The Routledge International Handbook of Public Sociology

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From public sociology to collective knowledge production

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Michael Burawoy was championing 'public sociology,' I was a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Berkeley where he worked. The notion of sociology for a public – engaged in issues members of the public are concerned with, and in dialogue with publics through writings and other forms of communication – was very much in the ethos of the department. Apart from Burawoy, other professors, including those I worked closely with – Peter Evans, Raka Ray, Ann Swidler, Kim Voss – were engaged in such public sociology in one form or another. Beyond their own research, in the classes they and others at Berkeley taught, we were exposed to scholars whose concerns went beyond intellectual curiosity to ethical, political, civic engagements. Many fellow graduate students were deeply invested in social justice work of various forms in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. I was thus socialized to be a professional sociologist in a milieu where public sociology was something to aspire to and taken for granted as integral to the work of a sociologist. In the 15 years since graduation, this sensibility continues to loom large in my life as a sociologist in Singapore.

Preparing to write this chapter, I revisited Burawoy's clarion call at the 2004 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting (Burawoy 2005) as well as responses to his arguments (Burawoy 2014b; Clawson et al. 2007). With some years between now and the heady years of graduate school, and the experience of being a professional academic and doing public sociology, I see on one hand how his call is more urgent than ever and, on the other, how the tensions embedded within this enterprise – as pointed out by critics as well as Burawoy himself – also seem more pertinent than ever. In particular, three interconnected issues with doing public sociology stand out: labor and its division, the effects of a dominant US sociology and the legitimacy of academic expertise.

This chapter traces the terrain of doing public sociology in contemporary Singapore. I reflect on how these three issues shape the work of doing public sociology in this context and the more general challenges for the discipline my case illuminates.

Labor and its division

Burawoy characterizes sociology as formed by four (ideal) types of scholarly labor and persons: policy, professional, critical and public. All four are necessary and should exist

symbiotically – policy sociology speaks to specific predefined solution-seeking problems and is linked to particular funding agents such as governments; professional sociology focuses on advancing knowledge and academic publications, thereby establishing scientific rigor and professional legitimacy; critical sociology reflects on the enterprise of knowledge production and checks the discipline on its biases and blind spots; public sociology engages with the needs and problems of civil society and has the potential to establish sociology and sociologists as key players in generating truths and justice in confounding and unjust times. While his general argument implies that it is different people doing work in different quadrants, Burawoy also suggests that within the life course of a sociologist's academic career, one can and should move around the quadrants.

In response, Sharon Hays (2007) argues that Burawoy sidesteps the issue of hierarchies within the discipline across the four types. She worries the naming of public sociology as a category without addressing the dominance of a certain form of professional sociology will reify the belief that public sociology is not 'good' sociology – that it is dumbed down, ideologically driven and thereby tainted. Patricia Hill Collins (2007) further wonders if naming public sociology will make it more difficult to those already doing it to keep doing the work, because the label can become a form of stigma and attached only to specific, and already more marginalized, members of the discipline. She worries too about institutionalization negatively altering the ethical values of actual practice, as boundary-making and professionalization are wont to do. Lynn Smith-Lovin (2007), from a different perspective – of valuing knowledge production for its own sake and with an instinct to protect the internal validation process of professional sociologists – is concerned that public sociology, if officially integrated into the discipline, will break it apart by imposing a burden of consensus around moral and political issues on which there are diverse and conflicting positions among sociologists.

In Singapore, the deep and wide presence of the state further complicates these issues of intra-disciplinary hierarchy and normative consensus/discord. The Singapore government has been dominated by a single political party for six decades. It is a government that has monopolized economic, social and political space. Myriad areas of social life are regulated by state institutions through laws, regulations and policies; notably, governance is characterized by a combination of cultural and ideological hegemony with a monopoly over material resources (Chua 1995; Lim 2013; Low and Vadaketh 2014; Teo 2011). Singapore society is therefore deeply infused with the priorities, interests and worldviews of the People's Action Party. Collective action and dissent outside state-sanctioned perimeters are difficult and indeed often illegal (Chua 2012; Rajah 2012).

The university specifically, and knowledge production agents more generally, are not exempted from these conditions. In this context, sociologists (and humanities scholars and social scientists more generally) cannot avoid analyzing the state in their scholarship – it is *always* the largest and most significant elephant in the room. Correspondingly, analyses of the state, particularly those that involve critical scrutiny *and* travel outside the walls of academia, make for risky business.

At this particular historical juncture, where the People's Action Party is entering into its fourth generation of elite leadership and there is a sense that all is not well and yet that these leaders cannot be openly criticized, we see a tendency among the governing elite – both political office holders and civil servants – as well as among some of the public to crudely frame and label critical perspectives as anti-government/establishment. Doing public sociology – if public sociology is, as Burawoy argues, responsive to the needs and desires of ordinary people and civil society – places the public sociologist either under the safe wing of a particular state-sanctioned version of civil society *or* outside this very large wing in a small and exposed space.

Within Singapore's universities and research institutes, it is possible to place sociological scholarship and other forms of social science scholarship broadly into Burawoy's four quadrants. And, as Hays, Collins and Smith-Lovin argue, hierarchies and tensions around normative positions abound. Importantly, in contrast to the United States, the differences between policy or professional sociology on one hand, and critical or public sociology on the other, are not merely about occupational prestige and resources. The hierarchies imply not just differential professional status or reward, but personal risk and cost. Critics of the Singapore state – including academics – can jeopardize jobs, tenure, grants and be publicly marginalized, discredited and stigmatized when they do work akin to public sociology (George 2017).

Unsurprisingly, the sensibilities and worldviews of those who are closer to the policy or professional quadrants tend to be quite different from those who identify more with the critical or public quadrants. I recall a time running into someone whose work can be firmly categorized as policy sociology and his sarcastically asking me, 'Oh, how's the public sociologist?' His disdain was not regarding the standing of my work within the discipline – since I am in some ways more 'professional' by virtue of having published in well-ranked international journals – nor was it because my work is in the public realm per se, since he and others like him regularly release public reports of their research, but in the implication that I am on the 'wrong' side by virtue of being critical of state policies and practices. Within the small group of academics who do work that can be construed as critical of the state, and who are interested in engaging the public or civil society outside of the state's terms, there is a sense of our being marked and thereby discredited as 'troublemakers.' Ironically, apart from our own concerted efforts to get our work into the public sphere – through things like op-eds or non-academic books – we are not the scholars regularly contacted for quotes in the national media, even when our expertise is relevant; policy sociologists who are not 'troublemakers' access the public more easily than critical public sociologists do.

The relationships among people who do research on Singapore society, then, are uneasy. The content of our scholarship is regularly oppositional rather than mutually beneficial and in collective service of further knowledge production. Particularly among those explicitly studying public policy, further tensions bubble around methodology – the usual arguments among sociologists regarding quantitative versus qualitative evidence, objectivity and subjectivity, positivism and interpretation map messily and yet somewhat predictably onto political sensibilities and ethical worldviews. It is difficult to construct a symbiotic relationship across different types of sociology and a functioning division of labor in service of building authority together. The division of labor is in some ways more accurately described as division of risk and perhaps even the creation of risk for some and the reduction of risk for others by virtue of each's existence; the 'good' ones are rewarded by the state for their loyalty and the 'bad' ones hope they are at least not 'rewarded' with anything at all.

The effects of a dominant US sociology

Where the first set of tensions is most pronounced between policy and public sociology, a second set is most salient between professional and public sociology. The typologies are useful here not so much for illuminating a division of labor, but for centering focus on the fact that there are different types of questions a scholar can ask. Moreover, what they do end up asking is shaped by the fields of power in which they operate *and* has consequences for how they in turn disrupt or perpetuate the rules of that field.

Here, the dominant status of US sociology has a major effect on the specific articulations of professionalism in Singapore and the undermining of particular forms of knowledge production

and dissemination. My insertion of the observation of US sociology as having specific effects, which Burawoy points to and Sari Hanafi (2011) and Judith Stacey (2007) echo and elaborate on, is to draw attention not to US sociological practice per se but to highlight that the presence of a massive external bloc – of academics, universities, publishers – serves the function of obscuring precisely the fact that there *are* different types of questions a scholar can ask and that these *are* shaped by the field of power in which they are located.

When I returned from the United States to Singapore, I traveled from a place extreme in its self-confidence as the center of the world and the bearer of neutral, universal standards to a place extreme in its (elites') sense of needing to look outward, westward in order to locate rankings to climb and thereby be legitimated as 'First World.' It was also a journey from a country in which the university is a site relatively independent of state governance to one where universities come under the direct and explicit ambit of the state and have specific missions for serving the national good (Holden 2019).

In my decade of being on the tenure track and then tenured, I experienced an intensification of a particular form of professionalization within the university. The big-picture goal is to build Singapore universities to become 'world class' institutions (George 2018; Lim and Pang 2018). The means to this is to climb up various global rankings. The trickle-down effect at the level of practice is the hiring of graduates from high-status universities (particularly, US universities), the institutionalization of appraisal and evaluation indices to favor publications in journals with high impact factors (in many disciplines, this means US journals since its size means larger circulations and citations) and heavier emphasis on grants and publications over other activities a university professor might be involved in – including data collection, teaching and community engagements.

From the perspective of the individual academic, particularly junior faculty, the writing on the wall is clear: publish or perish. But not just publish or perish, which American academics are also familiar with, but publish in journals whose audiences are not especially interested in non-US cases, or perish. Focus on securing major grants – many of which are given by the state and have narrowly defined frameworks – and focus on activities that give the best buck for your name on publications. Scholarship on a small country that US audiences have no reason to be especially interested in, scholarship that requires a researcher to be involved in nitty-gritty data collection, scholarship that requires some form of dialogic engagement with publics to figure out questions and frameworks, scholarship that may not have theoretical payoffs (from the perspective of US sociologists) but that add important descriptive detail to understandings of a case – none of these are rational priorities for junior faculty trying to hold on to jobs. Put simply, the quest for 'world class' status makes it irrational for scholars to study Singapore. As Sari Hanafi put it in the context of the Arab East: 'publish globally and perish locally or publish locally and perish globally' (Hanafi 2011).

The professionalization of Singapore universities looks neutral – 'world class' implies objective standards – but it pivots incentives away from certain kinds of scholarly orientations. It discourages the kind of work that a society needs in order to understand itself better – questions that get at some level of specificity of a case and that are difficult to theorize at more abstract levels; questions that need to be formulated through engagement with questions that other knowledge producers, including outside academia, are asking about a society. It pivots away, indeed, from the kind of work that many American sociologists do for their own society, including in the quadrants that fall outside of critical and public sociology.

In a country with a population of less than six million, there is a correspondingly small number of sociologists (and other scholars) in Singapore. As the orientation intensifies toward the United States – which is actually incidental to the story except in the existence of its massive

and monopolistic academic publishing machinery – it becomes harder for the few academics who persist along this irrational route to build and accumulate knowledge. The world-classing professionalization that is supposed to lead to better, more rigorous scholarship, then, has the opposite effect of limiting the range of questions scholars ask and stunting the growth of diverse approaches, methodologies and theories. By virtue of being limited in size, as well as outnumbered by the academics who play by rather than circumvent the rules of the game, the doing of public sociology – unavoidably local, or at least with no reason to be US-centric – cannot harness sufficient momentum to disrupt the field of power.

The specific articulations of US sociology's dominance into a neutral form – world class, global university, international standards – has made it difficult to see that we are, in the process of building this 'world class' university, suffocating certain forms of knowledge production. The presence of a giant influences this field of power in knowledge production, but the agents moving levers in place are very much domestic, located within Singapore's institutions of higher education, including our own ministry of education. To what extent do decision-makers driving these developments understand that these pivots shift away from questions critical and public sociology, might ask? Well, that is an empirical question to which we – because not enough are asking – have no answers.

The legitimacy of academic expertise

The particular manifestations of division of labor and the effects of a dominant US sociology in the Singapore context illustrate that what is at stake is a more general struggle for legitimacy. Who has the right to engage with and speak about public issues, and on what basis?

In Burawoy's conception of the four quadrants, the division of labor is a solution. Sociologists have the potential to bring about ameliorative social change precisely because there are different types of sociological labor. To effect actual change, sociologists need to be heard. To be heard, they need to have legitimate authority. It is here that public sociology relies on professional sociology for its labor in upholding the processes and standards that give the discipline its imprimatur of science – characterized by rigor and political neutrality. On this, Douglas Massey (2007) and Frances Fox Piven (2007) argue with Burawoy – the former critiquing him for going too far and the latter critiquing him for not going far enough.

Massey argues that the inclusion of public sociology into the work of the *professional* association of sociologists will undermine the impact of sociologists when they want to lend their voices to influence decisions. For him, the work of public sociology is more impactful if conducted separately from sociologists' professional research and insofar as they act as individual experts rather than as a collective professional body. Piven argues that the talk of public sociology is merely going back to the roots of sociological inquiry and that in the historical institutionalization of the profession, what has happened is that sociologists have become overly invested in seeking position, influence and funding. What they have produced is not better and more neutral knowledge but knowledge that serves the interests of elites to the detriment of the marginalized. Professional sociology, in Piven's perspective, may bring legitimacy to sociologists but only if your idea of legitimacy is approval from above.

From where does legitimate authority to speak on matters of public concern emanate in the Singapore context? It is perhaps instructive to think in Weberian terms. As I point out, there is a particular orientation toward the United States as the bearer of standards; this has translated into the favoring of degrees from some universities over others. On some level, then, there are important trappings of legitimacy embedded in the 'right' formal credentials. Where people receive their PhDs, and particularly whether they attended elite institutions in the United

States, is crucial information in Singapore when it comes to weighing how seriously someone's ideas are taken. Employment in universities also matters; there is some hierarchy among institutions, but this is small, given that there are only six universities, and so other forms of distinction become more consequential – rank (assistant/associate/full – professor); administrative/leadership roles (dean/chair, etc.). Disciplinary hierarchies within the humanities and social sciences matter in similar ways as they do in the United States insofar as the expertise of economists are valued more highly over everyone else's. Lawyers too have a high level of prestige.

But cracks to formal rationality appear as soon as you look more closely at who else occupies the halls of academia and airtime in public discourse as 'experts.' Here, we see people whose credentials are not PhDs from universities, whose careers are not in education and research, whose CVs are not populated with peer-reviewed publications occupying key roles in universities as well as shaping public discourse as 'public intellectuals.' They are retired from institutions of the state – diplomats, members of parliament, senior management in the civil service, heads of government-linked corporations. Apart from legitimate authority drawn from formal rationality, then, there are important forms of legitimate authority that look closer to Weber's traditional type – in which authority is granted to loyal subjects directly by rulers.

The simultaneous presence of different types of legitimacy – forms that draw from different sources, disrupting the line from rigorous empirical research to informed expert opinion – has the cumulative effect of undermining the status of empirical evidence. It disrupts the authority that potentially emanates from public appreciation of the logics of inquiry and validation embedded in humanities and social science research. Put more crudely, if anyone with an academic-institutional title can speak, and if those titles are not necessarily connected to any rigorous research program or even research training, then the overall value of research is undermined. In these conditions, navigating the path of legitimacy is a walk on a tightrope, and the elephant in the room can hold you there or knock you off.

In such a context, protecting the legitimacy of one's work by separating the labor of professional research from the labor of public engagement is effective only if the valence of one's work weighs in specific political directions. We are back to the problem of the tainting effects of being labeled anti-establishment troublemakers, this time acknowledging that a degree from Oxford or Harvard or Berkeley are talismans until they are not. Perhaps this is precisely Piven's point: that the question of legitimacy is ultimately a question about legitimacy *in whose eyes*.

The sociologist who wants their work to have impact in shaping the world must ask: to whom should I speak? Whose ears do I want if I want to be a part of ameliorative social change? Your desired audience – who you hope will respond to your expertise – in turn depends on where you think the levers of change lie. Who will change the world *with* you? Here, I think Piven, and Burawoy as well, want public sociology's work to extend beyond just going to where existing levers of change are and trying to turn them there. For them, public sociology should actively shift the levers of change – away from the powerful toward the marginalized.

A decade and a half after graduating from Berkeley, the challenge and promise of public sociology continues to animate my work and dominate my dreams. I am now a tenured professor, heading a department of sociology. I have worked hard maintaining two lives – one within the academy, jumping through the hoops befitting a 'world class' university so that I can keep my job; one outside the academy, building allies and trying to make my work relevant to society so that I can keep my soul. The two lives, not always easy to live in and align, have ultimately complemented each other well. Besides drawing the strengths Burawoy pointed to of professional and public sociology – one building rigorous standards of the academic craft, the other building dynamic engagement with the needs of the real world – traversing the two worlds has helped me dodge the tunnel-vision that can come from being overly immersed in a singular

lifeworld with its own set of rules, norms, logics. There have been a lot of voices around me, and because they are demanding varying things, I can hear the discordant cacophony and ultimately find my own.

The desire to lead the bifurcated life, as well as the theoretical tools I have had for navigating challenges, was made possible, in retrospect, partly by Burawoy's naming of public sociology as that which deserves a proper seat at the table. When local conditions in Singapore did not encourage me in this direction, particularly insofar as the considerable risks of irking the state were present in both the lives I was leading, I looked to ethical orientation and psychological validation elsewhere – within my social networks from graduate school; in the writings of people doing public sociology in and outside of the academy; and, to some extent, despite my feelings of exclusion from the US-centric American Sociological Association (ASA), to the ASA itself. In 2013, I won the American Sociological Association Sex and Gender Section's Feminist Scholar Activist Award. I have no way of knowing its actual effects as a talisman for legitimation, but I certainly wore it in my mind as one.

Three years ago, in January 2018, post tenure, I published a book of essays, *This Is What Inequality Looks Like* (Teo 2018). Writing a book that purposefully turns away from a 'global' academic audience; publishing it with a small local literary press; honing in on a 'public' audience whose scale and boundaries were as yet unknown; naming and critiquing the contours of a powerful state to this imagined audience (if I build it, will they come? *Who* will come?) – the project was the culmination of ten years of doing public sociology and 20 years of dreaming it. Because of the success of the book, perhaps no one but me really sees this now: it was equal parts experience and naiveté, audacity and recklessness.

The book propelled onto the national nonfiction bestseller list; it is mentioned regularly in various public media; it has sold more than 35,000 copies to date; it got me listed on various 2018 year-end media round-ups and as a finalist for a Singaporean of the Year Award 'for igniting a national conversation on poverty and inequality' (Rashith 2018). It put my name squarely in the consciousness of the political elite and my email address in the hands of their secretaries. I am compelled to think and rethink what it is to do public sociology.

Labor: building communities of knowledge producers

The division of labor problem, as I have suggested, is extremely challenging. The small size of Singapore sociology and the looming presence of the state and its apologists mean that it is not just labor but also risks that are distributed unevenly. To keep doing critical work, including labor that extends outside the academy – risking professional advancement and considerable personal fatigue – public sociology needs more warm bodies.

A number of things may add up to a solution. First, sociologists cannot work alone, and public sociology needs to extend to become public social science and humanities. This entails building relationships and engaging one another's work across disciplinary boundaries. The small size of this country can be used to our advantage. The bigger barrier may be the time pressures people feel in the university. Academics must thus find opportunities within existing professional activities to incorporate this priority, such as curating panels of conferences or conducting literature reviews more deliberately. It could mean, since the purpose is more than interdisciplinarity per se but the extension of public engagement across disciplines, extending invitations to civil society events to more people outside of one's discipline. Academics already engaged with civil society need to make more effort to bring others in.

Second, to build critical mass, cross-generational solidarity must be forged. There are Singapore scholars in training still yet to enter academia. Many already wonder if they should do

critical work true to the various academic traditions they are in – geography, anthropology, history and so on, and not just sociology. Some are contemplating this question along with the question of whether to return to Singapore at all. Academics further along in professional careers need to make concerted efforts to encourage these younger scholars. Sometimes, this might require holding back one's own cynicism and despair – to say 'Oh this cannot be done' to oneself is a personal prerogative, but to say it to others, particularly to others to whom one is an authority figure, is to do irresponsible damage to future possibilities of change. Building a critical mass of public sociology (broadly defined) also requires explicit discussion of the state and its encroachment on intellectual labor. This may not immediately solve problems, but it demystifies state power and separates real risks from imagined threats so that people can make better, more empirically sound decisions about which risks to take and when and how. Naming actors and acts, calling out the contours of power and inequalities – the bread and butter of sociological inquiry – is key to unpacking individual experiences, establishing patterns and shattering atomism and building solidarity. These are the beginnings of breaking power's grip around individual necks.

Third, academics need to be more reflexive about and shed their sense of superiority to other producers of knowledge. As we do, we will see that there are alliances to build in the larger purpose of engaging public audiences. Burawoy points to a division of labor within the discipline; we should imagine a division of labor that extends beyond it. In the past two years, for example, I have worked with theater practitioners who are also interested in the issues of poverty and inequality.[1] Their modes of knowledge production and transmission are different from mine, and it is precisely in these differences that my relatively smaller investment in the last mile of dialogic engagement with audiences is bolstered by their work, and their relatively smaller investment in primary data collection is bolstered by mine. In the process of working together, we each discover new questions to ask and new perspectives and thinking tools that contribute to the longer trajectory of our separate and collective labor.

Where Burawoy's vision, looking from within a large contingent of professional sociologists, does not extend much toward non-academic knowledge producers, I, standing on a small island, am compelled quickly to see that thinking more generally in terms of knowledge producers, and not just sociologists or even just academics, can help public sociology. Embedding ourselves in a wider community of knowledge producers – theater-makers, writers, filmmakers, photographers, journalists, activists – can deepen and widen our questions, analytical tools and answers. If sociology leaves the academy, not just when it seeks to disseminate its knowledge but in the process of producing its knowledge – engaging and co-creating it with other types of knowledge producers – we may expand our understanding of the social world, appreciate the limitations of our discipline and take up and cede space in ways that enhance the overall value of public engagement.

Building legitimacy from the ground up

That academics are reluctant to travel out of the academy is partly related to the desire to protect our authority. The problem of US dominance I named earlier – with specific Singapore contours – is, of course, more appropriately conceptualized as the hegemony of narrow professionalism that several responses to Burawoy – Hays (2007) and Glenn (2007) among them – emphasize. It is a problem tightly tethered to the quest for legitimacy.

In Singapore, much of the securing of legitimacy is systematized and depends on the anointment of material titles and positions by institutions. But as I have tried to show, much of it is less formal than appears and indeed dependent more on anointment from above, from state actors.

This suggests that legitimacy is slippery space, where criteria and process are not stable. This is a space of risk, but it can also be a site of possibility.

The success of my book was a shock. It took everyone by surprise. From where did my authority to speak come? In the first instance, it was, of course, my formal credentials and institutional position. Without these, I would not have been able to publish the book at all; as an unknown name to most, it would have been hard to get the book picked up. But beyond my formal credentials, two other things are important to note: first, although the degree of its success was a surprise, I would not have written a book for a public audience at all if I had zero evidence it existed and no track record of engaging with a public audience. By the time I published this book, I had been writing op-eds for a decade.[2] I had published essays in books aimed at non-academic audiences and given public lectures. I had spent time in conversation with various members of civil society. Soon after the book was published, there was a core group that very quickly picked up on it, talked about it, spread the word and shared it with others. With hardly any marketing, word of the book spread quickly. Drawing from my experience writing op-eds, and relying on the wisdom and support of a small but tight community of friends and allies within and outside academia, I could quickly respond to attempts to reframe or misconstrue my message. The overall outcome was that the book was able to travel intact, without being misconstrued much, and with limited challenge to my right to speak. Part of legitimacy building, I saw, comes about through regular and long-term encounters with publics – it is partly about establishing a track record of engagement in public issues and partly about building trust among core groups with especially closely related interests. This base, in being the first champions of the book, helped build legitimacy around it.

Relatedly, a second thing to note and perhaps especially encouraging as we think of how to do public sociology in a world where the legitimacy of expertise and intellectuals is under assault: as the book traveled, I watched it *create* an audience appreciative of ethnography. I included in the book an appendix titled 'This Is What Data Looks Like' in which I discuss knowledge production as process, ethnography as methodology and the use of ordinary people's experiences as data. Throughout the book, I described where I stood, what I saw, how I interpreted, what I felt. Again, equal parts audacity and recklessness; at the end of the process of writing, I was so depleted I thought I might need to hide for the next ten years. But there was a major payoff to this exposing of the craft and the self: as the year progressed, I saw that in public discourse, there now circulated a wider set of vocabularies for thinking about what research – and particularly *ethnographic* research – is, and what it can do. As people understood and appreciated my approach, they were willing to judge it on its terms. As the weeks turned into months, the book stayed on the bestseller list, and the issues of poverty and inequality stuck in public consciousness. Official critiques of my work appeared, and reporters who had been regularly contacting me stopped. This is the point where usually, by virtue of being out of favor with the elite, one's legitimacy can be undermined. Instead, the book kept flying off shelves, I kept receiving fan mail and, most importantly, people – ordinary members of the public – kept talking about the ethnography, about the details they read that stuck with them. I started to see and hear sociological frames and vocabularies in other people's comments and work; details about living with poverty, about the everyday experiences of inequality showed up – very often without explicit reference to me. The legitimacy of the book, and the sociology in it, had separated itself from the legitimacy of me as a person, and this – because shade is more easily thrown at one person than at multiple ideas – seemed to enhance the impact of my work. Building legitimacy for sociology or other forms of knowledge, then, can come about from building, brick by brick, with public audiences, understanding of the knowledge production process and its limitations.

What created a deep sense of vulnerability as I was doing it, insofar as it felt like the surrendering of professorial authority, turned out to enhance it.

Dreaming alternatives

There is a final problem I have not thus far discussed but which has been on my mind as audiences encountering my book relentlessly ask: what now? What do we do now that we have seen the problem?

Michael Burawoy, in his rejoinder to his critics, argues more forcefully for seeing contemporary sociology as sitting at a critical historical moment in which the forces of marketization are wreaking more havoc than ever on how humans live. Public sociology, and what he calls a third wave of sociology as discipline, must step up, or it 'may as well be dead' (Burawoy 2014b). The problems of the world – massive inequality, displacement of persons from homes, the erosion of human dignity and rights, impending climate disaster – require fundamental rethinking and reconfigurations of how we exist (Burawoy 2014a).

Framed in these global terms, and recognizing that academics are typically better analysts than dreamers, the quest to build critical mass and alternative sources of legitimacy are tremendously urgent. To go from analysis of the past and present to alternatives in the future, we need to work with people who know how to dream. The labor of building ideas about alternatives is labor that requires the creativity and expertise of many and cannot be limited to the narrow confines of professional knowledge producers. Moreover, bringing about alternatives that enhance human dignity and well-being requires social solidarity. If the levers of change are indeed to be with ordinary people, shifted away from elites, then these people cannot be a bunch of isolated, atomized individuals. They must know how to see and act as collectives. Even as the building of communities of publics is directed toward specific issues or projects at any given time, they are also essential to the longer-term cultivation of social ties necessary for bringing about significant change.

We are still talking about public sociology in the discipline today – this edited collection still needs to exist – because we as a discipline are still trying to figure out what the hell we are doing existing in this world, doing this work, calling ourselves sociologists. My training at Berkeley means that US sociology lives in my head and infuses my work. Michael has been a major influence in my life, and it is hard to think about public sociology without simply trying to walk behind him. In reflecting on my life after Berkeley, I see anew how bold and important his vision was, how it carved out a path for those of us who came to sociology precisely because we wanted to be part of the world rather than apart from it. I also see, however, that stepping away from Berkeley, living in tension with US sociology, compelled me to turn to a separate lifeworld that may yet hold lessons for sociologists in the United States.

The work of public sociology requires sociologists to position ourselves in a larger ecology of knowledge-producers – we have to find and create communities and bring others in the academy along; we have to stretch across generational divides; we have to do collective knowledge production not only at the point of knowledge dissemination but also at the point of conceptualization and production. The division of labor must go beyond the four quadrants. In a world where our expertise is suspect, we have to build our own communities of legitimacy-granters and create legibility for our work outside the usual anointers of legitimacy. The labor of doing public sociology is collective labor, entailing time to create knowledge *and* solidarity, involving bodies in and out of the academy. Doing this messy work, I hope we may yet find tools not just for analyzing, but also for dreaming.

Notes

1 See https://peerpleasure.org.
2 For a partial list, see https://teoyouyenn.sg.

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