

THE NECESSITY OF PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

Micheal Burawoy has questioned the position of South Africa in recent times as Sociology gets bifurcated along two major divide: “on the one hand, liberation sociology engaged with communities of struggle, and on the other hand, market research pandering to the interests of the day” (2004:13). The sociology profession, according to Burawoy, is a multifaceted, hierarchical organization with a jealously guarded self-referential autonomy that is also insular. Only in the context of such an elaborately organized autonomy, Burawoy contends, can we appreciate the significance of public sociology (2004:13). In this essay, therefore, I support Burawoy’s call for the necessity of Public Sociology not only globally but in South Africa. I will also dwell upon the need to recover the discipline of public sociology for the sake of social relevance especially for the South African context. I will, however, start by defining what is meant by public sociology.

On Public Sociology

The idea of Public Sociology derives, *inter alia*, from C. Wright Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) with its celebrated condemnation of professional sociology as ‘abstracted empiricism’ and ‘grand theory’. Instead, Mills calls for a sociology that connected historical biography to social structure, a sociology that turned personal problems into public issues. Others have followed this line of criticism. For example, Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals* regrets the substitution of the public intellectual by the professional scholar, no longer interested in the big issues of the day, but in boosting his curriculum vitae with peer reviewed articles. Other renowned Sociologists have also accused professional sociology of dwelling on the trivial rather than the ‘big issues’ of the day, on method and technique at the expense of substance, for encouraging pedestrian rather than original research (Burawoy 2004:16). While it could be argued that public sociology was hitherto a force to reckon with, it has, nonetheless, become a weak force that needs to be bolstered, not in opposition to but in collaboration with professional sociology (16). Burawoy states that public sociology serves a distinct public purpose which is “to represent humanity’s interest in containing the unbridled tyranny of market and state,” He notes that “engagement with publics has often been the most fruitful source of innovation, imagination and challenge to sociology” of which public sociology aims to achieve (Burawoy, 2003: 257). In fact, for Burawoy, public sociology is sociology and its relation to civil society. For example, what calls to mind is how, in the United States, the civil rights movement spurred the transformation of the study of collective action and invented the field of social movements, or the feminist movements whose impact has echoed into virtually all fields of sociology and its publics, and making them more self-conscious by giving them a name – public sociologies” (257). Public sociology aims to bring sociology to audiences beyond the academy (Burawoy, 2004). Burawoy, therefore, urges us to “think of public sociology not as an alternative to professional sociology but as a necessary and invigorating accompaniment.”

Forms of Public Sociology during apartheid in South Africa

Burawoy makes a distinction between public and policy sociology: Policy sociology hires itself out to a client or is sponsored by a patron who defines a range of important problems, restricting the autonomous input of the sociologist. Policy sociology applies expert knowledge to specific social problems, whereas public sociology stimulates open debate as to what the problems are and how they might be tackled. Public sociology brings alternative values to the table. It is the conscience of policy sociology, questioning the givenness of ends and the appropriateness of means. One measure of its success is the galvanizing of social movements, which might in turn affect policy (2004:17). It is in the context of the above juxtaposition between Policy and Public sociology that Burawoy evaluates the impact of the later during apartheid in South Africa. Not only that, by building what he calls the disciplinary matrix, Burawoy connects public sociology to professional and critical sociologies. While he identifies areas of their interconnectedness, Burawoy concludes that public sociology stands out among all the four as an area that radiates, and acquires, force through its engagement with the public. And how did this public engagement manifest itself during apartheid South Africa?

During the apartheid period in South Africa, public sociology, among other things, occasioned the Durban strikes that, surprisingly, exploded onto the political scene in 1973, followed by the Soweto uprising of 1976. Founding their own radical voice, Blacks lived up to the challenges of the totalitarian apartheid regime and this gave rise to a new industrial sociology, well grounded in the dictates of the labor movement. This sociology equally thrived “in academic debates and in pages of the new South African Labor Bulletin” (2004:22). Sociology, thus, proceeded from this critical standpoint onto the trenches of urban warfare and the gutters of social movement unionism. Burawoy believes that the 1980s represents a watershed in the historic intersections of critical sociology with Marxism and public debates regarding the anti-apartheid movement – its relation to the apartheid state, to the African National Congress and to the Black Consciousness Movement. The year is also remarkable for the complex relations that existed between trade unions and community based organized (UDF), among many other events. Burawoy argues that the struggle to end apartheid stipulates a major objective: the making of a special kind of sociology that aligns with the aim of public sociology, which he (Burawoy) aptly crafts as ‘liberation sociology’. One striking question that Burawoy brings to the fore is whether sociologists should relinquish their intellectual autonomy as they collaborate with trade unions and liberation organizations such as SACP and ANC? In this regard, should sociologists develop an instrumental or a reflexive engagement? (22).

For Burawoy, the uniqueness of the 1980s was the rise of what he calls ‘trench’ sociology. Thus, we see how each period of South African sociology adds a new moment, re-signifying rather than displacing what already exists. The public sociology (liberation sociology) of the 1980s evolved out of, and merged with, the critical sociology of the 1970s, itself a reaction to the failings of professional sociology of the 1950s and 60s to come to grips with the exigencies of anti-apartheid struggles (see Burawoy 2003: 268; Burawoy 2004: 22). Moreover, throughout the course of the history of South African sociology the center of modernization re-emerged from an instrumental to a reflexive sociology. Burawoy dismisses the general consensus that upheld universalism in public sociology and he, thus, advocates that public sociology needs contextualization. Citing an exemplary models, Burawoy states that “as politics in the United States moves rightwards – eroding civil liberties, eliminating welfare, reducing funds for education and health and at the same time increasing war expenditures and reducing taxation of the wealthy – so sociologists acquire a greater sense of urgency to communicate their ideas and findings to broader communities” (2004:16). Indeed post-apartheid South Africa may have succeeded in commodifying the profession of

sociology and transforming all other sociologies into policy-driven enterprise. Indeed civil societies may be too weak to sustain public sociology (compare Burawoy 2003: 267).

Sociology in post-apartheid South Africa

Sociology in post-apartheid South Africa manifestly makes a detour from spontaneous engagement with publics and social issues to instrumental reason, what Burawoy calls “defence against the twin pressures of de-professionalization and commodification.” Under post-apartheid South Africa, sociology sings the song of developmental and problem-solving lyrics and “equally fired embrace of private property and market exchange” (Burawoy 2003). It was clear that post-apartheid demobilized civil societies and trade unions and one is forced to attribute this tendency to “the upward mobility of leaders or of the neoliberal offensive” (23). This, according to Burawoy, has “rendered sociology increasingly rudderless.” Less affected by the assault on academia and situated between the university and civil society, NGOs have often assumed the responsibility of public sociology. It has been abandoned for left intellectuals, some of them ex-sociologists such as Ashwin Desai and Trevor Ngwane, to galvanize poor people’s movements, building alliances such as the Anti-Privatization Forum. An academic sociology has yet to coagulate around these new movements (2004:23).

As the World Bank abandons its funding of higher education, the government has imposed a ‘structural adjustment’ on the social sciences, demanding that they be ‘cost-effective’, by turning to vocational education and supplying specific skills rather than a critical intelligence (2004:23). Disciplines are under assault from an ever more voluminous administrative machinery determined to control their every move. The already dissipated energies, due largely to lack of competent teachers, are getting more dissipated in bureaucratic tasks far removed from the university’s mission. We are witnessing the instrumentalization of sociology, re-directing it from an interrogation of ends to a fascination with means, often means of its own continued existence. The post-apartheid state views itself as a representative of common good and thus believes that sociology should be a state-driven enterprise needed for nation building. The state, however, has little patience for public and critical sociologies that articulate the disparate interests that inhere in society. The assault on sociology becomes part of a broader offensive against an active society (2004:25).

Burawoy’s question of “What happened to sociology after apartheid?” is critical towards a necessary recovery of public sociology. In his Presidential Address to the South African Sociological Association in 1996, Ari Sitas paints a miserable picture of how the new democratic dispensation has been accompanied by the decline of left hegemony. He points out some fundamental problems such as the brain drain of sociologists into corporations and government, the dropping of material conditions in the academy, the rise of professionalism, experts and consultants, and the ascendancy of problem-framing by policy structures and international collaboration (2004:23). Concerning Third World’s relationship to the IMF or the World Bank, Burawoy believes that we are borrowing cultural capital from the most inappropriate sources to service appropriate needs. Sounding like a round peg in a square hole, our actions, according to Burawoy, likens to ‘mediocre imitators’

In support of public sociology in post-apartheid South Africa

The big question is how South African Sociology can be preserved and restored to a preoccupation with public issues, especially in the face of systemic assault by the state? It is already established that “the cornerstone of anti-apartheid sociology was its public face that depended on close engagement with burgeoning civic organizations and trade unions” (Burawoy 2003: 23). We are aware that Burawoy’s texts are concerned with sociology and its relation to civil society which, as we already know, was born in European civil society at

the end of the nineteenth century. In supporting Burawoy's call for public sociology in the present South Africa it must be recognized that Sociology has a public voice and face going by its previous connections with apartheid South Africa and going by Burawoy's historical extrapolations: that sociology was given birth with structures that had the public's interests at large, such as mass education, mass political parties, the print media, national police force, the postal service and the means of transportation all of which linked populations to the nation state. I strongly believe that as mirror and conscience of society, sociology must define, promote and inform public debate about increasing class and racial disparity, new gender establishments, environmental degradation, market fundamentalism, state and non state violence. I believe that the world urgently needs public sociology, a sociology that transcends the academy more than ever.

In my thinking, as also argued by Burawoy, South African Sociology can be preserved and restored to a preoccupation with public issues not by re-enacting the past or mourning the disappearance of liberation sociology, but by invoking a radical kind of sociology that addresses more complex investigation of alternative routes. Public sociology must be achieved by pursuing new research programs that critically scrutinizes the social grounds of different development strategies, development strategies that, in turn, depend on autonomous spaces for reflection and debate, for undertaking research and analysis.

I argue that a South African sociology must restrain the evil hands of globalization which has cut down the spending on research in higher education. These same evil hands have also re-directed the agencies of funding from research that adopts home-grown criteria as its bench-mark for standardization. Much as one does not advocate for a South African sociology that is isolationist, I strongly push for a sociology that addresses human problems from a local perspective. In addressing national issues that are uniquely South African, there is a need to take a cue from American sociology especially for the purposes of satisfying local research needs. Recuperating South African sociology must be informed by South African priorities that will also accommodate other sociological paradigms from the South. Such sociology must abandon the project of dominant ideology and rather adopt an alternative thesis that is counter-hegemonic and rooted in national and transnational civil societies.

Conclusion

In this essay I have strongly supported Burawoy's call for public sociology as a means to recuperate the discipline of sociology. The reasons have also been well spelt out: a public sociology will speak to the local dynamic and make sociology accessible to the broader local/South African community. A public sociology will form a defense against the tyranny of the state (as it did during the apartheid period with the rise of social movements). A public sociology will engage in a critical conversation with environmental, human rights, labour and gender movements to restore lost glory gained in the sociology discipline during the apartheid period. However, the process of achieving this goal, in my mind, can be articulated through what Edward Said (1978) calls "contrapuntal reading" and through what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) describes as "Provincializing Europe". Both Said and Chakrabarty emphasize the need for eclectic dialogue in approaching issues of intellectual and epistemological concerns. They seem to echo Jimi Adésinà that there is a need for inclusive and interpenetrating methodology such that "we are not "either" / "or" rather we are often many things embedded in one" (Adésinà, 2005:21). For Edward Said, therefore, 'contrapuntal reading' allows one to synthesize fundamental elements of all the other four aspects of sociology namely: Policy, professional and critical sociologies to arrive at a suitable model to engage the public. For Chakrabarty's 'provincializing Europe' public sociology may not become a self-referential autonomous subject that it aspires to, rather it

might become a means of viewing sociology through the prism of other disciplines such as History, Anthropology, Geography, Political Science, among other disciplines. In doing this public sociology may no longer assume a conventional methodology rather it might become a means of methodological critique. Finally, I advocate for a public sociology in South Africa as a way to recover the discipline of sociology in South Africa. In support of my view Lionel Thaver, for example, believes that for a meaningful recovery of South African sociology, one needed to revisit apartheid and its associational paradoxes, re-align one's text towards contextual methodological and epistemological concerns in South Africa. The social dynamics surrounding South Africa demands urgent attention from sociologists doing sociology in South Africa, otherwise their sociology, according to Thaver, is like a text devoid of the very ground upon which it is meant to stand.

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