

# **Public Sociology**

Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate  
Politics and the Profession in the  
Twenty-first Century

EDITED BY

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# Contents

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Acknowledgments / vii

## INTRODUCTORY

Introduction

ROBERT ZUSSMAN AND JOYA MISRA / 3

For Public Sociology

MICHAEL BURAWOY 23

## INSTITUTIONALIZING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

Public Sociology and the End of Society

ALAIN TOURAINE / 67

Stalled at the Altar? Conflict, Hierarchy, and  
Compartmentalization in Burawoy's Public Sociology

SHARON HAYS / 79

If I Were the Goddess of Sociological Things

JUDITH STACEY / 91

Going Public: Doing the Sociology That Had No Name

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS / 101

ORLANDO PATTERSON

## About Public Sociology

Michael Burawoy's account of public sociology exhibits some of the virtues, and many of the worst intellectual vices, of contemporary sociology. The piece is well informed, intellectually lively, and dashed with a few useful insights, such as the distinction between sociology and the career trajectories of sociologists (Thesis V) and the different styles of sociology around the world and the questionable international role of American sociology (Thesis IX). Contrary to his repeated misrepresentation of me as an "elitist" in his frequent talks around the country and the world on this subject—a fabrication that verges on the slanderous in light of my long engagement with radical political change and social programs aimed at the alleviation of poverty in the postcolonial Caribbean—I firmly believe that the public use of sociology, properly executed, is part of a communicative process in the public sphere that is necessarily democratic in both intent and consequence.

At the same time, the essay illustrates some of the worst habits of contemporary sociological thinking, the most important here being its excessive overschematization and overtheorizing of subjects, the construction of falsely crisp sets and categories, and the failure to take seriously the role of agency in social outcomes, even while theoretically applauding it, or to acknowledge the profoundly moral or valorized nature of the sociocultural universe we study and the distinctive intellectual challenges this valorized reality poses.

Let's take a closer look at one of the most glaring of these: the overschematization and theoretic pretensions of the essay. Burawoy's task is simple: What is public sociology? What are its problems and where is it headed? He begins by imposing a fourfold schema (that Ouija board of the discipline), which is plausible enough. Not content with this, however, Burawoy proceeds to square the grid, proposing that the content of each cell become a new dimension, generating a sixteen-celled array of sociological types! I am not exaggerating—see Thesis IV.

If this enterprise we all care about is to be taken seriously by nonsociologists, we have to begin by being less promiscuous in our use of categories. But there is an even more serious requirement: sociologists have got to learn that the universe they study is imprecise, and for this reason most of the sets we work with are at best fuzzy.

In what follows I will draw on over four decades of personal experience in public sociology, and on the lives of other sociologists in America and other parts of the world, in an attempt to describe the main types of public sociology and the reasons why there is so little of it in America *relative to* the large number of professional sociologists in this country. What do past and present members of the profession who are generally acknowledged to be public sociologists do, *qua* public sociology? At the narrowest, they are engaged in one way or another with various publics beyond the strictly professional community. Engagement entails the attempt to communicate with, and influence, the particular public they are involved with. If the communication is democratic, as it should be, the influence is mutual, or at least has the potential to be so. The public in question may be transnational, or the nation at large, or it may be more specialized and local—one's city or state or local farm community, an interest group or ethnic community.

### PUBLIC AND POLICY SOCIOLOGY: A FALSE DISTINCTION

Burawoy and several others writing on this subject, including Pierre Bourdieu, have argued that those who work for a client—political or business—are not to be considered public sociologists. Indeed, Bourdieu went so far as to call such sociologists "scabs" (Carles 2001). Burawoy and those he echoes offer no good reason for this distinction, and I strongly disagree with them. Working for a client may or may not be public sociology, depending on the nature of the task, the principles

and intention of the social scientist, and the involvement of an audience beyond the expert and the client.

Let's take the case of the Council of Economic Advisers to the American president. Sitting on this council offers any scholar an extraordinary opportunity to practice public social science, and it is absurd to suggest that the terms of employment rule out such work from the domain of public sociology. It depends entirely on what the expert does with the job, as the following cases demonstrate. A year before he took up the chairmanship in 2003, Harvard economist Greg Mankiw was severely critical of President Bush's enormous deficits and had nothing but contempt for supply-side economic theories as well as policies based on this view, going so far as to use it as a case study in bad economic thinking in his popular economics textbook. Nonetheless, within weeks of taking up the chairmanship, Mankiw did a complete about-turn and was fully supporting the president's profligate deficit spending and massively regressive tax policies on supply-side grounds. Here we have a scholar serving his employer in an intellectually dishonest way that completely disregards the national public, or any public for that matter. What makes his actions all the more deplorable is that there were several precedents of economists who chose to abide by their principles and placed the public interest (as they saw it) over the wishes of their boss. In 1983-84, for example, Mankiw's senior colleague at Harvard, Marty Feldstein, who chaired the council under Reagan, publicly disagreed with his boss's fiscal policies and warned the public in speeches and op-eds that the price it would pay would be years of trade and budget deficits (Frankel 2003). Feldstein's behavior in the chairmanship was a classic instance of honorable public social science behavior. The main difference seems to be the degree to which social scientists remain true to their principles and what they have learned from their discipline and their willingness to speak truth to power in defending the public interest as they understand it.

This remains true even in cases where the political and policy views of the professional are greatly at variance with those of the client. An example from my own experience can illustrate this. Not long after Gerald Ford took over the presidency upon the resignation of the disgraced Richard Nixon, it became apparent that his very sheltered political life as a congressman from an upper-middle-class suburb in Michigan had left him painfully ignorant of important areas of public life in the country that he now led. To correct this problem, an in-house educator at the White House arranged a series of crash-course tutorials for the presi-

dent on important economic and social issues of the day. A small group of experts on the subject in question were invited to spend the better part of a working day at the White House, where they had lunch with the president and put on a lively debate for him, making sure that all points of view were represented. One topic on which the president needed education was ethnicity; apparently he hardly knew what the word meant when he took over, even though the country was then going through the so-called ethnic revival, a movement with political implications in view of the fact that the revival was really mainly a backlash by so-called white ethnics against the newly emerged black solidarity movement. I was invited to join a group of five scholars on this occasion, my role being to argue the case against any promotion of ethnicity by the government, which I then considered, and still do, a development with neofascist dangers. I accepted the assignment, in spite of my radically different political orientation from the rather conservative president (indeed, at the time I was actually a special advisor to Prime Minister Michael Manley of Jamaica, then the second-most-radical head of state in the hemisphere). Did this mean that my engagement at the White House did not count as public sociology? Absolutely not. I consider it a public duty to help in the education of the leaders of any country regardless of my ideological differences with them. I was giving expert advice, as I interpreted it, about a vitally important development in the country to someone in a position to do something about it. Of equal importance, however, is the manner in which I gave my expert advice. I told the president outright that the ethnic revival was a right-wing reaction against the civil rights movement and the growth of African American political consciousness and that the state should stay out of it. This ran against the advice being given by his own political aides, as I discovered two weeks later when the president announced a new White House initiative to aid the preservation of ethnic communities. It was another battle lost, but an honorable defeat in my career as a public sociologist.

An expert who offers a range of viewpoints and leaves the decision to the client is indeed behaving like a hired hand and is not in my view a public sociologist. Boldly presenting one's point of view is a *sine qua non* of public intellectual activity. A second requirement is that what one does be of public interest.

The fact that one works for a client is an irrelevance, as is the question of whether one is paid or not. Two further cases from my own experience with the private sector will further clarify the issue. I was

once asked by *Forbes* magazine to debate the issue of affirmative action before a large audience of personnel executives from America's top five hundred companies. I was handsomely paid and lavishly quartered. My work for *Forbes* was public sociology in every possible sense of the term. I was attempting to educate the five hundred most influential employers in the nation, and whatever they took away from our meeting was likely to influence in some way the employment prospect of a good number of minority and women executives.

Contrast this with a lecture and discussion session I had with the marketing staff of one of the nation's largest pharmaceutical companies several months ago. Neither I nor my audience was in any doubt about the objective of our engagement—they were there to pick my brains about how they could use America's central civic value—freedom—to sell their products. This was, to be sure, perfectly respectable work—no Pierre, this is not “scab” work. We live in the world's most successful capitalist society (with incomes to prove it), and however much sociology may choose to forget and deny it, marketing is one of the discipline's stupidly abandoned orphans, jointly parented by two of the preeminent founders of modern American sociology, Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld. Nonetheless, this was not public sociology.

Why? Simply that, unlike the *Forbes* case, there was no public involved. This was a wholly private affair between employer and expert. In the work for *Forbes* there were large and important publics—minority and women aspirants to executive jobs. And there was a major public issue—the glass ceiling that these groups encounter at certain points in their careers. What's more, to the degree that the emergence of a solidly grounded middle- and upper-class minority is considered important for the long-term solution of one of America's most chronic social problems—the historic ethnic exclusion of minorities—our debate addressed a national issue. The same holds for women's equality. The only consequence of my work for the pharmaceutical company, if any, pertained to its private gain, which, to repeat, is a perfectly honorable thing in this ultracapitalist America that so generously endows me and the likes of Michael Burawoy.

Any action by a sociologist beyond the academy, then, that entails and engages a public is public sociology. The engagement may be for any kind of client and may be more indirect than direct; it really does not matter. Indeed, the insistence by people who write about public sociology that the sociologist must be directly engaged is not only romantic nonsense but dangerous, for it implies that the sociologist need not be

as alert to the publics he or she is likely to be engaging, however indirectly or unwittingly, when doing private work. Sociologists ought to take seriously what radical women sociologists and intellectual activists were the first to make clear—that the distinction between private and public is itself at best fuzzy, although still very useful, and in the wrong heads can be turned against women and other excluded groups.

How many kinds of public sociologies are there? It depends very much on who is doing the classification and the objectives of the analyst. I suggested above that Burawoy's schematization is overdone. Instead of sixteen or even four, I suggest three broad sets of public sociologies: the professionally engaged; the discursively engaged; and the actively or civically engaged. The sets overlap. A single sociologist may engage in all three, as I do.

### PROFESSIONALLY ENGAGED PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

By professional engagement I mean the kind of public sociology in which the scholar remains largely committed to the work but becomes involved with publics and important public issues as an expert. Usually the public comes to the social scientist for advice, rather than the latter seeking out and engaging the public, although this sometimes happens. Now it is the case that a fair number of sociologists do just this, but what is truly remarkable about the current state of American sociology, and the saddest reflection of the state of the discipline, is how few sociologists get publicly involved with issues that they have spent their entire professional lives studying. Most sociological specialists prefer to spend their time talking to other specialists.

In their long-term study of the effects of sociology on public policy, Carol H. Weiss (1993) and her collaborators found such effects “only occasionally evident.” The best that could be hoped for is a kind of “knowledge creep” in which there is an “amorphous percolation of sociological ideas into the policy arena.” It is revealing that whenever Weiss gives actual examples, she shifts from talking about sociology to “social science,” and as often as not the social scientists she has in mind are economists.

A major reason for this state of affairs is the perverse tendency of the discipline to shed or marginalize most applied and descriptive areas of social research, precisely those fields that are of direct interest to policy makers and the nonsociological public in general. This strange proclivity for practical irrelevance began with the professionalization of the

discipline in the early part of the century, when social work was shunned by all the emerging departments, along with scholars who were devoted to it. A major early intellectual casualty of this development was Jane Addams, a brilliant founding mother of the discipline in America who suffered from the blatant sexism of her times and continues to do so in the near complete neglect of her important contributions. Unlike all the other social sciences, including economics, sociology has rejected any kind of applied branch, and no major department will today consider hiring anyone, however distinguished in her own right, who works in applied areas such as social work.

But later developments were even more perverse. Several fields that naturally belong to sociology and are, in some cases, technically even more advanced than that found in typical mainstream sociological work have been held at arm's length by the discipline. Demography is the most extreme case in point. What is true of demography is even more the case with criminology, another field that is as natural a sub-field of the discipline as the study of the family or organizations. The same holds for fields such as marketing and communications.

By systematically shedding all those areas of the study of society that the public is most interested in and would naturally turn to sociology for expert answers, sociology has committed a slow kind of disciplinary hari-kari. Who in America, except fellow sociologists, wants to learn about the micro-macro problem, the processes of structuration, or the quarrels between rational choice theorists and comparative macrosociologists about the best theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of revolutions? Don't get me wrong. These are worthy issues, and I should be the last person to complain about exotic problems. For heaven's sake, one of my most recent academic papers was on the problem of the relation of slavery to Spartan helotage in Messinia some five centuries before Christ! My complaint, rather, is with the fact that these are primarily the issues that sociology finds legitimate. All the other social sciences, including economics, have made sure that however much they may soar in the theoretical or exotic academic realms they have one applied foot firmly planted in the real world where their expertise is needed.

The main reason for the unwise dissociation of the discipline from fields such as demography and criminology with their rich traditions of professional engagement is the decision by gatekeepers of the discipline, especially after the 1960s, to adopt a normal science approach modeled on physics and its experimental methodology rather than on biology.

Stanley Lieberman and Freda Lynn (2002) have written eloquently on this fateful turn and its implications.

Another major reason why the expert advice of sociologists is often neglected is the structural bias of the discipline and its tendency to neglect—and often abominate—personal choices and responsibility as important components of any explanation of social problems. Let me illustrate with one striking example. Today a major debate rages in America about the state and future of marriage and the family. While there are a few notable exceptions—David Popenoe, Sara McLanahan, Pepper Schwartz, Arlie Hochschild, Linda Waite, and Norval Glenn immediately come to mind—what strikes me as unusual is the absence of a vigorous sociological presence in this heated public debate. Imagine a national debate on the crisis of stagflation, as we had in the 1970s, that was not dominated by economists, and one has some idea of what I am getting at.

This was not always the case. Before sociology shifted toward value-free scientism in the 1960s, almost all sociologists spent some of their time as experts informing and advising appropriate audiences. Typical of the pre-1960s era was Ernest Burgess, the twenty-fourth president of the American Sociological Association (in 1934). Although the model scholar who was thoroughly rigorous in his research and always up on the latest methods of quantitative and qualitative research, Burgess was always concerned with the ways in which his research could benefit the broader public. The big difference between today and the earlier era is that the typical sociologist then was professionally engaged, whereas today only a small minority are. Because there are thousands of professional sociologists in America, possibly more than all sociologists in the rest of the world put together, Burawoy is able to cite several prominent names as examples of expert engagement, but what is striking is how minuscule a *proportion* of the total are professionally engaged.

## DISCURSIVE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

The situation is not much better in the second of my fuzzy sets of public sociology, what may be called discursive engagement. Jürgen Habermas immediately comes to mind as the great contemporary exemplar of this tradition. However, although he does practice what he preaches, Habermas is more a theorist of this kind of social practice. It existed long before him and continues to be practiced today by publicly engaged sociologists who may never have read him and in ways that

differ from many of his own specific prescriptions. Habermas's ideas and practice, however, are useful as a prototype in a preliminary account of what this kind of public sociology is about (I draw here on Habermas 1970 and 1991).

Discursive public sociology is a form of communicative action in which claims about an aspect of our social world, or about a given society, or about society in general, are validated by means of a public conversation between the sociologist, who initiates the discourse with his or her work, and the particular public the sociologist engages. It is a requirement of this communicative process that the audience to whom, and often about whom, the sociologist speaks—and not just other sociologists—is free and able to participate, to talk back or qualify the claims made. Another way of putting it—drawing on Jürgen Habermas and J. L. Austin—is to say that the sociological communication becomes a complex speech act performed in the public sphere, aimed at a particular audience. As such, it is more than merely a locutionary statement—an objective account of social reality which is either true or false, although it also strives to be—since its pronouncement is in itself a performative act in which the intention, motive, mode of expression, attitude, beliefs, and feelings of the author are meant to have persuasive force and are thus partly validated by the audience on the basis of its perception of the author's authenticity and eloquence. And, in all cases, such works are perlocutionary acts: they are meant to have an effect upon the audience they engage; they invite responses which may change the author's later communications, for example, in later editions.

Discursive public sociology thrives in Europe, where it is still possible for scholars such as Robin Blackburn to move from decades of editing *New Left Review* and being consulting editor for Verso Press to a professorship of sociology at Essex, which has one of Britain's leading departments of sociology. Scholars such as Clause Offe and Hans Jonas in Germany, Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Aron in France, and Perry Anderson and Michael Young in Britain are only a few of the many that immediately come to mind. There is also a lively tradition of discursive public sociology in many developing societies, especially India, where the works of scholars such as Veena Das and T. K. Oommen are exemplary.

In discursive public sociology at its best, the sociologist is both rigorous social analyst and critic of society at all levels. The fact that validation comes through what Habermas calls a circular process of interaction helps to keep the analyst honest. But there is another way: constant self-

scrutiny of one's own communicative acts and the methods by which one's claims are arrived at. Excellent recent examples of this are found in the works of several Indian sociologists, such as Veena Das (1990), T. K. Oommen (1990), and Yogendra Singh (1984).

Discursive public sociology is distinctive, too, in the kinds of issues chosen for communication. Its practitioners are sometimes, a bit pejoratively, called big-think sociologists, which can easily be misunderstood. The term *big-think* is misleading if taken to mean macrothink. Many discursive sociologists think big about middle-range and small-scale issues; typically, they shift levels as the occasion demands. Herbert Gans's discourse on *Middle American Individualism* (1988) spoke at the macrocultural level; his discourse on symbolic ethnicity, a gem of rigorous social analysis that is also highly critical, paints on a medium-sized canvas, as did his classic work on working-class family life in the North End of Boston.

Whatever the level on which they think, all discursive sociologists were or are deeply engaged with a broader nonsociological audience. As such, they try hard to make their works accessible. An important way in which they did, and continue to do so, is by means of journalistic articles and editorial columns in newspapers and magazines. Journalism has had, of course, a close relationship with sociology. Many of the early founders of the discipline came to it from journalism. In Europe today, nearly all prominent sociologists write for the press.

However, with the rise of scientism in the mid-1960s, the gatekeepers of the discipline began to frown upon this and other modes of discursive communication, creating in people like David Riesman and C. Wright Mills what David Paul Haney calls "a pronounced professional ambivalence, one which they shared with sympathetic colleagues" (Haney, n.d. [1998]). When I referred to David Riesman as the "last sociologist," I was thinking mainly of the deliberate evisceration of this great tradition of discursive sociology that went back to the founding fathers of the discipline. Burawoy is completely inaccurate in his claim that the writers I cited earlier were an exceptional minority, as Haney makes clear in his valuable dissertation on the era. The price sociology paid for its scientific turn was the abandonment of its distinctive role as the discipline primarily dedicated to the critical exploration and discourse on modernity. Haney puts it well:

The challenge of retaining professional respectability became acute as professional sociologists launched aggressive attacks against both professionals and non-professionals who refined or simply appropriated sociological

research and communicated it to a non-professional readership. These professional condemnations of popularization, in turn, constituted a rearguard action in the name of preserving the autonomy of social scientific expertise from the oversimplifications and misinterpretation of sociological work in the public sphere [by people such as Vance Packard, A. C. Spector, and even William H. Whyte]. The net effect of these tensions among sociologists and between sociologists and wider communities of discourse was to exacerbate the rift between the professional and non-professional discourses on modernity. (1998, 28)

The rift widened between the 1960s and the late 1980s, the era of professional scientism. Happily, the tide began to turn after that, as a younger generation of scholars began to challenge the self-destructive withdrawal of the discipline from the public sphere. A small minority of respected scholars such as Ann Swidler, Robert Bellah and his associates, Amartai Etzioni, Richard Sennett, William Julius Wilson, Alan Wolfe, Theda Skocpol, Christopher Jencks, Paul Starr, and Todd Gitlin are reviving the great tradition of sociology as critical discourse in the public sphere through their writings and editorial work in major newspapers and journals. One of the most promising recent developments in this direction has been the launching of the journal *Contexts*, under the auspices of the American Sociological Association. (Burawoy praises *Contexts* as an exemplary case of sociology's democratic discourse. However, in labeling, and libeling, me an elitist, he failed to note that I was a founding member of the editorial board of *Contexts* and played an active role in launching and helping to nurture it through its first critical years.)

In this renewal the op-ed—invented by the *New York Times* in 1974—is a natural medium for the discursive sociologist. When successfully executed, the op-ed is an exquisite exemplar of Habermasian communicative discourse, a speech act directed at sometimes a million informed citizens, the most articulate of whom fire back with hundreds of lengthy responses, made easier by the Internet. Their comments and criticisms often raise questions that sometimes go to the heart of the scholar's work. While some sociologists have made use of this medium, it is still surprising how relatively few of them have done so, compared with economists and other social scientists.

A final point to note about discursive public sociology is that the typical scholar is not necessarily actively involved with movements within the public sphere. At one extreme she or he may even shun direct personal involvement with activist or even established civic groups. Discursive public sociologists—like their nonprofessional counterparts in

public intellectual life—have often been criticized for this lack of active engagement. Habermas has been unfairly criticized on these grounds. Within sociology perhaps the most extreme case in modern times is C. Wright Mills, who adamantly refused to become engaged in any kind of civic organization, to the occasional annoyance of good friends and strong supporters such as David Riesman.

David Riesman, as I have suggested elsewhere (Patterson 2002), was the prototypical discursive sociologist. His classic, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), is still one of the greatest acts of national self-scrutiny by a sociologist to have animated the American public sphere. The tradition continues in American sociology, but it only limps along. What is striking about the present scene in American sociology is how few leading sociologists take on this role. The tradition is actually alive and well, but it is now largely practiced by nonacademic analysts such as Michael Lind, by academics in other fields such as history and cultural studies, and by journalists such as Andrew Sullivan, Alex Kotlowitz, Scott Malcomson, and Barbara Ehrenreich.

#### ACTIVELY ENGAGED (OR CIVIC) PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

The third and final set of public sociologists I wish to distinguish is that marked primarily by the degree of active, civic, especially political, engagement of the scholar. Max Weber has often been mischaracterized on this subject. He is, in fact, a prototype of the actively engaged public sociologist. Weber's views on value neutrality in social science are often cited. I frankly find his many statements on the subject insightful in their particulars but contradictory to the point of incomprehensibility when considered in toto. What is clear is that few sociologists have ever been more passionately involved with public life. He was adamant that political engagement should be strongly informed by one's values.

The tradition of political and other civic engagement by sociologists initiated by Weber persists in Germany, as it does in most countries where the discipline thrives, America being the major exception to this pattern. It cannot be an accident that it is precisely in those countries where prominent sociologists have established a tradition of active engagement in political and civic life that sociology is held in most esteem. In contemporary Germany, Habermas is a revered national figure. More in keeping with the activism of Weber is the highly esteemed sociologist, politician, and statesman Ralf Dahrendorf, who is a former member of the German parliament, a secretary of state in its Foreign



Office, and a commissioner in the European Commission. Dahrendorf is unusual in the fact that he is equally prominent in Britain as both an academic and a public sociologist. In 1993 he was made a life peer of the realm by Queen Elizabeth. While Brazil holds the distinction of being the first state to elect a sociologist as its head, Germany may technically stake its claim to that title since Theodor Heuss, the first president of the Federal Republic, considered one of the nation's most prominent statesmen of the postwar era, was a noted member of the German Sociological Association.

In France sociology is also held in high esteem, thanks to the combined academic repute and civic engagement of scholars such as Alain Touraine, Pierre Rosanvallon, Raymond Boudon, and, of course, Pierre Bourdieu. They work in a tradition of active engagement that goes back to the main founder of the discipline in France, Émile Durkheim. In Britain, although nonsociologists and journalists like to carp at sociologists, the long tradition of active engagement by sociologists there has earned grudging respect for the discipline. In America, it is the rare sociologist who becomes politically involved with national politics.

Can sociologists ever escape their sociological training and imagination in public sociological work? Should they even try to? The two most famous politically engaged sociologists of the second half of the century seem, at first sight, to offer contradictory responses to this question. Pierre Bourdieu, who at his death in 2002 was arguably the world's most famous and influential sociologist, insisted in both his words and his deeds—especially during the last, politically militant decade of his life—that the sociologist necessarily brings his or her specialized training to social and political work in the public sphere. Loïc Wacquant, Bourdieu's collaborator and a leading interpreter, tells us that "Bourdieu continually fused scientific inquiry and political activism. Doing social science was always for him an indirect way of doing politics: what changed over time is the dosage of those two elements and the degree of *scientific sublimation* of his political pulsions" (Wacquant 2004). Further, sociologists have a moral obligation to bring their training to work in the public sphere, because it is precisely when sociology moves from the abstract to the publicly engaged, the "nitty gritty," as Bourdieu calls it, that it becomes a powerful means of personal liberation from the external and internalized forces of domination in modern capitalist society. As he himself wrote:

I believe that when sociology remains at a highly abstract and formal level, it contributes nothing. When it gets down to the nitty gritty of real life,

however, it is an instrument that people can apply to themselves for quasi-clinical purposes. The true freedom that sociology offers is to give us a small chance of knowing what game we play and of minimizing the ways in which we are manipulated by the forces of the field in which we evolve, as well as by the embodied social forces that operate from within us. I am not suggesting that sociology solves all the problems in the world, far from it, but that it allows us to discern the sites where we do indeed enjoy a degree of freedom and those where we do not. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992)

But consider, now, the second-most-famous sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century and, as the only member of the profession to ever lead a country, the most powerful: Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who became president of Brazil after a landslide victory in 1994. (On Cardoso's sociology and its relation to his politics, see Kane 2004.) Cardoso was for most of his adult life a leading neo-Marxian academic sociologist, one of the founders of the dependency school of Third World development studies, and a former president of the International Sociological Association (Cardoso 1978).

So what happened when a neo-Marxian sociologist became president of one of the world's largest countries? He became a leading advocate of neoliberal, market-driven reconstruction of his economy. I have no record of what Bourdieu thought of this transformation, but I suspect that his views, if available, would be unprintable. Using the policy prescriptions of free-market economics, Cardoso was enormously successful at reducing inflation and restoring fiscal stability to Brazil, and he became the darling of his nation's entrepreneurial elite and the International Monetary Fund. In fairness, he also consolidated Brazil's transition to full democracy, a major achievement in its own right. However, assessed in terms of neo-Marxian sociology, or even mainstream American liberal sociology, which focuses on inequality and improvements in the provision of basic needs to the mass of the population, Cardoso's regime was a failure. Brazil remained at the end of his presidency one of the most unequal economies in the world, its burgeoning *favellas* vast and hellish urban jungles of unimaginable misery, its African-descent population—by most measures, the majority—mired in poverty and utterly excluded from a racist elite whose only counterpart is apartheid South Africa, a condition made worse, until recently, by the country's bizarre dominant national narrative of racial democracy.

How could this have happened? What does it convey about the limits of politically engaged sociology? According to a now-famous report in the Brazilian daily *Folha de S. Paulo*, which has acquired the status of a

Brazilian urban myth and Third World intellectual legend, Cardoso, while serving as finance minister prior to winning the presidency, told a group of businessmen deeply curious about his sociological writings that they could safely "forget what I wrote." Cardoso has denied ever making such a statement, but what remains undeniable is that he ditched every tenet of the dependency theory he had so ardently advocated for most of his academic career as a sociologist (see Goertzel 1995).

Cardoso's experience made painfully clear the political and policy irrelevance of most macrosociological thought on the sociology of development. The problem of dependency theory was not so much that it was erroneous—although many have their doubts—but that it explained the realities of Third World underdevelopment at such a high level of systemic abstraction that there was nothing one could do with it when placed in a position of power, or of advising those in power. Cardoso also learned quickly where his theory was most deficient—that it made no room for human agency.

I learned this from my own experiences as special advisor to the late prime minister Michael Manley, whose democratic socialist government attempted the radical transformation of postcolonial Jamaica during the 1970s. I knew Manley long before he became prime minister of Jamaica in 1972, and in our dinners and many conversations with each other he was especially interested in the Caribbean version of dependency theory that social scientists belonging to the Caribbean New World group, myself included, had developed while teaching at the University of the West Indies. Unlike Cardoso, Manley continued to take dependency theory seriously after becoming prime minister and even wrote several books on the subject while still in office. It didn't work. In fact, the consequences were disastrous. His call for a new world economic order—which is the only logical policy implication of dependency theory—was grandiose and engendered enormous tensions both externally, especially with the United States, and internally. Castigating the local managerial elite as a comprador class is not a good idea when you are introducing a vast number of new programs requiring managerial talent, especially when that managerial class has easy exit to North America. Maligning the International Monetary Fund with rhetoric taken from unequal exchange theory has unfortunate consequences if your foreign earnings are exhausted and the exchange rate of your currency is plummeting. Dependency theory, in short, worked wonderfully in graduate seminars. As the foundation of real policies in the real world, it was a nonstarter.

Unfortunately, much the same holds for the policy implications of most contemporary sociological theories. The problem with sociology is that it does not take personal agency seriously, even though it has become fashionable to note the need to take account of it in recent scholarship. However, the subject is treated at an almost metaphysical level in discussions of the so-called duality of structure and agency. In theoretical terms, scholars who talk about agency nonetheless proceed to develop theories of revolution and social movements devoid of ideology or human leadership. In practical terms, sociology remains highly suspicious of all notions of personal initiative and responsibility. Indeed, it is routine to castigate anyone foolish enough to take agency seriously as a reactionary bent on blaming the victim, as I have discovered in my attempts to do so in my studies and academic talks on the problems of gender and familial relations among African Americans.

I suggest that this is the real reason why sociology finds itself marginalized today in the United States and not, as Burawoy argues, the fact that the country is moving to the right while sociology is moving leftward. Of course, if, as I suspect, Burawoy holds that taking personal responsibility seriously is a right-wing move, then he is correct. And that, I fear, is the problem. Sociology has condemned itself to a version of public action that is out of this world. It does not even apply to communist China anymore.

But sociology's version of public action is a dogma that the discipline seems suicidally committed to, and it explains why the vast majority of leading sociologists largely shun political and other active engagement, even in areas where they have devoted a considerable amount of academic energy. Nowhere was this more evident than in the marginalization of the discipline during the major shift in welfare policy in the mid-1990s. It will be recalled that for decades prior to the 1996 welfare reform act (known officially as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act), sociologists had insisted with extraordinary unanimity that the poor, especially the black poor, could never learn to fend for themselves without major government subsidy, that poverty was wholly the result of structural factors, that talk of welfare dependency and personal responsibility was reactionary, and that the only decent policy for the poor was to give them more of what they lacked, money, until such time as the radical restructuring of the economy allowed for their final transition from poverty. Even scholars who argued for a more interactive approach, in which historically inherited and institutional structures had to be interpreted in light of

their internalized effects on the poor by means of which the poor became the agents of their own victimization, were dismissed as callous reactionaries. No matter that in Europe nearly all radical sociologists took such a view as given, Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* being only one way of phrasing this commonplace.

It was because of this disciplinary dogma that sociologists ended up condemning the welfare reform act and predicting catastrophic consequences as a result of its implementation. As the world now knows, nothing of the sort took place. For all its transitional problems, the welfare reform act has been a major policy success. Millions of poor people were tugged into assuming responsibility for their own lives and found, to their great personal satisfaction and relief, that they could make it on their own. Most ex-welfare recipients now insist that the act was the best thing that ever happened to them. This entire episode has been an acute embarrassment for the discipline, something that it has yet to come to terms with. Amazingly, instead of engaging in serious disciplinary self-scrutiny, many sociologists are still carping and sniping at the "failures" of the act. Most, however, have quietly retreated to their offices and classrooms, where their *one-sided* structural explanations can go unchallenged by reality.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay I have argued that there are three broad and overlapping classes of public sociology: the professional, the discursive, and the active, or civic. I have suggested that the discipline emerged in Europe as a publicly engaged endeavor and has remained so outside of America. Unfortunately, in America, where most sociologists work, a different course has been followed. Up to the middle of the last century, American sociologists were very engaged, especially in professional and discursive ways. This tradition, however, was deliberately discouraged and even maligned after midcentury with the development of scientific sociology and the expansion and professionalization of the discipline. It is the passing of that earlier tradition that I mourned in my article "The Last Sociologist" (Patterson 2002), on David Riesman. Whatever Burawoy may say, however much he may huff and puff to the contrary, the fact remains that there is no place in contemporary sociology for the modern equivalent of a Weber or a Mills or a Riesman. There are still people who work in that great tradition, but they go by other professional names and earn their keep by other means.

I have, additionally, taken issue with Burawoy's contention that the reason sociologists are not more publicly involved is that the country has moved to the right while sociology has moved leftward. This is a romantic conceit. I have proposed, instead, that the real reason the discipline is so conspicuously absent from major public engagements (always allowing for the relatively few overworked exceptions), especially in active policy and practice, is to be found in certain deep-seated professional assumptions and ideological dogmas. Chief among these are the overwhelming structural bias of sociological thought; the high level of abstraction on which most explanations of the world are offered; the fatal decision by gatekeepers, in the turn to scientism, to model the discipline on experimental physics rather than on biology; the subsequent insistence by professional journals that every account of reality be subsumed under covering theories; the perverse reluctance to incorporate rigorous inductive disciplines such as demography and criminology; the stupidly arrogant denigration and rejection of applied work by the leading departments of the discipline; and the refusal to acknowledge the vital *interactive* role of real human agency—real choices, real personal responsibility, real individual freedom, real preferences, real values—in the people they study and write about, even as they hypocritically exercise precisely such agency in their own competitive lives and expect it, indeed demand it, from their own loved ones and others close to them.

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