

# **Reflections on Themes in Burawoy's Thinking: From Dehumanisation to Epistemological Error Checking**

## **Introduction**

In this essay I explore the subject of public sociology by making sense of Michael Burawoy's original theses laid out in 2004 (Burawoy, 2005). I offer a syncretic account of what I perceive to be the core dynamics of public sociology relating thinkers and bodies of work that provide particular insightful articulations. Due to the limited scope of what can be explored in detail here I have selected what I see as the key themes which pervade the spirit of public sociology making it operationally meaningful as a practice in the world.

## **Overview of the Internal Dynamics of Public Sociology**

public sociology relates to concepts and methodologies of sociology as a part of the lives of a broader public rather than simply as part of the realm of professional spheres, academia and policy making. The term 'public sociology' was introduced by Burawoy to make sociological practice more polyvalent and plurivocal in its practice and “engage multiple publics in multiple ways”.

In accepting the vernacular accounts of people as sociological witnesses, public sociology aims to bring into awareness and discourse perspectives which deepen the understandings of the field. The act of bringing outsider knowledge into a professionalised realm is not just an act which conforms with notions of social justice but also is an act essential for the evolution of sociology as a discipline.

Using sociological knowledge as a lens to view society, Burawoy discusses sociological labor as interconnected domains or types: the professional, critical, policy, and public. These sociological knowledges exist in interrelated and tensioned ways. They can manifest as a public good but also as pathologies which exclude and subordinate certain populations. A central litmus for the over all aim of sociology is that it contributes to the public good and acts in “defense of civil society” (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 259).

Grounding this in practical examples, 'public sociology: Research Action and Change' edited by Philip Nyden illustrates a range of case studies in practice (Nyden, Hossfeld & Nyden, 2012). As a collection of writings it offers useful articulations of the ways which sociology 'gets into play' with explicit aims of bringing about constructive social change; implicit in this is the active involvement of peoples (publics) outside of academia recognising that the work of sociology happens beyond the institution, tangled in the everyday lives people lead.

They bring together exemplars including those of equitable community development such as homelessness and gentrification; environmental issues like health and the displacement of populations by climate breakdown; naming and raising awareness of hunger and poverty issues by data collection; analyses to challenge inequalities of race, class and gender; and building resources

which exist as a part of communities. Nyden and colleagues offer an array of illustrations of sociological practice as a diffuse and socially inclusive project with the intentionality of bringing about more equitable and healthy societal arrangements.

Burawoy makes special reference to how civil society is “beleaguered by the encroachment of markets and states” (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 259) suggesting that the remit of public sociology should be to address issues associated with the field of Political Economy and generally adopt an interdisciplinary modality in its systemic investigations. As the concerns of civil society are bound up with, and meaningful only through the collecting together of multiple perspectives of knowledge, it seems that an onus Burawoy brings is the necessity for trans-disciplinary thinking. An application of this might be sociological analyses of how the political economy of Britain is simultaneously involved in creating and maintaining secrecy jurisdictions [tax havens] (Shaxson, 2018) which promote flight of capital whilst making political decisions to deliberately keep ten to fifteen percent of its population in chronic poverty (Alston, 2020). Knowledge from multiple subject fields is necessary to produce the 'intersected' accounts needed to model complex poverty phenomena. I use the term 'intersected' as a contraction of the term 'intersectionality'. This comes from a key paper by Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989) who illustrated how the siloed account in law theoretically erases the experience of the individual through categorical abstraction. This results in the production of an unrepresentative cypher of the real lives of people generating straw man fallacies. Crenshaw's work has made pivotal contributions to the development of Critical Race Theory and contributes to a lexicon which better expresses the living experience of people of colour and subaltern groups.

In effect, the public sociologist must be prepared to draw from all 'publics' (groupings of people) and all languages of knowingness in order to effectively get at a synthesis that addresses previously insoluble issues which affect civil society.

### **Locating Social Justice in public sociology**

In view of the 'defence of civil society' which Burawoy foregrounds, it helps to position social justice in sociology. To do this I look at the etymological roots of the language used offering us a helpful framing of the relationships that constitute 'society'. The term 'sociology' was coined in publication by August Comte in 1838 (Gane, 2006, pp. 65) developing the notion of a science dealing with human society in his *Course in Positive Philosophy*. The root of the words 'sociology' and 'society' both lie in the Latin 'socius' meaning 'companion, ally, fellow' (Onions, 1966, pp. 842). The root of 'science' is found in the Latin 'scientia' which is a present participle stem of 'scire' meaning 'know' and 'knowledge' (Onions, 1966, pp. 797). We can see the etymological root of the word 'justice' in the Latin 'justitia' meaning 'righteousness, equity' (Onions, 1966, pp. 500).

This etymological exercise serves to excavate starting points for the meanings active in 'public sociology'. By doing this we can notionalise sociology as a discipline which uses methods of knowledge building in order to attend to fellow needs in an allied way characterised by equity; the language simultaneously suggests equity as the source of righteousness.

The origins of Sociology as a discipline Burawoy sees as emerging through responses to social problems. To illustrate this he provides us with a list of thinkers: “Thus, Karl Marx recovered socialism from alienation; Emile Durkheim redeemed organic solidarity from anomie and egoism.

Max Weber, despite premonitions of 'a polar night of icy darkness,' could discover freedom in rationalization, and extract meaning from disenchantment. On this side of the Atlantic W. E. B. Du Bois pioneered pan-Africanism in reaction to racism and imperialism, while Jane Addams tried to snatch peace and internationalism from the jaws of war.” (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 260). We can see the recurring theme of social justice playing a central role in orienting knowledge about human society.

### **Sociologists Recreating the Problems they Study in Society**

Inspired by these emancipatory histories Burawoy focuses on the professional and academic world suggesting “If our predecessors set out to change the world we have too often ended up conserving it” (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 260). In this way he directs his attentions not just to the way in which public goods are expressed in a culture but also to asking systems questions of how the reproduction of society takes place through social processes that preserve social realities like alienation, anomie, egotism, disenchantment, irrationalism, racism, imperialism and conflict in the face of the lip service paid to the values of egalitarianism.

The work of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann is of value in this context to explore how social realities of inequality reproduce themselves. As a systems thinker he borrows the term of 'autopoiesis' from the biological sciences: “Autopoiesis is taken place whenever the components of a system are produced by the components of the system itself” (Koskinen, 2013, pp. 62).

Burawoy's call for public sociology includes in it an imperative acknowledgement and recognition of how societal structures are maintained and renewed along with their characteristics and inequities. The sociologists Norbert Elias and John Scotson bring detailed accounts of sociological phenomena of communities. In their book 'The Established and the Outsiders' (Elias & Scotson, 2008) they document how ingroups and outgroups form illustrating mechanisms by which exclusionary status is re-created and conserved. The following is a larger excerpt worth including here as it has direct bearing on the managed boundaries of knowledge production and valuation in sociological realms:

“Already at that time the 'villagers' evidently formed a relatively close group in a much greater degree. They had developed traditions and standards of their own. Those who did not comply with their norms were excluded as people of an inferior sort. Hence they withdrew from the pub which the immigrants had chosen as their meeting place, and they took up the struggle against the intruders by using all the characteristic weapons available to a well established and fairly closely-knit community in its relations with groups of newcomers who, for one reason or another, did not adapt themselves to their traditions and their norms and who therefore threatened, as they must have felt it, their communal status and identity: They closed their ranks against the newcomers. They cold shouldered them. They excluded them from all posts of social power whether in local politics, in voluntary associations or in any other local organisation where their own influence dominated. Above all, they developed as weapons an 'ideology', a system of attitudes and beliefs which stressed and justified their own superiority and which stamped the people on the Estate as people of an inferior kind. Built around certain stereotyped themes their status ideology was spread and maintained by a constant stream of gossip” (Elias & Scotson, 2008, pp. 18)

Elias and Scotson offer an analysis which puts in context dehumanisation psychology at play in exclusion of outsider publics. This kind of alienation is well documented (Bain, Vaes & Leyens,

2014) but perhaps finds one of its more refined analyses in the work of Ann Cahill. Her book 'Overcoming Objectification' (Cahill, 2011) develops a scheme of language to advance the framing work which the word 'objectification' does, especially in the cannon of Feminist philosophy. She suggests that the concept of "derivatization" has better explanatory power than the implicit limits of the language of objectification in as much as it values bodily experience as intrinsically human having better affordances for nuanced understandings of the intersubjectivity of human relations:

"If 'objectify' means to 'turn into an object,' then 'derivatize' means to 'turn into a derivative.' To derivatize is to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc. The derivatized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivatizing subject's existence—other elements of her (as I will argue in the next chapter, women are far more likely than men to be derivatized) being or subjectivity are disregarded, ignored, or undervalued." (Cahill, 2011, pp. 32)

This formulation of dehumanization is helpful to understand how interactions continue in society with noticeable absence of interpersonal antagonism and conflict between the derivatizer and the derivatized. This stands in contrast to frank dehumanisation in which targets are explicitly othered. Cahill's work lends detail to the body of work done on 'infrahumanization', which refers to a subtle denial of humanness associated with ingroup favouritism. (Bain, Vaes, & Leyens, 2014, pp. 2).

In context with Burawoy's statement of sociologists conserving the sociological problems of the world, part of his impetus is to raise awareness to highlight an active myopia. People are not always aware of their prejudices and biases, and in professional contexts people may be led to believe that they are objective and unbiased through the nature of the job role they occupy. Caroline Criado Perez suggests that a belief in meritocracy may be all you need to introduce bias. Studies have demonstrated that a belief in your own personal objectivity, or a belief that you are not sexist, may make you less objective and more likely to behave in a sexist way (Criado-Perez, 2020, pp. 94].

Uhlmann and Cohen (2007, pp. 221) report: "When people feel that they are objective, rational actors, they act on their group based biases more rather than less...such psychological licensing helps to explain the persistence of discrimination in organizational contexts despite personal and institutional pressures towards egalitarianism".

This may offer an account for the observational outcomes given by Professor Lesley McAra who point out how policy change may not necessarily translate to change in culture (McAra, 2016). Cahill describes what happens when derivatized outsiders express differences to the insider agenda and voices how the derivatizer may not even be aware they perceive the other as less than human:

"Should the derivatized subject dare to demonstrate aspects of her subjectivity that fall outside of the derivatizer's being—assuming such a demonstration can even be perceived (it may well be so incomprehensible so as to be beyond the perceptual range of the derivatizer)—she will be perceived as arrogant, treasonous, and dangerously rebellious." (Cahill, 2011, pp. 32)

Returning to Burawoy's provocation of sociologists conserving problems in the world as they are, these thinkers offer insights for understanding how the maintenance and recreation of social issues

comes about by professionals purporting to be involved in resolving social issues.

### **Enlarging the Field and Broadening the Knowledge**

Burawoy calls for a type of questioning which enlarges the field of sociology encompassing not just pre-eminent names which have shaped the academic and professionalised realm with contributions of highly technical language, but also of knowledge of the everyday valued in authentic everyday language; words which have not been separated from direct and situated experience.

He calls for the self referential nature of the culture around the pursuit of academic credentials to be challenged suggesting that the institutionalisation of the knowledge suffers from the shifting of values bases away from the 'moral impetus' which originally called people to become practising sociologists.

Speaking to the domain of professional sociology, Burawoy suggests that public sociology sets out on a journey to take Sociology on a "systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles". He suggests it as an approach which is complementary to Professional Sociology rather than a negation of it; he makes efforts to point out that the different realms of sociology come of each other and need each other to be effective.

Making sense of this, public sociologist Eurig Scandrett argues that at the heart of public sociology is a dialogue held between the abstract knowledge of the expert and the concrete knowledge of the socially located person; those in 'the everyday' have access to situational understandings which are indispensable for the development of expertise and those in positions of expertise bring with them their investment in institutional study drawing especially upon codified forms of received knowledge like textuality. As Scandrett put it "drawing on expertise is good; expertise needs criticality to be successful" (Scandrett, 2023).

### **Relating Public Sociology to Action Research**

In these ways public sociology as a practice shares a great deal with Action Research as a methodology. A famous figure of action research is Paulo Freire known for his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (Freire & Bergman, 2014). Freire came from a middle class family and grew up in Brazil. Reflecting on his heritage and the material conditions of poverty he stated "We shared the hunger, but not the class". He later got the opportunity to go to university and become a teacher whereafter he worked with impoverished youth communities. This is where he apprehended that the traditional pedagogy he was exposed to was oppressive to those who came from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. He perceived it to be dehumanizing failing to value the experience, language and culture of the peoples he spent time with. His interests become focused on developing a liberating alternative to traditional pedagogy which through what he called 'conscientização', a process that refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality. (Freire & Bergman, 2014, pp. 35)

Following the 1964 coup d'etat in Brazil Freire was imprisoned as the new regime considered his teaching to be subversive. Freire then went into exile until 1979 before returning. Freire placed 'critical consciousness' as a central pillar of learning relevant to the people ensconced in their socio-environmental-political setting. The critical reading of what gets presented through traditional pedagogy is a foundation on which to build a new pedagogy that questions the 'tabula rasa' perspective (the mind hypothesised as a blank or empty state before receiving outside impressions) he named 'the banking concept of education'. This view of the dominant culture of education and learning is dehumanizing because it fails to recognise what is already in situ, and embodied in the experience of the learner. It confounds the exercising of intersubjectivity by limiting the scope of action allowed to the students to receiving, filing, and storing deposits of knowledge made by the teacher/teaching system through mechanical means like memorization, repetition and lecture.

This teleological model of education (education designed for a prefigured purpose), imposes curricula on individuals and cultures, lacking the reflexivity and criticality which comes of a direct dialogical relationship with/in the world. It deals with knowledge especially in parsed and codified forms, uses jargon language and rejects vernacular experience as it occurs in the world; i.e. if the knowledge comes from outside the institution then it is received as 'other' than 'orthodox' (rooted in the meaning 'right opinion' [Onions, 1966, pp.634]). Freire describes this abstraction of knowledge from its real contexts by traditional pedagogy in the following framing:

“The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration— contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity.” (Freire & Bergman, 2014, pp. 71)

Freire's interests are specific in developing education and knowledge to challenge injustice, an explicit characteristic shared with public sociology. The notion of privileging one culture of perspective over another is an indication of the function of power and ideology in dominating another. It is, as Foucault suggests, a “regime of truth” where a general politics of truth that each society has, embodies “types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true” (Foucault, 1977, pp.13):

In a recording of Freire later on in life he says: “Who says that this accent of this way of thinking is the cultivated one ? If there is one which is cultivated it is because there is another which is not...it is impossible to think of language without thinking of ideology and power. I defend the duty of the teachers to teach the cultivated pattern and I defend the rights of the kids or of the adults to learn the dominant pattern. But it is necessary in being a democratic and tolerant teacher; it is necessary to explain, to make clear to the kids or the adults that their way of speaking is as beautiful as our way of speaking. Second, that they have the right to speak like this. Third, nevertheless they need to learn the so-called dominant syntax for different reasons. That is the more the oppressed, the poor people, get the dominant syntax the more they can articulate their voices and their speech in the struggle against injustice “ (Freire, 1996).

As a counter valence to the traditional pedagogies of dominant cultures Freire suggests that liberating education consists in the cultivation of acts of cognition rather than transferrals of

information. This can be done through problem-posing education that positions the subject field as authority which mediates the teacher-learner/learner-teacher experience relating a contradiction that they set out to resolve. The resolution of the problem is achieved through overcoming the contradiction of the vertical nature of banking education, resolving the relations in accord with the world as it presents itself in concrete form. It is a dialogical form of relation coordinated by the world (Freire & Bergman, 2014, pp. 79) which similarly operates in public sociology practice.

### **The Dialogue between the Abstract and Concrete**

In this section I am going to explore how the conversation between the codified and the everyday, the professional and the public, the abstract and the concrete (Scandrett, 2023). This kind of dialogue offers access to an important remedial process that operates as an imperative at the core of public sociology to reach new syntheses.

This can be understood as a dialectical process, a dialogue that goes on between the abstract and concrete, the public and the professional as essential to reach a synthesis that offers better representation of the complex phenomena of life. Gunn and Wilding (Gunn & Wilding, 2022) argue that a vital way of apprehending the dialectical process as bringing the humane into being is the dynamic of mutual recognition (Gunn, 2018). Without a mutually recognitive society, sociology - and other forms of institutionalised knowledge - are incapable of recognising valuable insights from outside their own habitus and therefore capacities for discovery and to check for error are damaged.

Gregory Bateson's work brings together biology, anthropology, psychology and cybernetics, offering insights on how this process of recognition functions to elucidate phenomena. Whilst challenging, Bateson's ecological thinking – that is thinking in terms of interlinking systems – offers something unique. His discussion of 'epistemological error' in relation to 'mind' offers a powerful account of meanings which constitute sanity and insanity. Bateson expanded the framing of mind to include a wider range of self-corrective systems which have the characteristics of learning and growing. The embodiment of mind involves receiving, transforming and exchanging information but much of this is in tacit forms like aesthetic or affective experience. Bateson suggested the ecological system itself has 'mind' of which humans are a part of and which co-evolve with (Lowney, 2022). I suggest that the dialectical and dialogical experience is directly related to the capacities we have to tune into greater networks of mind (I.e. publics; and possibly the natural world as a public?) in order to error check our working models of the world leading to sanity. The following excerpt from 'Steps to an Ecology of Mind' (Bateson, 1987) grounds his systems perspective in practical example:

“Let us now consider what happens when you make the epistemological error of choosing the wrong unit [of 'evolutionary survival' which turns out to be identical with the unit of mind]: you end up with the species versus the other species around it or versus the environment in which it operates. Man against nature. You end up, in fact, with Kaneohe Bay polluted, Lake Erie a slimy green mess, and 'Let's build bigger atom bombs to kill off the next-door neighbours.' There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rooted parasite through the tissues of life, and everything gets into a rather peculiar mess. When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise 'What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,' you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-

products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system—and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.” (Bateson, 1987, pp. 340)

Bateson critiqued the common conception of mind as associated solely with conscious rationality, which has come significantly through the work of Immanuel Kant. An overly rationalist, technocratic approach to human society results in epistemological errors which he suggests as a form of madness. Sanity – or healthy forms of society – comes with ecological wholeness that necessarily comes through the recognition and experience of our interconnection with larger realities, larger networks of mind. Bateson suggests that it is patterns of behaviour which connect us to other and extended systems which develop capacities of error correction he suggests as sources of 'wisdom', acting as sources of healing.

The recognitive aspect in context with the omissions of Immanuel Kant's philosophy are picked up on by Ann Cahill in her scrutiny of dehumanisation. Cahill writes: “there is much more to lose than there is to gain by adopting a Kantian approach...that personhood is a trait that is added to embodiment; a person has a body, but is not a person by virtue of that body, and the particularity of that body need not (indeed, one should assume, does not) affect that individual’s status as a person. The dignity that is the ethical right of a person is grounded in distinctly non-bodily characteristics” (Cahill, 2011, pp. 24)

Placing this in the public sociology context, by the artificial attempt to separate the subjective from the objective gaze, the professionalisation of knowledge manages to isolate itself from its source of error correction, learning and growth; it becomes stranded in the encompassing reality. This lack of recognition and dialogue also sets up the circumstances for moral disengagement, derivatization and dehumanisation of others. As I understand public sociology it actively holds as a part of its make up a recognition of the mutual roles which individuals bring to research, a value system that contributes co-constituted capacity through the properties of equity. This dynamic characteristically extends the dignity of the intersubjective experience through positive externalities marking education as a public good. This semiotic speaks to a fundamental advantage which human beings have tapped into which comes from synergistic companionship and inclusion in culture.

## **Conclusion**

For sociology to be effective it needs to take onboard knowledge from all perspectives and be capable of valuing that knowledge in all its different expressions. This is reflective of Burawoy's understanding of public sociology in the world. In this essay I have brought together thinking which examines different representations and contradictions in order to produce constructive analyses.

Public sociology embodies discursive modalities capable of epistemological error checking with their operational effectiveness in dialogical processes rooted in equity. The embedded values have a functional nature in that they yield better, more representative understandings in the science of human society we know as sociology.



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