

Public sociology - a discussion for and against



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It may be argued that sociology is of activist origins, propelled by a desire to comprehend, diagnose and ultimately administer solutions to societal ailments. However, with the advent of scientific discourse, especially the rise of so-called hard sciences, the discipline has been absorbed into the pedagogic realm of social-science which seeks to emulate its empirical cousin and take residence within the ivory tower of academia, virtuous in its efforts to seek objectivism, value-freedom and political abstinence. The purpose of this essay is to explore the proposition that sociology should reclaim its identity, expanding its imagination (Mills 1959) as a politically engaged agent tasked with improving society through a critical dialogue with various institutions and actors. This essay will consider the contention offered by some of sociology's founding fathers, particularly Marx and Engels (1848) and Durkheim (1972), that sociology should be at the vanguard of social engagement and change - a citadel of moral and intellectual purity, a 'philosopher king' (Plato 1993: 109). By extension, this essay will include a critique of the academic milieu in which sociology resides, addressing the dispute that it has become colonised and thus compromised by wider market and political forces and thus incapable of functioning as an independent agent of knowledge and change.

The proposition of a Public Sociology is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, the founding progenitors envisaged a discipline actively engaged with the political milieu and public lifeworld. Indeed, Durkheim (1972), conceiving of a social world underpinned by tangible laws - reiterating Comte's (1988: 33) 'science of society' - predicted that sociologists would become aides-de-camp to the state, revered intellects who would influence policy and legislature. By

contrast, Marx and Engels (1848) were interested in the dissemination of knowledge to the grass-roots or proletariat - to reawaken their collective consciousness and engender a rebellious will-to-power (Nietzsche 2014) against the prevailing capitalist system. Importantly, despite its definition, sociology was less interested in the comprehension of social life per se: rather it was obsessed with the noxious configurations that comprised society, mournful of the crippling and incarcerating effects these had on humanity's potential and species-being (Marx and Engels 1991). This remains a dominating theme within sociology today: the field of critical theory has almost reached a level of 'theoretical saturation' (Bryman 2004: 544) inasmuch as abuses against civilisation on grounds of (for example) gender, class, race and creed have been researched and articulated repeatedly in pedagogic discourse, simply restructured in linguistic hyperbole to pass as authentic. By contrast, Weber (1989) was concerned with maintaining abstinence from the political arena, endorsing scientific mastery and the conduct of research for its own virtue i. e. 'as a vocation' (78); sociology held no greater esteem over the value-laden judgements of social-political discourse and must therefore limit public discussion to the classrooms.

The debate regarding sociology's public face was again revitalised by Mills (1959) who, acknowledging a gross depreciation in the social lifeworld, offered a critical assessment of his field, which had abandoned its public calling, instead becoming captivated by the power and prestige (including resources) offered by academia. The discipline had succumbed to institutionalisation, a servant of the university and its preoccupation with

quantifiable (profitable) results, professionalism and its self-image as a reputable organisation. By extension, as a business, academia pandered to powerful organisations (purse holders) like the state and private shareholders; exploration was only authorised and noteworthy if it aligned with the demands and/or values of a minority who possess the architectural means of production (Zsolnai and Gasparski 2002). Also, Parker and Jary (1995) allude to the notion that sociology is subject to the McUniversity, whereby the fixation of budgets, time restraints and production of (quantifiable) articles, books and graduates has a detrimental effect on the vibrancy and eclecticism of its sociological imagination (Mills 1959), thereby crippling any possibility for politicking – scientific absence is the prevailing episteme or ideology (Gouldner 1971). Thus, sociology is not only accused of abandonment but also of participating in a form of symbolic violence inasmuch as it retains potentially empowering or life-giving knowledge, which it retrieves from an ailing world, to secure its own somewhat tentative (albeit profitable) status as a soft ad-hoc science. As Luck (2007) ably posits, this negative label cast on the back of sociology is based on ‘not so much its actions but failing to act’ (140). In addition, Gouldner (1971) had contended that, awkwardly aware of its betrayal and desperately seeking to generate a credible facade, sociology provides lip-service or commiseration and an imitated gesture of desire for social change.

Yet some have argued that sociology has required time to solidify itself and create a scholarly community based not only on substantive research but also camaraderie, interdependency and trust (Adair-Toteff 1995) from which a new breed of intellect could arise, unfettered by self-interest, and rather

concerned with improving society and seeking to reinvigorate and enhance its intellectual flare through public engagement. As Marx and Engels (1848: 3) asserted: 'philosophers have interpreted the world [...] the point however is to change it!'. Therefore, sociology should be less concerned with holding onto the tailcoats of so-called hard sciences, and focus on harnessing its own methodology to irradiate, disseminate and help transform the social milieu - to become a participatory agent in the (re)creation of society. Indeed, the political life of Bourdieu (1993) is often regarded as a prime example of the kinds of dirty work sociologists should be engaged in; having witnessed the venomous social disparities of a failing and unjust French society, he took to the streets in numerous political protests. This constitutes a form of academic bricolage (Hebdige 1988) whereby normative procedures and forms of professionalism prolific within the pedagogic milieu - designed to confine scholars to specific predefined scripts of conduct - are broken or otherwise inverted. His actions as a scholarly activist serve as a template for today's sociologists; a reminder of their role involves dirty work or aligning themselves with ordinary people in a bid to better understand social angsts - thereby enhancing epistemologies and methodologies - and subsequently improve society. As a result, Bourdieu (1993) suggested that, only through public engagement could sociology develop an augmented, rich and powerful knowledge-base, otherwise it would simply be masquerading as a social-scientific field.

Thus, Chomsky and Otero (2004) denote that we must fashion a more reflexive sociology (third-order understanding) - to analyse and remodify the pedagogic habitus - capable of comprehending often subtle and taken-for-

granted interconnections, like the asymmetrical interplay of power, capital and playing fields within academia, that affect and hinder the discipline. Sociology must be aware of its own metaphorical blind spot – its arrogances and handicaps – and critically engage in reciprocated policing within its various subfields and other interdependent social-sciences. As Bourdieu (1988) advocated, being self-critical will facilitate a comfortability in one's own skin and ultimately strengthen the field's core. Indeed, as Murji (2007) argues, sociology remains a host to external asymmetries such that a white middle-class male continues to demarcate the archetypal modern-day sociologist. In a similar vein, as Ossewaarde (2007) alludes, sociological productions are overwhelmingly driven by and imbued with Westernised ideals, values and perspectives, specifically those fashioned in the United States: this is obviously indicative of wider societal inequalities that belittle or otherwise disadvantage other countries not befitting first-world status. Also, as Parenti (1995) suggests, the types of research revered most are typically those aligned with empiricism (e. g. statistics, quantification, reports) and policy-centred. As a result, somewhat idealistically, Burawoy (2005) advocates an academic revolution within sociology to generate a more equitable playing field.

Despite the criticism inferred on sociology, concerning its diminished public identity and seeing it as a hotbed of malignance, many have come to its defence. For example, Hossfeld and Nyden (2005) have contended that an ASA Task Force has been created to reclaim sociological presence within the political, offering incentives and promotional positions to eligible scholars interested in disseminating the sociological imagination to wider audiences.

Also, Kalleberg (2005) recognises the existing efforts made to produce jargon-free literature and broadcasts that pertain to parochial as well as (inter)national issues. Similarly, as Skeggs and Deem (2003) note, especially following the cultural turn, face-to-face and in-depth engagements with the public, including those disadvantaged groups such as women, the working-class and ethnic minorities, have intensified with the rise of qualitative methodologies. Hence, there remains active engagement and participation by sociologists with extra-academic cohorts, alluding to the fact that sociology can synthesise professionalism with public involvement; a by-product of this is the emancipatory and empowering effects such engagements can generate. However, proclaiming that sociologists should uproot and become heretical scholars is a monumental ask; one that threatens their very ontological wellbeing i. e. their reputation, financial security, friendships and way of life could be jeopardised in the process of transgression – one might even envisage a social death for those daring to try (Shilling 2003). By extension, such an act would invariably compromise the already fragile reputation of sociology; opening its doors to the public would risk its credibility and entice the stigmatised label (Goffman 1990) of just another fanatical ‘ism’ to be discarded alongside the other failed idealistic enterprises, such as Marxism and Feminism (Brady 2004).

In addition, given the fact that sociology is inhabited by a diverse and deeply opinionated cohort of intellects who occupy a range of paradigms, it is unlikely that (in the near future anyway) such individuals will collectively march in unison under the banner of a Public Sociology. Yet it might be plausible for sociology to formulate a democratically charged governing body

that could represent the standpoints of a majority force; elected representatives may perhaps serve as champions charged with proliferating ideas and findings and leaving society to decide what, if anything, should be done with them. That said, Nielson (2004) makes the important point that there is a massive incongruence between the ideal and somewhat advanced heuristic devices and ideas generated within the pedagogic milieu and the realities of the social lifeworld; the latter remains a comparatively primitive figuration of ideologies and values incapable or unready to assimilate the ideas of the former. The mind is a cursed thing, it permits us to envisage infinitely wonderful (utopian) worlds where societal processes operate as a beautiful symphony unchecked by toxic social phenomena, histories, idiosyncrasies and other variants that make reality a constant work-in-progress of ebbs and flows, of civility and barbarism, of progress and regression (Parenti 1995). As a result, in true Weberian tradition, Nielson (2004) contends that sociology has no superior 'right of way' (33) in public-political affairs. Instead, we should concern ourselves with aiding the present or aligning ourselves with the spirit of the times (zeitgeist). In the end, the question of sociology's public identity continues to be a hotly debated concept, its actual realisation requires a level of faith and risk and remains (in large) something to behold.

This essay has sought to detail the various arguments for and against a politically engaged Public Sociology - a controversy that has reigned since the subject's inception and one that continues in a somewhat recurring pattern throughout its development. Indeed, as sociology becomes increasingly self-reflexive and more substantiated in its understanding of

social processes, the urge for argumentation regarding its identity and role within society becomes greater. As this essay shows, there is certainly a moral imperative or compulsion within sociology to irradiate asymmetrical discourses that cripple humanity's potential and subsequently assist in emancipating ourselves from them; this urge is expected given that we are sentient and empathic beings. However, this essay has also acknowledged the possible detriment that may befall sociology in such a venture. Moreover, we have explored the various external forces that contribute to the overall condition of the sociological paradigm; the discipline is imprinted with numerous inequalities and is persuaded greatly by market and political demands to the disadvantage of forming a Public Sociology. Finally, the issue of individual differences, whilst not extensively explored, will remain a long-lasting dilemma as we attempt to reconcile our differences, and harness our collective research and experiences to develop a legitimate and democratically-orientated discipline suitably equipped, confident and competent in participating within wider society.

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