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Bookmarks for public sociologists[1]

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Michael Burawoy deserves much credit for bringing the role of public sociology back to the discipline's attention. Public sociologists have always been called for. However, it is hard to recall a time in which they have been more needed but less in evidence than the present day. Furthermore, I also find Burawoy's four-fold typology of sociology quite useful, and I am keenly aware (and not only from studying the matter) of the tensions that exist between them and above all between those practiced by the publicly engaged and those pursued by the academic purists. In effect, I have come to realize that up to a point this tension is 'functional', keeping public sociologists from straying too far from the evidence and academic sociologists from ignoring the social relevance and consequences of their work.

I add here a few observations concerning engaging in public sociology. First, one cannot be a public sociologist (and arguably a sociologist of any other kind) without taking a normative position. Second, to be public is to be in politics. And anyone who is or who is contemplating becoming a public sociologist must decide how far along the action chain he or she is willing to proceed. I then argue that to provide a stronger foundation for public sociology, we need to add policy research to basic research. Finally, I close with a note about what is called for if we are to train and foster more public sociologists.

To be public is to be normative

Public matters are never merely technical, nor can they be treated strictly on the basis of empirical findings and observations. There are normative dimensions to all issues that one faces in the public arena. This becomes all too obvious when dealing with the debates over how asylum seekers ought to be treated, whether prisoners can be tortured, and what is to be done about genocide in Sudan. However, even on matters that seem to be technical, normative issues lurk close to the surface. Whether or not one should tolerate deficits is not simply a question of flattening the business cycle and of determining what

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deficit amount raises interest rates to levels that harm the economy. It is also a question as to the morality (or immorality) of saddling our children with bills for expenses that we incurred. (I am not arguing that deficits actually have such effects but only pointing out that these normative issues do in fact arise when policymakers and the public at large debate whether deficits should be tolerated and if so at what level and under what conditions.) The Euro serves as another example. Adopting the Euro of course is not only a matter of joining a currency block but also a matter of assessing the value that one attaches to national pride and autonomy.

It follows that public sociologists who believe that they can contribute to dialogues on public matters by merely relying on and referring to evidence (which by itself tends to reflect normative assumptions) are mistaken. Whatever position they take has normative implications. And if they are to have a role in the give and take, they had best anticipate and deal with these implications. For instance, if a sociologist publishes a study (or writes one up in terms accessible to policymakers and the public) that deals with differences in achievements among various racial and ethnic groups, he or she needs to take into account that such a publication is likely to fan prejudices. Obviously, given the differences in economic and educational background, a history of exploitation and prejudice, and other such factors, some racial and ethnic minorities are likely to score lower on some measurements than the white majority. But unless the sociologist in question takes the proper steps, the public is unlikely to consider these factors and will, in all probability, view the findings as indicative of intrinsic defects, hence confirming prejudices and further favouring prejudicial actions. A sociologist aware of this normative pitfall will do his or her best to control for economic, educational, and other variables, thus reducing the appearances of differing levels of achievement among the groups, and/or highlight changes between current achievement levels and those earlier measured. He or she will also add a strong introduction on the true sources of the differences, as well as warn against drawing the wrong conclusions. (That is, unless that public sociologist shares the public's prejudices and does not mind egging them on, as Charles Murray did in *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) and as Samuel Huntington did in *Who Are We?* (Huntington 2004). In general, no one entering the public arena should release any data or make any comment based on research without first considering the normative implications and then addressing not only how the data ought to be presented but also how the findings should be interpreted.

To be a public sociologist is to be in politics

Public sociologists may well hold that they are mainly 'critical', speaking truth to power and seeking to enlighten people about the nature of the society,

regime, or world. However, there is not a meaningful public voice that does not affect the mobilization and coalition-building that is the essence of politics – the efforts to build support for new policies and regimes or to conserve existing ones (Etzioni 1968). Take for example my reflections on Prime Minister Tony Blair and the communitarian promises that he made during his first election campaign. When I wrote that Blair lived up to his word by devolving power to Scotland, Wales, and London but did not go far enough to bring power truly to the people, I was supporting those in his government who wanted to make contracts with much smaller communities that would enable them to run their own services their own way (of course within the confines of limits set by national policy). The fact that I was unaware of the struggle between the limited and the further-reaching, true devolution advocates matters little. In the political struggle between these two groups, my writings presumably tilted, however so slightly, in the direction of true devolution.

It follows that public sociologists who are keen to have an effect, and not merely to vent their feelings in public and to have their names seen in print or their voices heard on the radio, should take into account the political lay of the land and consider where, when, and how they will join the fray.

Along the action chain

Every public sociologist must decide how far along the action chain he or she is willing to proceed. Some stick close to the shoreline, formulating ideas that they then float in the public realm with the hope that those ideas will wash up on the right beach when needed. Others jump in and paddle, trying to ensure that their ideas reach the right harbour in the nick of time. They impatiently call the press when it does not call them and flood editors with op-ed pieces. You hear them on radio call-in shows and see them on the tube. Still others are ready to carry their loads out of the harbour and onto dry land, even if it means getting their feet wet and hands dirty and pushing aside other stevedores. They buttonhole politicians and join public interest groups. Some even organize rallies, demonstrations, and strikes.

The further one goes, the more of an activist one becomes and the more likely it is that one will evoke the ire of those who firmly believe that leaving the academic ivory tower is bound to undermine scholarship. (One must also wonder whether those who spend years gaining an advanced degree in sociology and doing research make particularly effective activists.) At the same time, those in the trenches – Burawoy worked on an eight-person team that manned the furnace in Hungary's Lenin Steel Works – are best suited to keep academic sociologists from straying too far from social relevance (Byles 2001) And they may be the very ones who in the end truly reach people. In any

event, choosing to become a public sociologist is only part of the decision one faces; how public, how active, must also be decided.

Public sociologists need policy research

Finally, public sociologists need the backing of policy research and not only basic research. Policy research does not replace academic research but adds to it a distinct way of garnering knowledge – one that is action-oriented. There are profound differences between research aimed at increasing our understanding of the world (basic research) and the research required to guide action (policy research). The main differences between the two modes of research are as follows: Basic research has no a priori favourite variables, whereas policy research is mainly interested in those factors that are relatively malleable. For example, individuals conducting policy research would be much more interested in the ways that people perceive differences in sex roles than in the sex ratios at birth. Policy research sort of follows the notion that we should focus on that which can be changed, not taking on that which is a given, and have the wisdom to tell the difference.

Policy research must take into consideration all of the major elements of the slice of the world with which it is trying to deal, or it will be unable to address the needs of action. In contrast, basic research proceeds by fragmenting the world into abstract, analytical pieces and then studying this piece or the other. Thus, a basic researcher may study only the prices of flowers (together with other economic factors); a physiologist, the wilting processes; a social psychologist, the symbolic meaning of flowers and other cultural items; and so on. But a person who plans to grow flowers must deal with most, if not all, of these elements and the relationships between them. Wilting, for instance, will affect the symbolic meaning of a flower (as any man who has ever handed a faded rose to his date is likely to have noticed). And this, in turn, will influence the flower's price.

In this sense, medicine is a policy science and provides a model for an action-oriented mode of science. Physicians are not high-powered specialists in any one academic discipline. They know some chemistry, physiology, anatomy, and psychology. And they combine this knowledge with a great deal of practical information that has no basis in basic research but is very useful. Above all, physicians realize that, given their limitations, they actually are experimenting rather than relying merely on solid answers derived from some science. This is why they typically instruct people to try this or that medication or procedure and then call back in a few days to check in. If the patient reports that the suggested measures did not work, the physician will experiment with something else.

Similarly, public sociologists do best when they are generalists and, better yet, command some knowledge of other social sciences. Also, public sociologists ought to make clear that we can often identify more readily the tactics that will not work as opposed to the exact ones that will. And we should highlight that the best course for public action is achieved through a trial and error approach, a willingness to make necessary adjustments instead of proceeding full speed ahead. Moderating our public voice with some of the hedges with which academic training equips us adds to our credibility and effectiveness and leads our work to be viewed more favourably than that of the talking heads on TV who do not have such training.

An afterword: on the making of public sociologists

Above all, more sociologists need to serve as public sociologists. Sociology does provide a sound basis for societal analysis and guidance, and the society is woefully in need of more voices tutored in this social science. But public sociologists do not grow on trees. Like specialists, they must be cultivated. Talent helps, but the notion that anyone with a PC and a good or critical heart can become an effective public sociologist is erroneous. As with other subdisciplines, universities and their sociology departments can help to prepare individuals for a career in public sociology. To do so requires the following: first, admission policies that make it clear that those who have such an inclination or calling are welcome; second, an understanding that these students will have to learn to consume statistics but not necessarily be able to produce them; and third a faculty that includes some role models and a curriculum that shows a commitment to public sociology – which surprisingly, few departments of sociology do.

In addition, major sociological journals should set aside a section exclusively for public sociology essays. Anyone examining the official flagship publication of the American Sociological Association, the *American Sociological Review*, will gain the impression that (a) public sociologists need not bother submitting their essays and (b) the discipline has no room for public sociologists. Nor can one say that they can expect to be welcomed by the other publications of the American Sociological Association. If one were to submit anonymously an essay by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, Robert Bellah, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Herbert Gans, C. Wright Mills, or any of the other most important public sociologists, it would be rejected out of hand.

In general, public sociology is the sad case of a shoemaker with no shoes. Presumably, sociologists know something about how to foster a subculture and build institutions. It is time to apply these findings and insights to a

systematical production of public sociologists *and* to nurturing them once they are trained. Both sociology and the public would be the better for it.

(Date accepted: May 2005)

Notes

1. I draw here on my book *My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message* (Etzioni 2003).

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