

The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Inaugural Issue*

Article 4

12-2005

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Recommended Citation

Deflem, Mathieu (2005) "Public Sociology, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie, and Chevrolet," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol1/iss1/4>

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Public Sociology, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie, and Chevrolet

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Parts of this paper were previously presented at a roundtable presentation at the ASA annual meeting in Philadelphia, 2005. I am grateful to Paul Paolucci for organizing the panel.

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Abstract

Public sociology is neither public nor sociology. Public sociology does not and cannot have an epistemology. Speaking only for and to itself, public sociology has no public. There is no debate with public sociology. Instead, public sociology has been successfully advertised and widely embraced among sociologists. Public sociology has consumers. Public sociology is the fast-food of social science. The influence of public sociology is visible and real as it has been institutionalized in various ways. I analyze the conditions of the institutionalization of public sociology and critically evaluate its dynamics and consequences.

Introduction: The Last of Public Sociology

Though this is not my first, I hope this will be my last paper on public sociology, because I have to admit I am rather fed up with this debate which still has not taken place. My hope, no doubt, is idle, as reasons to write will remain. Maybe time will not be on my side though. The occasion to write this paper is the second time that it was editorially decided in advance of the publication of these words that a 'response' was to follow by a certain someone. That is a bit remarkable because I did not know I was talking to somebody other than the general universe of readers who happen to read this paper. But at least there is some consistency to public sociology.

The occasion to write this paper is the first time that I write on the basis of a request by a representative of public sociology. This is surprising, because typically public sociologists do not practice what they preach and prefer to keep their activities private. They rule, by their own admission, by "mandate" (Burawoy 2004a) and by appointment rather than election, such as was the case with the Task Force to Institutionalize Public Sociology in the American Sociological Association (ASA). Sometimes they even claim popular legitimacy although their powers come from nominations committees, such as when Michael Burawoy was selected to run for President of the ASA. The rise of public sociology and its gallant leader during 2004 was not meteoric but logical, because it enjoyed the full support of the ASA Executive Office, its mighty bureaucratic control over our organization, and its drift towards commercialization and publicity of our profession. With such great powers in support of public sociology's advancement, what else was to be expected? How could sociologists who were critical have possibly been more vocal and better organized? Against such might, no masses could revolt!

Among public sociologists, opposition is not tolerated and not accepted. Dialogue is not only not central to public sociology, it is entirely absent. Though not unnoticed, recognized my

contributions about the subject matter have not been. At the 2004 ASA meeting in San Francisco, a public sociologist remarked, “nobody takes Deflem seriously.” To many a public sociologist, the statement is probably true (as opposed to false), and no illusions nor regret will be entertained. For among public sociologists, indeed, the tactic is to pathologize the enemy while simultaneously idealizing the self. Perhaps my marginality is to blame more than public sociologists’ refusal to engage in discussions. But it cannot be denied that there have been occasions when public sociologists could have engaged in a debate yet refused. When I wrote (Deflem 2004c) that I had been contacted by fellow sociologists and members of the ASA, including especially graduate students, who are afraid to speak out publicly against public sociology for fear of retaliation, public sociology’s patriarch (Burawoy 2004a) responded in a manner Sartre (and Habermas) rightly called reactionary: he remained silent. At the San Francisco meetings, likewise, no voices of dissent were tolerated. In any case, my contributions on public sociology in published form and online —via the campaign site ‘Save Sociology’ (www.savesociology.org) and through my blog (www.mathieudeflem.blogspot.com)— will mostly indeed have sped up my ride on the express train to disciplinary pariah status and the labeling I enjoyed as a scientific ideologue. If only I had been called a monster!

I am critical of public sociology but I am not a critic of public sociology. I am a sociologist specialized in the study of law and social control.¹ And although there are definite issues of legality, legitimacy, and control present in the discourse on public sociology, which is

¹ Interested readers may also be interested to know that most all of my writings, including those cited in this paper, are available on my website (www.mathieudeflem.net). I enjoy to the fullest the advantages of having my work be available as widely as possible. This dissemination of one’s work stands in contrast to at least one self-declared public sociologist who lambasted me for my opposition against public sociology and the fact that I would favor to keep sociological work “private” among sociologists. Nothing could be further from the truth, again in stark contrast to said critic whose work is not publicly available, although, I must admit, this is largely due to the fact that he has virtually no work that might be made publicly available.

still no debate, those are not my primary motivations to write about it. I am not a professional sociologist either, although sociology is my profession. I do not accept the demarcation between public and professional (and critical and policy) sociology, because I refuse to accept the lack of seriousness and coherence imposed by a left-fascist regime, however friendly its guise. As a sociologist, I abide only by the force of the better argument —although in the case of public sociology, I must admit, any argument would do.

There are no professional sociologists who dismiss public sociology as a euphemism for partisan sociology, because sociologists who are critical of public sociology are sociologists. A psychologist also I am not, although I assume a considerable amount of empathy is required to explain this peculiar result of a move to and from Chicago to Berkeley. The rise of public sociology, also, does not particularly anger me. Richard Nixon once remarked, in a surprising moment of intelligence and clarity, that one can only get mad at somebody one respects.

In this essay, I will address the institutionalization of public sociology and how it has been accepted, embraced, and consumed so widely and eagerly, much like McDonald's and Britney Spears. Surely, an absence of substance in our culture readily leads to widespread consumption by means of clever marketing campaigns, but it remains surprising to observe the success of said commercializations among a profession that is purposely set up to not be trapped by such trickery. The institutionalization of public sociology remains puzzling. I will first briefly recapitulate some of the criticisms I have raised against public sociology in prior writings (Deflem 2005a, b, c, 2004a, b, c).

Why Public Sociology is Neither

According to 2003-04 ASA President Michael Burawoy, public sociology “defines, promotes and informs public debate about class and racial inequalities, new gender regimes, environmental degradation, multiculturalism, technological revolutions, market fundamentalism, and state and non-state violence” (ASA 2004). Additionally, “public sociologies should challenge the world as we know it, exposing the gap between what is and what could be” (Ibid.). In other words, public sociology imposes a dual limitation. First, public sociology is limited to certain areas of research. And, second, public sociology is not oriented at analyzing the social world’s structures and processes, but instead seeks to challenge the world by an imagined unreal world of ‘what could be’.

Public sociology is a fractioned and perverted sociology. For sociology is a social science and thus is not, by definition, involved in promoting or defining anything other than scientific knowledge about social life. Sociological knowledge abides by standards in matters of methodology and theory, leading to corroborate or falsify insights from empirical research. Sociology does not need to be limited to any specific issues. And sociological knowledge cannot challenge the world. We have philosophy and morality for such important tasks.

Public sociology and the demarcations it introduces are part of a strategic plan to subsume sociology under one ethico-political vision. Sociology is always public. The very term *public* sociology assumes that there can be a sociology which is not. Why then was the term introduced? The label public sociology was stolen to offer a thinly veiled disguise of a particularistic version of “sociological Marxism,” as the practitioners themselves call it (Burawoy and Wright 2000). Within the safe confines of certain Marxist clubs, public sociologists also admit as much. In the newsletter of the ASA Marxist Sociology section and in

the journal *Critical Sociology*, for instance, Michael Burawoy writes openly and proudly of his accomplishments in having brought leftist politics into sociology (Burawoy 2003, 2005a). In the Marxist newsletter, Burawoy proclaims that the ASA has “ventured into political debates about race” and waded “into politics with an anti-(Iraq)war resolution that was passed in a member ballot with a two-thirds majority” (Burawoy 2003:12). In the radical social-science journal *Critical Sociology*, likewise, he writes passionately of public sociology as an “integral part of the project of sociological socialism” which has to hold itself accountable to “some such vision of democratic socialism” (Burawoy 2005a:325). The true face of public sociology is revealed. More broadly, what we see at work in the appropriation of the term public sociology is a strategic move to acquire symbolic power. In an insightful analysis on the current state of sociology, James Moody (2005) argues that the term public sociology slyly changes the meaning of sociological practice by relying on a widely known manner to define subfields in the discipline. “Once the term is in circulation,” Moody argues, “the defining details are largely irrelevant. *Power comes in establishing the term, not by filling in the particulars.*”

Most recently, what has been striking is the pluralization of the term public sociology into ‘public sociologies’ to indicate that any activity that somehow relates to publics other than the sociological profession (or to public as opposed to private—it is still not clear whether the word ‘public’ in public sociology is an adjective or a noun) is also public sociology. These activities would include such diverse matters as political activism, interviews in the media, and teaching. This deliberate tactic has also fueled the misconception—as a corollary to the notion that there would be sociologists who see themselves as objective scientists with no regards to the practical uses of their work (Deflem 2005b)—that any sociologist who engages in work outside the academia cannot be critical of public sociology. The fact that there are public sociologists

who fail to recognize that responsible opponents of public sociology favor and practice the role of the sociologist as public intellectual to the best of their abilities is the irony.

Given its hidden but real agenda, public sociology is not a forum for discussion—neither sociological nor political—in which a plurality of viewpoints can participate. Instead, it is a particularistic political position, devoid of any epistemology, which represents but one specific and singular voice. Public sociology allows no discussion with others. Public sociology cannot be spoken or heard except by itself. Public sociology has no public. It speaks for itself.

To the extent that it has been successful in advertising itself for something it is not, public sociology has contributed to undermine the public standing of sociology as an academic discipline. Public sociology enjoys a degree of popularity, a popularity that is not based on arguments but on a populist conception about the supposed activities and objectives of sociologists. Public sociology is the choice between Coca Cola and Pepsi.

The sociological discipline has been politicized. Public sociology is but a consequence. The profession has managerialized. Public sociology is but a consequence. Public sociology does not, *pace* Burawoy (2003), threaten the legitimacy of sociology “among the powers that be.” On the contrary, the powers that be have never thought less of or about sociology and sociologists than ever before. To the so-called powers that be, sociology is virtually dead. One cannot only blame the rise of public sociology for this sorry state of affairs, nor could our structural weakness as a group be held to blame. Instead, our respective intellectual shortcomings as individual scholars have contributed most to our (relative) lack of relevance in public discourse. But at least those who oppose public sociology still accept that sociologists can and do legitimately contribute to their society, while as particularistic critics, public sociologists are heard by nobody but themselves. A relevant sociology requires an unyielding commitment to sociology as an

academic discipline. The courage to be resolutely analytical about society is the true revolutionary quality of sociology. In its inability to be resolutely analytical and transcend the blinding darkness of fundamentalism, public sociology is tame at best, conservative at worst. Society deserves better and more than public sociology.

The Institutionalization of Public Sociology

The seeds of the rise of public sociology were probably sown a long time ago, even well before the debacle over the editorial appointment at the *American Sociological Review* (SSSITalk 1999). But a clear turn toward public sociology's institutionalization was taken in the Spring of 2003, when a resolution was initiated in the ASA by members of the group, 'Sociologists and Political Scientists Without Borders', now called, 'Sociologists Without Borders.' The resolution specified that the American Sociological Association should call for "an immediate end to the war against Iraq" (ASA 2003). The ASA Council decided to forward the resolution to the Association members, along with an opinion question about members' personal position on the war. A majority of voting members approved of the resolution, so that it became the official position of the ASA that the war in Iraq should be ended. Not only did this resolution present the morality of the war in Iraq as a pseudo-sociological issue, it also brought about that the politicization of the ASA was normalized and that further resolutions on similarly moral and political matters could be addressed. The resolution signaled the clearest beginning of the institutionalization of public sociology.

A year later, on March 26, 2004, a resolution was submitted to the ASA Council regarding the U.S. President's proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage. The resolution called for the ASA to oppose the proposed constitutional amendment

defining marriage as between a man and a woman. On April 7, the ASA Council held a conference call on the resolution, which the ASA referred to as ‘member-initiated,’ voicing support for it, and deciding to hold an election on the matter among the members of the ASA.

In the meantime, the actions of the ASA Council and its President have been exposed for exactly what they are. The resolution was not initiated by ASA members but was the result of then-ASA President Burawoy’s politics-over-procedure approach—for which he had already been reprimanded when he chaired the ASA Publications Committee—when he had first suggested the idea for the resolution to certain ASA sections after the matter had already been discussed by the ASA Council (Deflem 2004c).

Like the resolution on the war in Iraq, the 2004 resolution on marriage and, more generally, the ethical-political drift in the ASA are detrimental for the discipline and profession of sociology. The problem is not whether we favor or disfavor certain rights or constitutional bans, but whether it is up to the ASA to pass a resolution on such matters. The ASA and the profession at large are in danger of becoming something they simply are not meant to be. Besides, the ASA resolutions are useless for society. It may be shocking for public sociologists to read this—as shocking as it was when they heard me say it at the 2004 ASA meeting—but the ASA anti-war resolution did not save a single life in the senseless bloodshed that is ongoing in Iraq. It only made public sociologists feel better about themselves. Do you want to supersize that?

Among sociologists, the alternative to being irrelevant (a constant danger of academics) is not being a political activist in our profession nor allowing only an activism of a particular kind. Instead of an activist sociology or a singular sociological activism, as public sociologists prefer, only the promotion of a broad range of sociological activisms would be able to usefully

link sociological insight with the broader questions that move our society. For there is a rational plurality of alternatives in our political and moral struggles. But the ASA leadership, in its eagerness to have sociology be publicized, and the public sociologists, in their eagerness to have sociology be politicized, do not want the truth to be revealed. By their own admission, they do not care for the truth (Burawoy 2004b).

Since the ASA resolutions, more striking than the introduction of public sociology during the reign of Michael Burawoy as President of the ASA has been the ease with which the idea of public sociology has since been embraced and the extent to which it has been institutionalized. To be sure, the disintegration of our profession through the thoughtless proliferation of our graduate education is a contributing factor—to wit, obviously, the fact that the ASA resolutions passed because sociologists today are not so much more left (as opposed to right) but less right (as opposed to wrong). Also, most of the foot soldiers who have been marching in support of public sociology are not exactly central to our profession as their work is not exactly central to our discipline. Even more importantly, public sociology has benefited from the managerialization of the profession and the commercialization of the discipline that has taken place in recent years, especially through the efforts of the ASA Executive Office.

The institutionalization and influence of public sociology are visible and real. Besides the fact that some sociologists now explicitly mention public sociology as an area of interest and expertise, some departments have announced a routinized commitment to public sociology in their teaching and research programs. The Sociology Department at Berkeley is presently advertised as the “premier home of ‘public sociology’” (Voss 2005). As the Department houses public sociology’s self-declared meteor, that description might not be altogether surprising. Berkeley also organizes a series of public sociology talks and generally appears to invest much

time and energy in promoting public sociology. What is remarkable about Berkeley's self-image is that it is hard to imagine a sociology department further removed from the concerns of the American public than Berkeley. But perhaps ketchup is a vegetable.

Besides Berkeley, also, there are nowadays several other departments that claim to be explicitly devoted to advance public sociology, not merely house some of its practitioners. The Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota has instituted an award in public sociology (Aminzade 2004). Some departments have announced a move towards public sociology in their job advertisements. George Mason University recently posted a job ad that stated that the Sociology Department is working towards "an expanding unit that is dedicated to developing a profile in public sociology" (ESS 2005). At Ithaca College, sociologists "with activist or public sociology expertise are especially encouraged to apply" (ASA 2005). A job ad posted by the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs announced that the Sociology Department has a "long-standing commitment to public sociology" (UCCS 2005). An ad for a position at Northeastern Illinois University's Sociology Department similarly mentioned the "Department's emphasis on public sociology" (ASA 2005).

Probably most distinct in its public-sociology aspirations has been the Sociology Department at Florida Atlantic University, whose website announces that the Department is "among the new 'Public Sociology' departments in the United States that are defining sociology as both a scholarly endeavor and as an activity in the service of humanity" (Araghi 2005). Somewhat confusingly, the Sociology Department at American University in Washington, DC, has announced a new concentration in "Professional Sociology" in its MA program. The concentration is meant to teach students how to use sociology in a wide range of professional

settings, including “social activism and advocacy” (American University 2005). At American, in other words, professional sociology is also public sociology.

Some of our discipline’s journals have devoted separate attention to public sociology, mostly not to evaluate and discuss its merits, but as exercises therein. There have been special issues in *Social Problems* (2004), *Social Forces* (2004), *Critical Sociology* (2005), and the *British Journal of Sociology* (2005). The *Social Forces* debate was the most open-minded of all and actually included some critics of public sociology. But a more radical public sociology invasion at the journal was soon thereafter swiftly realized when Editor Judith Blau instituted the inclusion of a separate non-refereed section on public sociology in each issue of the journal. Blau additionally announced that papers in the areas of criminology, public health, and urban planning would be excluded from the journal (Deflem 2005c).

The ASA Task Force to Institutionalize Public Sociology has to date at least institutionalized itself somewhat. The Task Force set up a website, which has remained largely inactive, receiving very few posts on its web board which has recently been invaded by one Zetha, who posted a bunch of “Owned by Zetha” messages. The Task Force also published a report on the historical roots of public sociology (available via the Public Sociology website) and set up an email list serve. The list’s main topic of discussion at this point is how to get tenure on the basis of activism rather than scholarship, much like the first recommendation in the Task Force’s report was a call to the ASA Council to endorse public sociology tenure and promotion guidelines. Again as a result of the publicity activities in the ASA Executive Office, the ASA publication *Footnotes* has a special section on public sociology. And our discipline’s textbooks also have some public sociology sneaking into its pages. Professor Lord Giddens and his collaborators added new materials on public sociology in the 5th edition of their *Introduction to*

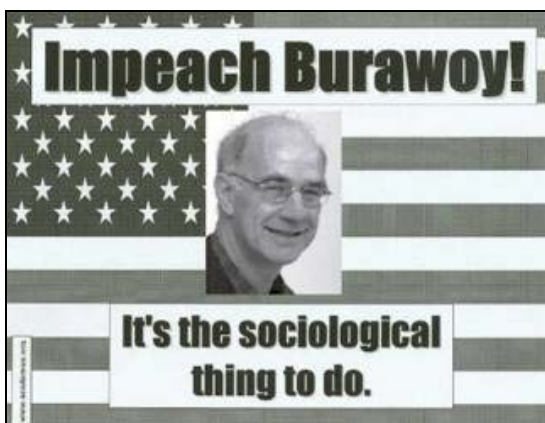
Sociology (Giddens, Duneier, and Appelbaum, 2005). Perhaps public sociology can bring even the combatants of sociology together in the same fight.

Finally, it may be ironic, but it is far from surprising to observe that the advent of public sociology is facilitated by the commercialization of sociology. Last year, the ASA website began advertising an online store where members can purchase merchandise with the ASA's traditional or centennial logos. The broader issue that is involved in this matter of business and commerce is indeed, as Durkheim reminded us, not an economic but a moral problem (Deflem 2004d). The ASA online store, which has recently been reformed as a merchandise section in the ASA online bookstore, is yet one more sign of the managerialization of the ASA administration, which is now hopelessly divorced from the profession, not to mention our scholarship. It has been the ASA administration, also, which propagated public sociology by means of organizing a giant travel tour for Michael Burawoy during his Presidency of the ASA. Commercialization indeed. And let us not forget the truly ground-breaking nature of the San Francisco meeting in 2004: it was the first ASA meeting to feature corporate sponsorship on the conference handbags.

Conclusion: The Georgia Journal of Sociology

In my journey of becoming an American sociologist, I made many mistakes and was subject to a wealth of misconceptions upon my migration to this country we call home. I misreckoned that, unlike the nepotistic patriarchy that reigns in Belgian academia, American sociology would provide an open occupational structure in which professional rewards were based on scholarly accomplishments. Once, also, I thought that American society had a less developed public intellectual culture than the one enjoyed in many European nations, but I did not know it had none. When I first set up the 'Save Sociology' campaign site, it included a set of posters and

flyers that contained spoofs, inspired by the tactics of current anti-Bush social movements, on then ASA President Michael Burawoy and his march to public-sociological fame and glory. What's good for one president should be good for another, I thought. But much to my surprise, the strategy largely back-fired as I tragically miscalculated the extent to which humor has been banned from our profession. But taking my commitment as a public intellectual seriously, I was and remain willing, though not altogether happy, to contribute in a manner more attuned to the culture in which I work.



With its successful institutionalization, public sociology has now become one of the mainstream components of American sociology. Predominantly white, male, and middle-class, public sociology is now respected and respectable. Worse yet, public sociology has become altogether decent. Public sociology does not shout. It is polite. I hope that public sociologists, whatever it is they stand for, at least no longer entertain any doubts that their activities too are part and parcel of American culture and all that it breeds. Public sociology has consumers—a lot of consumers. As the fast-food of social science, public sociology is now everywhere.

Yet, nobody has to accept the perversions of public sociology or assume nothing can be done against it. Recently, a new editor has been appointed at the journal *Social Forces*. Though the previous editor may not have been removed because of her embrace of public sociology (her incompetencies as an editor, I believe, were many), the section on public sociology has been removed from the journal, which will also restore its balance in research specialties. I therefore also call on my colleagues in the Georgia Sociological Association to seize the opportunity to establish a journal that does not bow down to any need to demarcate between professional and public sociology, but that instead is resolutely committed to sociology. Call it *The Georgia Journal of Sociology*, call it anything Georgian sociologists like, but keep clear and clean your commitment to sociology plain and simple.

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