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998 words

To progress public sociology, pursue the contradictions

Developing from a programme that brought Berkeley students together with public sociologists internationally, Michael Burawoy's collection offers an engaging and diverse sample of the field and problematises what we understand by public sociology. It is relevant to anybody with an interest in sociology's public contribution.

In his preface and introduction, Burawoy questions the adequacy of his earlier framework, which presented an academic division of labour into four quadrants: public, policy, critical and professional sociologies. Burawoy reflects on the difficulties applying this outside the United States, and applying it to public sociology as practice. Burawoy develops Bourdieu's concept of 'fields' and considers public sociology as an activity at the intersection of academic and political fields, which vary with time and place and shape the opportunities for public sociology and its relationships with other kinds of sociology (149). Further critical reflections are offered by Karl von Holdt in his chapter on health care interventions in South Africa, where he argues for a "socially engaged sociology" operating in contested terrain between "dominant sociologies and subordinate sociologies" (182) and along public/policy and critical/professional continua, "rather than sharply distinguished fields" (192).

There are important differences amongst the contributors regarding which stages of sociological research should be "public", which cast light on the diversity of relationships between academic and political fields. For Sari Hanafi, in his account of public and policy sociology in the Arab world, sociologists' commitments can legitimately influence their choice of topic and means of dissemination, but "fieldwork is fieldwork and should follow its course in the most objective way possible" (205). Michel Wieviorka goes a step further in his chapter on French sociology, arguing "There is nothing public about choosing an object, a question, then a method...It is very frequently even a solitary task" (244), and proposes that only dissemination should be public. By contrast, Ramon Flecha and Marta Soler draw on their research in Spain to argue for a thoroughly participatory methodology, which places research subjects "at the center of the discussions, from the formulation of the project until the elaboration of the conclusions" (233). Yet they allot sociologists a technocratic role, serving the public but not part of it, there "to provide the list of successful actions that the international scientific community had shown to be effective", and then working with community participants to assess and adapt these to the local context (237). It is not clear how this approach deals with disagreements within "the international scientific community" or the power-laden processes by

which certain perspectives come to be seen as the voice of this “community”. Frances Fox Piven presents a more blended relationship between her roles as an activism scholar and an activist:

“I study American protest movements...I also participate...When I am a participant, I try to bring what I have learned from my research.”

Contrasting with all of these approaches, Pun Ngai et al draw on activist-research interventions involving nine universities in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, together with an NGO, to challenge the exploitation of workers producing electronic goods for Apple. They argue for a highly political role for sociologists, aiming for a close fusion with workers, and report as one outcome of their project sociology students abandoning their elite career paths to live in industrial communities and set up educational and cultural programmes with workers (220).

Some contributors address practical questions. For example Rodriguez Garavito discusses the challenges arising from performing multiple roles - teacher, researcher, lawyer and campaigner – and suggests this offers unique insights and emotional strength but also potentially loss of concentration, compromise of academic independence, and burnout (161-162). In other places contributors address the tension between the certainty necessary to mobilise toward a definite objective, and the perpetual uncertainty required by scientific rigour. Walden Bello suggests this is heightened for intellectuals who are part of political organisations. He reflects that he did his “best analytical work” while working as a full-time underground activist for the Communist Party of the Philippines (272), but that ultimately he felt forced to choose between “truth and power” and leave the organisation (276). The relationship of public sociology to political organisation is rarely discussed, despite the influence within sociology of organisationally committed communists such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. Discussion of the relationship between public sociology and political organisation could be developed further by engaging with public intellectuals in countries such as Cuba and Venezuela, where committed communist intellectuals are playing leading roles in processes of social transformation.

Burawoy's collection offers a terrific diversity of provocative perspectives, which are not only different but often contradictory. Burawoy suggests a major cause of these differences is the national context (138). This is clearly the case for Nandini Sundar, writing about the development of an Indian sociology in a post-colonial context, and for the struggles described by Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova pursuing feminist approaches to gender studies in Russia. Yet there are also differences amongst public sociologists that can not be reduced to context. In some cases these are explicitly connected to the kind of alliances sociologists form (admittedly also influenced by context), a point Burawoy touches on when discussing the “powers” different kinds of sociologists attach themselves to (138), and the divide between “elite” and “organic” public sociology (145). It might further Burawoy's stated aim, to dissect the practice of public sociology, if these contradictions were pursued more fully: it would be fascinating, for example, to hear Ngai et al debate Wiewiorka over political objectivity versus commitment in research. It is also important to consider approaches that Burawoy's framework leaves out, such as the “private” activist sociology described by Bhattacharyya (2013). Perhaps that is expecting too much of a

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single publication, but it is important to emphasise the need to continue the conversation, and to actively pursue the contradictions in search of greater clarity.

References

Bhattacharyya, G. 2013. How can we live with ourselves? Universities and the attempt to reconcile learning and doing. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(9), 1411-1428.