



Sociology in Political Practice and Public Discourse

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abstract: Social science should take an active role in public discourse, interacting with its different publics, and should not be detached or separated from them – otherwise it becomes irrelevant; but at the same time it should keep itself at critical distance from both common sense and public discourse – otherwise it loses its autonomy of judgement. Sociology (as a science) and political practice are two distinct forms of action, which cannot be reduced to each other.

keywords: autonomy ♦ political practice ♦ public discourse ♦ publics ♦ social science

Introduction

The topic chosen by Piotr Sztompka for the Final Presidential Session of the 2006 ISA Congress in Durban raises fundamental questions for any social scientist: what is the meaning of our work (knowledge for what? knowledge for whom)? What are the relations between science and politics in general and between social theory and political practice in particular? How can sociology contribute to public discourse? What are the relations between positive theory and normative theory?

The gist of my argument in discussing these issues is, first, that social science should take an active role in public discourse interacting with its different publics and should not be detached or separated from them – otherwise, it becomes irrelevant; but it should keep itself at critical distance from both common sense and public discourse – otherwise, it loses its autonomy of judgement; and, second, that sociology (as any other science) and political practice are two distinct forms of action that cannot be reduced to each other.

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In my discussion of the complex relationships of sociology with common sense, political practice and public discourse, I will refer to Michael Burawoy's 2004 ASA presidential speech – which had the merit of addressing this broad set of issues and providing an analytical map of the various forms of sociological work (Burawoy, 2005a) – and to the interesting debate it raised, first of all in the *British Journal of Sociology*, and to his intervention in the 2006 ISA Congress Final Presidential Session, i.e. how does the sociologist understand the common sense of subaltern groups? What could be the political practice of the sociologist with regard to such groups? Through what form of public discourse can sociology articulate the interests of subaltern groups.

Sociology in Public Discourse

There is a broad area of agreement with Burawoy's argument. I too am convinced that professional sociology (actually any sociology) depends for its vitality upon the continual challenges of public issues and that sociological research needs to focus on fundamental social problems. And, like Michael, I am unequivocally committed to the values and practice of professional sociology (actually of sociology *tout court*) – its rigour, its scientific method, its research programmes, its concern with theoretical issues. I appreciate his attempt to work out a typology that analytically distinguishes among four interdependent types of sociology. I agree with him that 'professional sociology is a *sine qua non* for policy and public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005a: 267) and that there can be neither policy nor public sociology without a professional sociology that provides true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions and conceptual frameworks.

But there is also a broad area of disagreement between Burawoy and myself: the first is that I maintain that sociologists should recognize the irreducibility of scientific work and political work as two different forms of social action, the more so when they are engaged in political practice. A basic requirement of any kind of sociological activity is to maintain constantly an attitude of critical distance, although not of separation or detachment. In this respect, I agree with Calhoun's (2005) critique that Burawoy's typology of four specialized subfields of sociological work runs the risk of assigning concerns over autonomy only to 'professional' and 'critical' sociology, whereas these concerns are basic to the very existence of a science.

I develop this point later on when I discuss the issue of sociology and political practice.

The other two major points of disagreement are Burawoy's concept of organic public sociology (related to his specific interpretation of Gramsci's

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concept of the organic intellectual), and his notion of civil society. I will discuss Gramsci's concepts of organic intellectual and hegemony in order to warn against the risks of a specific type of public sociology (this brings me back at the beginning of my work as a sociologist when I wrote the first essay on Gramsci ever published in an American sociological review – the 1968 issue of the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*).

Burawoy's use of the word 'organic' in defining public sociology is clearly related to Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual, although he makes explicit reference to Gramsci only in his 'Response' to critics (Burawoy, 2005b). According to Burawoy, in organic public sociology, 'the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public. . . . Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education . . . the project . . . is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate those organic connections as part of our sociological life' (Burawoy, 2005a: 264). I do not intend to discuss here the 'correct' interpretation of Gramsci – one of the brightest political minds of the 20th century, whose notions of hegemony and civil society have become key concepts in the lexicon of social sciences – but I take advantage of his notion of 'organic intellectual' to illustrate the risks of any kind of 'organic knowledge'.

Burawoy's account of Gramsci's organic intellectual in his 'Response' is partial and somehow misleading; he writes:

. . . for Gramsci truth can only be elaborated in dialogue with agents themselves who are endowed with 'good sense' within their common sense. Subaltern groups are subject to dominant ideologies but this never totally eclipses their indigenous reason that intellectuals excavate and elaborate – a good sense that springs from their subjugation in and transformations of the world. . . . Social change comes from intellectuals working in close connection with agents, elaborating local imaginations of what could be, and struggling for their realization. (Burawoy, 2005b: 429–30)

This view is opposite to Bourdieu's, who is very critical of Gramsci's notion and argues for a radical separation between sociology and common sense (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu's criticism may be too harsh, but Burawoy is too benevolent in his appraisal and underestimates four serious problems or risks that concern not only Gramsci's view, but also the very idea of an 'organic public sociology'.

The first problem concerns the relationship between organic intellectuals and the social class they represent or speak for; the second has to do with dogmatism; the third concerns the risk of manipulation; and the fourth, the relationship between organic intellectuals and the party. All imply serious threats for scientific freedom, as well as the risk of reducing scientists to servants of political power.

The first risk is that of organic identification. According to Gramsci (1949a, 1949b), organic are those intellectuals who put themselves intentionally at the side of a social class and of its political representation in order to become hegemonic in society. To consider intellectuals as autonomous and disinterested is a social utopia. Intellectuals are always organically linked to a given social group, which makes their existence possible; they reflect the needs and goals of this group, clarify them and unite them into a coherent ideology. As the capitalist class creates the industrial engineer, the economist and the organizer of the bourgeois culture, so the working class and its own party – the Communist Party – will create their own intellectuals, whose task is to develop the new proletarian *Weltanschauung* and to exert a cultural hegemony in all the spheres of civil society. The more the intellectual elite is capable of relentlessly repeating the ideological message, raising the cultural standards of the masses and fostering ideological unity, the more successful the conquest of civil society will be.

Organic public sociology runs the risk of identifying with its own specific publics, compromising professional and critical commitments. Sociologists ‘capturing the successes of union organizing among immigrant workers’, or ‘producing works arising from a life-time collaborative struggles with various categories of workers’ (Burawoy, 2005a: 264) run the risk of insufficient critical distance from the ‘common sense’ (not necessarily misguided, as Bourdieu would argue) and from the value preferences of the social groups they engage with. It is true that Burawoy states that ‘public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence, other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005a: 266). Elsewhere, however (Burawoy, 2005b: 423), he says something different: ‘Public sociology, by contrast, makes both dialogue and normative stance central to its preoccupation.’ Moreover, there is an inherent contradiction between the commitment to dialogue as the only distinctive feature of public sociology and taking side with visible, thick, counter-publics as the term ‘organic’ implies. And it raises embarrassing questions such as: is the sociologist working closely with a xenophobic movement making public sociology organic?

The second type of problem stemming from the concept of organic intellectual is that of dogmatism, i.e. of not being able to consider alternative viewpoints: the *Weltanschauung* elaborated and exposed by the organic intellectual is considered the only truth. Gramsci was certainly not unaware of the problem of the freedom of thinking: he recognized that the search for new and better truths should be left to the free initiative of single scientists, even if this implies putting into discussion basic principles. But, he added that new individual ideas, before becoming public, should be submitted to the scrutiny of academies and cultural institutions

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in order to avoid the 'self-interested motives' of the scientist prevailing over the scientific motives. The problem is that the authority that can decide which motives are scientific or self-interested (i.e. which scientific results are admitted and which are not) are the academies subjected to the all powerful modern prince, the party.

The third type of problem stemming from Gramsci's conception, closely related to the second, is that organic intellectuals, themselves becoming part of the nomenklatura and pretending to speak in the name of given social groups, actually manipulate those groups with the aim of legitimating political power. Gramsci defines organic intellectuals as 'functionaries' of the superstructure, 'organizers', 'builders', 'permanent persuaders', who pursue social hegemony and political rule.

The fourth and more serious risk stems from the special relation between organic intellectuals and the revolutionary party. They must achieve the ideological conquest of civil society, and they are the more successful the more capable they are of converting, assimilating and conquering traditional intellectuals. Without this ideological conquest, the political rule of the 'modern prince' (the party) cannot be realized. In this respect, it is significant the parallel that Gramsci draws with the role historically played by great world religions in general and by the Catholic Church in particular. After having conquered civil society and having thus helped the revolutionary class to seize power, organic intellectuals become the guardians of ideology orthodoxy and repress dissent and freedom of thinking. This situation is familiar in communist countries – and in other totalitarian or authoritarian political regimes – where many intellectuals begin as producers of new values, insights and ideas and end up either isolated and persecuted (when they want to remain faithful to their critical mind), or organically employed in consensus formation and repression of any form of intellectual dissent. Gramsci's view is therefore potentially threatening the intellectual right to free thinking and free criticism. Supporters of organic public sociology can argue that the relationship with power that it implies is dangerous only in non-democratic societies. But risks of intellectual manipulation and ideological dogmatism do exist in democratic contexts as well.

A final major point of disagreement concerns Burawoy's idealization of civil society – and his definition of public sociology in terms of its affiliation with civil society. According to him, a public sociology that aims at contributing to public discourse and at influencing political decisions should not limit itself to studying everything from the point of view of civil society and to giving voice to the associations, movements and publics that are outside both state and market, in order to fight against state unilateralism on the one side and market fundamentalism on the other. 'In the last 30 years', he writes, 'civil society has been

colonized and co-opted by markets and states' and 'economics and political science have justified the excesses of markets and states' (Burawoy, 2005a: 288).

In so doing, Burawoy risks idealizing (or fetishizing) civil society and demonizing market and state, exaggerating the meaningful distinctions between them. First of all, as social scientists, we should always use concepts in the plural form, asking what kind of markets, what kind of states are we talking about. Besides market fundamentalism and state absolutism, there are many forms of market (regulated/unregulated, monopolistic/oligopolistic/competitive, etc.) and many types of state (democratic/authoritarian/totalitarian, presidential/parliamentary, federal/centralist, etc.). It is easy to defend – on the basis of good sociological theory and rigorous empirical research – the thesis that market, if it is not considered a spontaneous order, but an institution that needs to be regulated by a democratic political authority, can play a useful role in fostering development and social cohesion, as well as the thesis that democratic governments (which institutionalize political dissent and power accountability) are necessary conditions for the development of critical scientific thought, public sociology included (but Burawoy never makes reference to democracy as a precondition of public sociology). On the other hand, there are also many types of civil society (socially disruptive/socially cohesive, culturally heterogeneous/culturally homogeneous, peaceful/violent, etc.).

The idealization of civil society goes together with the idealization of the people and of collective movements, according to what I would define a populist orientation. Both sociological research and historical studies show that civil society is not necessarily all 'good' (xenophobic and fundamentalist movements are part of civil society). On the other hand, markets and states can play positive role for social cohesion. Clientelism and familism, patrimonialism and patronage politics are aspects of civil society, which tend to be stronger wherever there are weak states and non-competitive markets.

My approach to the analysis of markets, states and communities and their role in democratic global governance – as expounded in my 2002 ISA presidential speech (Martinelli, 2003) – is different. Markets, states, communities and the other institutions of civil society have historically identified themselves with the fundamental principles of social integration and social regulation – that is, modes by which activities are coordinated, resources allocated and conflicts structured: authority or hierarchical control, exchange or coordination in the form of transactions, and solidarity or normative integration. Authority has generally been considered as the constitutive principle of the state and of other public and private forms of government and bureaucratic organizations, exchange as the constitutive principle of the various types of market, solidarity as the constitutive principle of the various forms of

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community (whether of the traditional type, such as the family or clans, or of the new types, such as collective movements).

Instead of opposing the good civil society to the bad market and the bad state, it is better to analyse the various ways in which the different types of institutions interact, conflict and cooperate, thus making society possible. In my view, 'the defense of humanity', as Burawoy rhetorically puts it, is better pursued whenever each set of institutions check and control each other, so that they provide space for the social interactions of responsible individuals who respect each other's diversity and specificity. Alongside state unilateralism and market fundamentalism there is civil society unilateralism or fundamentalism. I agree with Offe's warnings of the six phallacies that a sophisticated political theory (and a sophisticated social theory as well) must avoid (Offe, 2000). Both the excess and the lack of governing capacity, both the exaggeration and the excessive limitation of market's sovereignty, both too much and too little communitarian identity in the civil society should all be avoided. The state can become too large, overextended and oppressive; but where it is too confined, or loses its legitimacy, major social problems develop too. Markets, when properly regulated, should have sufficient space in order to generate economic prosperity; but markets should not be allowed to infiltrate too far into other institutions, otherwise society will experience a failure of public life. Communities in civil society should develop in order to check the power of governments and markets and to defend the public space, but when they become too strong they can threaten both democracy and economic development.

The discussion of sociology in public discourse and civil society also raises the question of the specific standpoint of sociology with regard to other social sciences – and to economics and political science in particular – and the question of the privileged public of sociologists. Related to the fetishization of civil society is the tendency of many sociologists to make collective movements and counter-publics their privileged interlocutors and selected fields of study. Siding with the underdogs and fighting against the holders of wealth and power can be morally praised – and is often an exercise in soul saving – but it is not in itself a guarantee of good quality social science. This tendency implies a poor conceptualization of key concepts, such as power, democracy, competition, exchange, which are central in political science and economics, but are very important in sociology as well. Let us take power as an example: there is a strong tendency in the sociological way of thinking about power to pose the issue in terms of a bipolar contest between forms of power that are imposed 'from above' according to protocols that are not our own and resisted 'from below' according to a counter-logic expressing our own needs, desires and aspirations' (Burawoy, 2005a: 288). Power is, however, actually fluid and

dispersed; opposition and contestation are routine events located within, and generated by, practice of government and the contradictions between them – such as clashes between the governmental programmes of different authorities, breakdowns and imperfections in the functioning of technologies of government (Rose, 1999).

Sociology in Political Practice

I now briefly discuss the issue of sociology in political practice as an instance of the relationship between science and politics, in the light of Weber's two great complementary conferences, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* and *Politik als Beruf* (Weber, 1919a, 1919b). We can say that modern society is defined by the polarity between those two fundamental forms of action, both *Wert*-rational and *Zweck*-rational, both trying to harness the overflowing flux of life: in the case of science through the elaboration of pure mental forms of knowledge, in the case of politics through the will to make real values into a political project.

Both science and politics have an irreducible individuality. Political action is characterized by the attempt to combine the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility. The irreducible individuality of science – including social science – implies that it does not choose in the conflict of values, it does not intervene in the conflict of values (if not only in the sense of the *Entzauberung*). In a famous passage, Weber writes that it is a fact that science is a *Beruf*, exercised in a specialized way at the service of self-reflection and of the knowledge of objective connections, not a gracious gift of visionaries and prophets, distributing gifts of salvation and revelations, or an element of the meditation of philosophers and wise men on the meaning of the world. Science can understand action, discover correlations and uniformities that may be obscure to the actors involved, and in so doing can foster clarity and the sense of responsibility of individuals, helping them to become conscious of the ends of their own actions, of the means to achieve them, of the consequences stemming from them, but without ordering values. Scientific activity does not choose among values, but is not beyond the conflict of values, since critical distance does not mean detachment or separation.

Is Weber's position still valid? How can we not take side when faced with great injustice, blind prejudice, overt exploitation? Weber gave his famous speeches in a dramatically conflict-ridden Germany, where conflicts over values threatened to tear his country apart. In contemporary society, the conflict of values is not less dramatic and has taken a global dimension. Values are like explosives: they can be very useful in opening the way to building bridges, but they must be handled with care. Sztompka's (2006) argument for the importance of the axiological dimension, the return

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of values and valuations, and the interplay between analytical and normative knowledge, can be agreed upon, provided that we do not forget that, as social scientists, we should be especially aware of the risky potential of values and of the need to keep a critical distance, without being detached from them.

Not being detached from politics means that social scientists, as Lauder et al. (2004) argue, should act as theoretically informed and empirically driven expert witnesses, engaged in the democratic conversation about policy formation and accountability. One the main aims of social sciences is to discover the unintended consequences of purposive political action in order to influence policies for social change. But sociologists should provide expert advice also for an informed citizenship, making their ideas and theories more accessible to the various publics, in order to foster self-reflexivity, develop a democratic public sphere and strengthen democratic control of power. But science should not transform itself into ideology. If this distinction is upheld, scientific public discourse that is developed by transnational epistemic communities can effectively contribute to democratic global governance (Martinelli, 2003, 2005).

The gist of my argument is that science degenerates into ideology not only whenever it surrenders to the power of acting, but also whenever it conceives its critical distance as pure autonomy and not as a function of its confrontation and comparison with political action.

Thus, when we are engaged in political activity we do not act as social scientists or teachers, but as political actors. 'If the professor feels called to intervene in the struggle between Weltanschauungen or party opinions, he will have to do it outside in the market of life. The confusion of these two distinct – although often complementary – roles can be responsible for both poor scholarship and poor politics' (Weber, 1919a: 42).

In my life I have mostly taught in universities and done research in the social sciences, consulted for governments and firms, contributed to public discourse in the mass media, and I have been elected to the Milan City Council and coordinated the activities of a political coalition in Lombardy. It is not me who can say whether and how the fact of being a sociologist has helped or hindered my political activity, or whether and how the fact of having had political experience has helped or hindered my sociological work. But I have tried never to forget Weber's lesson that science and politics are two distinct forms of action that cannot be reduced to each other and imply different roles.

Note

This article is shortened version of my presentation at the 2006 ISA Congress Final Presidential Session in Durban (South Africa).

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