this commentary is a defense of Burawoy.

It seems to me that public sociology essentially involves two ideas: reaching a public audience and serving to improve the public's well-being. I would argue

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that all sociologists either are in agreement with these goals or should be. Supporters of public sociology may respond that these two claims are sufficiently innocuous that they do not warrant mention. Still, I hope skeptics and critics of public sociology keep these in mind.

The first matter — reaching a public audience — involves gaining a broader and larger reception for sociological research and theories. In short, a public audience includes anyone beyond the discipline of sociology. Realistically, all sociologists would appreciate more readers of their scholarship. Even if the broader public audience is merely limited to other social science disciplines, even critics of public sociology would welcome this. If sociologists want the opportunity to reach a broader audience, then they are implicitly wanting to be public sociologists in at least one form. Many times, sociologists — even those most skeptical of public sociology — desire the opportunity to have power holders and adversarial disciplines as audience members. All Burawoy is doing is calling for our audience to include mass democratic publics along with those that are normally welcome.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, if one seeks a public audience (of any kind), this seems consistent with public sociology.

The second matter — serving to improve the public's well-being — involves seeking to contribute to the betterment of society and the lives of its members. This may strike more readers as controversial. Others may be concerned that if one is seeking to change the world, one cannot be a serious scholar. However, I do not think public sociology necessitates a utopian vision. Rather, public sociology is simply the acknowledgement that sociology must *ultimately* seek to improve the lives of people.<sup>4</sup> The betterment of society can be indirect, remote and in the very long run. But, we should aim for a lasting outcome to sociological research that links to improved human well-being. This does not necessitate that sociologists engage in immediate direct action. But sociology must maintain at least an indirect connection to improving society. As Durkheim (1984) wrote in *The Division of Labor in Society* that,

Yet, because what we propose to study is above all reality, it does not follow that we should give up the idea of improving it. We would esteem our research not worth the labour of a single hour if its interest were merely speculative. If we distinguish carefully between theoretical and practical problems it is not in order to neglect the latter category. On the contrary, it is in order to put ourselves in a position where we can better resolve them. (xxvi)

Relatedly, if critics respond that theory and research need no connection to improving society, I would ask: why should public resources be used to support sociology? If there is absolutely no connection between sociology and public well-being, sociology may be profoundly undeserving of research grants (especially government funds), tuition dollars, administrative support, and land-grant campus space. If sociology does not maintain even a distant connection with improving society, the public has no responsibility to support

our discipline. Surely, there is a better use of tax revenue than transferring it to the well-being of middle-class professionals with no concern for public society. I anticipate that most readers endorse the public support that sociology receives. I question whether it is contradictory, however, that some sociologists prefer to remain completely detached from public society while at the same time completely dependent on public resources. I raise for debate the question that if we support public sociological funding of research, we have a consequential responsibility to public sociology.<sup>5</sup> All that public sociology is doing is calling on sociologists to recognize this responsibility. Perhaps we should even embrace it.

### The Shortcomings of Public Sociology

Despite my hope for public sociology, I am afraid that Burawoy's agenda for public sociology will fail. There are five reasons for this: there are no concrete proposals for practice; there are no incentives in professional sociology; civil society is not problematized; the state is demonized; and there are no tangible measures of success.

#### NO CONCRETE PROPOSALS FOR PRACTICE

One of the contributions of Gans's (1989) earlier presidential address for public sociology was his set of proposals for practice. Among other matters, Gans suggested that undergraduate sociology classes should focus on the analysis of institutions (e.g., church, school, government, etc.); the discipline should recruit and encourage public intellectuals; we should revitalize social criticism; and we need to get more sociology into the media.<sup>6</sup> While there may be limitations to Gans's plan, this was a valuable contribution. Unfortunately, Burawoy does not offer any set of concrete proposals for practice. After the ASA meetings, many of us may be wondering how we can pragmatically implement public sociology.

The examples of successful public sociology that Burawoy has offered are rather unconvincing. Most are individual cases of a dedicated sociologist toiling away. Few present a program that can practically be generalized to other settings and adopted by other sociologists. One of Burawoy's examples of public sociology is the ASA's new magazine, *Contexts*. To be clear, I think this is a wonderfully engaging, well-written, intellectually rich journal. Also, I think the journal has been extremely successful in presenting an alternative for members of our discipline. However, I doubt it is accomplishing the goal of being a forum for sociology to reach a broader public. I am afraid this journal is not really accomplishing Burawoy's idealized public sociology.<sup>7</sup> After looking in many different cities over a substantial period of time, I finally found *Contexts* in a

bookstore. Unfortunately, the bookstore was in Greenwich Village and the price was ten dollars. Both of these guarantee that very few nonsociologists will ever buy or read it. Ultimately, I am skeptical that *Contexts* has reached a broader public beyond our discipline (see also Best 2004).

For public sociology to make a real impact, we need a concrete set of proposals. We need practical steps that individual sociologists and departments can implement. At the North Carolina Sociological Association (NCSA) meetings, Burawoy called on sociologists to engage in debate over potential practical proposals. This may be a good thing. But I would also argue that the president has an incumbent responsibility to lead on this matter as well. One step might be for the ASA president to challenge *Contexts* to reach a broader audience beyond sociology.<sup>8</sup> Another step might be for Burawoy to identify successful strategies for the public presentation of sociology. As mentioned above, one of the recurring difficulties of public sociology is that the presentation of research and theory to a broader public often leads to diluted and counterproductive debate (Best 2004; Schram 2002; Stacey 2004). Surely, however, there have been successful attempts to reach a broader audience. Burawoy could lead by distilling general lessons learned from the disparate individual cases and articulating the patterns among those who have successfully reached a broader audience.<sup>9</sup> Hopefully, others can propose additional concrete proposals. Without realistic means by which to achieve the goals of public sociology, I am afraid it will not make much of a difference. For public sociology to have an impact, we need a plan.

#### NO INCENTIVES IN PROFESSIONAL SOCIOLOGY

Perhaps the biggest problem that public sociology faces is that there are few rewards for it in professional sociology. I am not a rational choice theorist. But I think we need to take seriously the lack of incentives for public sociology within most universities. Most scholars' (and especially young scholars') lives are focused on two things: managing the exigencies that dominate our time, and attempting to meet the professional standards of our disciplines and departments. Much of our time is taken up by exigencies: writing letters of recommendation, service work, advising students, pushing paperwork, etc. Though these activities are, of course, crucial, they often leave time for little else. The remainder of our time is justifiably used to publish scholarship that will get us raises, promotions, prestige, and advance the intellectual enterprise. Our scholarly pursuits are often framed within the relatively clear incentive system that our discipline and departments construct: publish in mainstream sociology journals, publish books at "big" university presses, and so on. Regardless of whether this incentive system is justifiable, the reality is that faculty are not likely to deviate from this unless new incentives emerge for

public sociology.<sup>10</sup> I am skeptical that this will occur, and without new incentives for public sociology, I imagine that public sociology will remain an island within academia.

In Gans's (1989) presidential address, he called on sociology to recruit and encourage public intellectuals. He asserted that public intellectuals should be more than popularizers. He argued that they should be empirical researchers, analysts or theorists that are particularly thoughtful, imaginative, and original. And they should have three key traits: communicating in simple college-educated English, have a breadth of sociological and intellectual interests, and avoid the pitfalls of undue professionalism. Burawoy's arguments seem consistent with Gans on this issue. The problem is that it appears that sociology has not changed significantly since Gans's call. So I am skeptical that sociologists will eschew the disciplinary incentive system and respond to Burawoy's new call for public sociologists. To be fair, Burawoy deserves credit for trying to change our discipline's norms on this matter, and if he is successful, his efforts may do something to change the culture of sociology.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY IS NOT PROBLEMATIZED

The major domain in which Burawoy anticipates sociology making a contribution is in civil society. In fact, Burawoy (n.d.) has argued that civil society is "indeed the only, terrain for sociologists to organize their public initiatives," and "states and markets are of great interest to sociologists but from the standpoint of their connection to civil society." However, he offers little evidence for his claims of the primacy of civil society. Instead, Burawoy (2004) just asserts that sociology has a comparative advantage in civil society and that "Sociology is born with civil society and dies with civil society." Instead of bold assertions, it may do us well to appraise what has been learned about how intellectuals or sociology can shape civil society from the vibrant literature on civil society. Without empirical evidence, I am skeptical that sociologists can have much impact on U.S. civil society. I am more confident of this potential in other countries.

Civil society in the U.S. today is hardly the idealistic public sphere that Burawoy romanticizes. The civil societies of New York City or Berkeley are radically, even entirely, different from the civil societies in which the vast majority of Americans live. It is ironic that Burawoy presented this address in North Carolina, the state with the lowest unionization rates in the U.S. By contrast, California has a relatively strong, if recently battered, labor movement. Burawoy (n.d.) presents California's Institute of Labor and Employment as a model of academic-civil society collaboration. However, the efforts for labor mobilization that we see in California would probably fail in North Carolina (and maybe the entire U.S. South). That is to say, our successful cases of civil

society may not extrapolate to a broader set of cases. We may even be counterproductive if we sample on the dependent variable — focusing attention on civil society success stories — and attempt to infer a process by which to influence civil society. Moreover, we may be unrealistically misguided by neglecting how academic-civil society collaboration often fails.

Though it remains open to debate whether civil society is declining in the U.S., U.S. civil society hardly seems the ideal domain for the progressive politics that Burawoy and most sociologists would hope to cultivate. In fact, U.S. civil society contains very reactionary, extremist, and exclusionary movements. After all, U.S. civil society is the wellspring for the teaching of creationism in public schools, the militia movement, and the religious right. Burawoy (n.d.) idealistically suggests that feminism has shown the way for intellectuals to change civil society. But it seems that Burawoy neglects the resistance and backlash against feminism that is so present in civil society. Also, Burawoy's hope for civil society seems to neglect the widespread disinterest and apathy for politics in the U.S. By and large, it is very difficult today for sociologists to get their students even remotely interested in, much less passionate about, politics. Hence, I doubt that civil society would be receptive to the sociological imagination or the progressive politics that often go with it.

#### THE STATE IS DEMONIZED

Burawoy's romanticization of civil society is even more striking when one compares it with his unbalanced indictment of the state. Burawoy's public sociology appears thoroughly hostile to the state. Burawoy (n.d) even deploys Ashcroftian political rhetoric by referring to the "terrorist state" and "terrorizing states" (Burawoy et al. 2004).<sup>11</sup> Burawoy does not even acknowledge the many good things that a state can accomplish if guided by sociological research and theory. This appears to be part of a broader Marxist tendency to almost nihilistically deny that the state can do any good at all. Of course, sociologists have shown how the state can reduce poverty, fight disease, enhance well-being, and educate children. In this era of welfare retrenchment and neoliberal privatization, is sociology really best served by demonizing the state?

Burawoy (2004) extends this unbalanced indictment of the state by disdaining "policy" sociology. He begins by constructing a false dichotomy between public and policy sociology — even though he later recognizes that, "There is no watertight distinction between public and policy sociology." He also arbitrarily places success stories under the label of "public" sociology when they could just as easily be labeled "policy" sociology (research on displaced workers, toxic waste, housing inequalities, and educational reform, to advocacy for public health campaigns around HIV-AIDS or needle exchange to training community organizers to deal with the media). One might wonder if the

boundary that Burawoy draws between public and policy sociology is any less problematic than the boundaries that he has criticized professional sociologists for constructing between professional and public.

Even more problematically, Burawoy (2004) unfairly caricatures policy sociologists by arguing that they are “putting values up for sale” since “expertise is sold for a fee” in an instrumental contractual relationship with a client or “patron.” Burawoy and colleagues (2004:104-105) also implies policy sociologists are “a servant of power . . . trapped in the dictates of money or power.” Would Burawoy have us believe that all criminologists, poverty researchers, medical sociologists, and applied sociologists working for the government are “putting values up for sale?” This is a crude and unreasonable way to define Ph.D. sociologists I know who work on youth and family violence at the Center for Disease Control. I hope that I am reading him incorrectly here, because Burawoy is precariously close to impugning the integrity of sociologists who do any form of policy or evaluation research.

Burawoy (et al. 2004:127) writes, “When it comes to policy, we cannot compete with economists.” This defeatist view neglects that if we leave policy to the economists, many sociologists would be uncomfortable with the results. Are economists the only ones who have something valuable to contribute to policy on poverty, health care, education, etc.? For that matter, are sociologists really in agreement with the theoretical, methodological, and political assumptions that economists would bring to policy work? I would argue that sociologists have something very different and valuable to contribute to policy. For example, status attainment stratification sociologists have provided convincing evidence that much of one’s socioeconomic status is inherited. I hope those sociologists do not remain silent when calls are made to repeal the estate tax.

#### NO TANGIBLE MEASURES OF SUCCESS

The final concern I have with Burawoy’s public sociology is that he offers no tangible measures of success. I would encourage readers to reflect upon this ASA theme ten years from now, and I expect they will confront a dilemma of vague uncertainty. How will we know if public sociology has succeeded? We need to have some clear indications of success or failure. Burawoy can lead as ASA president by setting some measurable goals. Certainly, some change will have to be an amorphous cultural change that is notoriously difficult to assess. Nevertheless, we need to have something that can be measured to judge progress. In my opinion, these goals should be measurable and ambitious.

Related to my first criticism of public sociology, I think there is a link between the lack of concrete proposals for practice and the lack of tangible measures for success. It is doubly problematic that public sociology lacks both

a plan and a goal. Articulating some tangible measures of success will force us to craft a concrete plan, and any concrete plans should be oriented by those goals.

## Conclusion

Public sociology seems an admirable grand theme. But, as is often the case, grand themes can be less promising upon close inspection. Though I appreciate the central ideas of public sociology — reaching a public audience and serving the public society — I am afraid that public sociology will fail. As I stated at the outset, I would be pleased to look back in ten years on this theme and article, and conclude that I was wrong about the potential success of public sociology. But I would argue that public sociology's limitations are serious: no concrete proposals for practice; no incentives in professional sociology; civil society is not problematized; the state is marginalized; and no tangible measures of success. The first and last of these limitations could be correctable. The middle two may be more fundamental theoretical problems with Burawoy's public sociology. Ultimately, the fortunes of public sociology look limited.

## Notes

1. One noteworthy feature of the pessimistic view of disciplinary decline is its ahistoricism (Ault 1997). In several prior historical periods, prominent sociologists have made almost identical arguments about sociology's decline. Twenty years ago, former ASA president Blalock (1985:256) complained about "laissez-faire graduate-training" as the source of our discipline's decline. Blalock (1987:19) later elaborated, "Our expectations are simply too low, and, as a result, we do not attract the kinds of undergraduate majors and graduate students that we believe we deserve." Blalock (1987: 20) added, "What I do not see in sociology curricula, either at the graduate or undergraduate levels, are what I would characterize as tough, intellectual challenges of the type that a student in mathematics or physics encounters. These are challenges that push the student to the limit of his or her abilities and that require a sustained effort to master." If pessimists are correct, they need to account for why prior pessimism does not square with the present vibrancy of the field (the number of undergraduate majors, academic jobs, etc.). Also, if contemporary pessimists were trained in the era Blalock considered (1970s & 1980s), one may wonder how they would have perceived Blalock's criticisms at the time.

2. I do not mean to completely downplay the role of ASA president for boosting disciplinary morale. Certainly, the ASA president can be effective simply by productively affirming and publicly presenting the value and contribution of sociology.

3. Of course, attempting to communicate with a broader public has the danger of diluting one's scholarship — or worse, even functioning to legitimate the status quo (Best 2004;

Schram 2002; Stacey 2004). However, as I argue below, this is a dilemma we should attempt to overcome.

4. This is meant to be consistent with Wilson's (1993) call for sociology for the public agenda.

5. For that matter, what is the point of teaching undergraduates sociology if it has absolutely no connection to people's well-being? This second issue is actually quite uncontroversial when one considers that many other fields (e.g., economics, medicine, psychology, public policy, etc.) presume that their work has some ultimate potential to improve public society. I imagine that most economists, for example, do not believe that social science should exist solely for itself. I should acknowledge that this point has origins in Gans's (1989) claims that sociology should focus on salient issues and subjects, that sociologists should debunk common misconceptions and myths, and that sociology should do more study of current events (also Wilson 1993).

6. At the end of every semester when I am teaching undergraduate research methods, I have my students read Gans's address. Compared to professors, my students have consistently been far more enthusiastic about the potential of public sociology and far less tolerant of the view that sociology is incapable of achieving it.

7. An exception to this may be that Contexts is a very useful teaching resource, so it may be reaching the "public" of undergraduates.

8. I am skeptical about Burawoy and colleagues' (2004:126) suggestion of "including articles of a public sociology within the *American Sociological Review* or *Social Problems*." On one hand, this could be like the "Practice" section of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (the official journal of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management). On the other hand, I doubt extradisciplinary broader publics will read *American Sociological Review* or *Social Problems*.

9. There is a literature that may prove instructive in this analysis (Campbell 2002).

10. Let me be clear, it is an open question as to whether fundamentally challenging the incentive system of professional sociology — so as to elevate the rewards for public sociology — is always a good or bad thing. While I am positive about public sociology, we need to be careful not to foster a "star" system where academic celebrities are privileged regardless of the actual quality of their scholarship or value of their contributions. It is a realistic possibility that attempts to move the discipline's incentive system might highlight self-indulgent celebrities at the expense of solid scholars who are less self-promoting, photogenic, or television friendly.

11. While disdaining the state, Burawoy (n.d) appears internally inconsistent since he calls for democratic socialism (marriage of state and society over market?) and routinely cites Karl Polanyi, whose key contribution was to emphasize how the state guides the market. Also, the ASA meetings program that Burawoy has helped construct features public intellectuals that have all clearly and directly engaged the state (Cardoso, Ehrenreich, Krugman, Piven, Robinson and Wilson).

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