



How not to become a museum piece

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Abstract

In this essay I want to address two question marks which arose during my reading of Michael Burawoy's inspiring piece. First, sharing his spirit of recreating the sociological enlightenment by differentiating between different types of public sociologies, I do not share his optimism that sociology can easily become an integral part of public discourse and practice. Second, I don't think that mainstream sociology is really prepared for this adventure. My argument points in the opposite direction: all the different forms of public and non-public sociology are in danger of becoming museum pieces. Thus, sociology not only needs a public voice, it also needs to be reinvented first – in order to have a public voice at all!

Sociology not only needs a public voice, it needs to be reinvented for the twenty-first century

Michael Burawoy has written an inspiring piece 'For public sociology' (2005). I don't think I have felt so excited about or agreed so strongly with any sociological argument for a number of years now. My own personal indicator for this are the many exclamation marks I have distributed throughout the text. But there are question marks as well. I want to address two of these here. First, sharing his spirit of recreating the sociological enlightenment by differentiating between different types of public sociologies, I do not share his optimism that sociology can easily become an integral part of public discourse and practice. Second, I don't think that mainstream sociology is really prepared for this adventure. My argument points in the opposite direction: all the different forms of public and non-public sociology are in danger of becoming museum pieces. Thus, sociology not only needs a public voice, it also needs to be reinvented first – in order to have a public voice at all!

I. Neither enlightenment nor social technology: the different worlds of academic sociology and public discourse

Michael Burawoy responds ‘to the growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study’. This is a very important issue in many respects, but it overlooks and underestimates the differences of rationality – codes of communication – between the worlds of academic sociology on the one hand and contexts of public, practical and political discourse and decision making on the other. My argument stems not only from personal experience in both these worlds. It is also a result of academic research on the ‘uses of sociology’ in many fields. What I am talking about are the results of a research programme which I organized in the late 1980s and which was financed by the German Research Society (DFG). Within the framework of this programme, several projects attempted to find out what happens to all the sociology being produced for public, practical or administrative purposes when it is used – or not used! – in public, practical and administrative contexts.¹ Most sociologists seem to have both very straightforward and very illusionary expectations as to how their results should be used. They often believe that sociology *qua* sociology can or should become an influential part of various non-academic discourses. Ever since the 1970s there has been much criticism of this ‘traditional wisdom’ (Weiss 1977) surrounding sociology in its relationship to the different fields of social action – the mass media, government administration, businesses, social movements etc. One of the outcomes of this were the many expressions of a new helplessness: ‘Putting sociology to work’ (Shostak 1974). And some raised the pressing question: ‘Why sociology does not apply’ (Scott and Shore 1979).

Our case studies radicalized the criticism of sociological idealism and self-centredness, which seemingly expect a ‘rational’, corresponding, direct use of social scientific ‘results’ in the different contexts. We demonstrated empirically that the classical model of applied social science is wrong – not only is there no connection between the context of production and the context of use of sociological knowledge, there is no identifiable relationship between them at all. The main result of our research programme was very disappointing and very challenging at the same time: *the uses of sociological knowledge have nothing to do with the sociological knowledge being used.*

This is, of course, fatal for the idealistic self-interpretation and naïve hopes of sociologists who naturally want to influence public discourses and different kinds of political or administrative practices through the specific message and the implications of their work; however, it also confirms the more calm and collected approach to applying sociology to the relationship between sociology and practice, and throws light on the paradoxes which arise from these different sorts of rationality. Of course, a sociologist who has been engaged in researching a specific topic for many years will be rather like a parent, hoping

that his or her 'child' – their scientific results – will succeed in the outside world of political reality. It is extremely hard to tolerate those results ending up in the paper basket of an 'ignorant' bureaucrat, or worse, and hence complaints about the 'irrationality', 'narrow-mindedness', 'ignorance', 'technocratic deformations' of the non-sociological uses of sociology become deafening.

There is a practical side to this attempt to conduct empirical research on the uses of sociology. Operationalizing our research programmes, we started with the principle: follow the result through its contexts of use! So we looked at parliamentary debates, proposals made by administrators, drafts of laws, administrative measures, and so on, to see whether we could identify any 'concepts' or 'sentences' or 'practical advice' in them that originated in scientific texts about problems in educational reform, social policy, criminal behaviour, drug policy and so forth. Those attempts were not entirely unsuccessful. But what we found could hardly be described and interpreted as a direct use of scientific 'results'. We discovered that our non-sociological 'fellow sociologists' (Alvin Gouldner) – the practitioners, decision-makers and journalists etc. – had re-interpreted both the sociological content and the so-called 'results' within their own frame of reference and for their own practical purposes. In this process of intervention, the 'sociologiness' of a 'result' of sophisticated research *gets lost*. And this is exactly the way sociology is being – *successfully* – used! To put it in paradoxical terms: the disappearance of sociology in practical and public and administrative contexts is precisely an indicator for the *successful* use of sociological knowledge! It follows the 'word of mouth' paradigm and is rather like the party game, known (in Britain) as 'Chinese whispers', where somebody says something to his or her neighbour and this is passed on from person to person, until finally the message has been transformed into something completely different, reducing everybody to fits of laughter.

I am not sure about the implications of Burawoy's ideas about a public sociology. But any realistic effort along these lines should be aware of the fact that there is no direct correspondence between public sociology and the public *uses* of public sociology. To put it in more general terms, a re-vitalized sociological imagination can and does have all kinds of impacts – it can be neglected, misunderstood and redefined for all kinds of interests. When public or other kinds of sociology become an integral part of practical and political discourses, they are effectively being 'transformed', that is, divested of their sociological identity, and constructed 'anew' in the interests and for the purposes of practical argumentation and acting.

One implication of this is that if public sociology does not try to control the public users of public sociology, and if the public feels free to use sociology on its own terms and in its own interests, then there is no control and no expectation of control on either side, and public sociology can be provocative. It

needs its own standing, its own vision, its own methodology, its own value relationship ('*Wertbeziehung*' Max Weber) and its own voice in order to be heard in the national – and/or global! – public arenas.

One of our results confirms Michael Burawoy's expectation that the flourishing of different types of public sociology is a condition of the flourishing of all. We found that the resistance, ignorance and indifference of, for example, administrations to sociological findings (which they themselves financed) crumbles when those findings are published and discussed in the mass media. Then – all of a sudden – the results are publicly recognized and constructed as results that have political implications, so that the 'user' has to react to them. Thus the public standing and presence of sociology – its *published* voice – produces, enforces or constructs its administrative, practical and political uses (whatever this means).

II. Reinventing sociology for the twenty-first century

I am not sure if I am misinterpreting Burawoy's argument. If he is arguing that there is a mainstream sociology and that *in addition* there should be different sub-disciplines of public sociologies, I doubt that this model of differentiation is really adequate in this case. This is because it takes for granted what has fundamentally to be called into question: *all* the different kinds of public or academic or practical or political sociologies are in danger of becoming old, familiar museum pieces. This is what I call methodological nationalism.

What do I mean by this? I mean that sociology has been historically concerned with the analysis of societies, with each society being based upon a distinct national state (or nation-state). So there is a system of nation-states and accompanying sociologies that study their particular society defined in nation-state terms. The nation-state constitutes the container of society and the boundary of 'sociology'.

The notion in, for example, Talcott Parsons' writings that each society is a closed and self-equilibrating system becomes invalid, albeit at uneven speed and with variable impacts. This attempt to reinvent sociology for the twenty-first century includes (at least) two steps: first de-constructing and then re-constructing sociology for the global age. I shall shortly be illustrating the implications of this in one key area, the sociology of class and inequality (Beck 2005, 2006; Beck and Sznaider 2006).

1. Deconstruction of the national sociology of social inequalities

There are at least two possible answers to the question of what it is that legitimizes inequality: the *merit system* and the *nation-state principle*. The first

answer is a familiar one and has been both elaborated and criticized; it derives from the self-understanding of the national perspective and relates to domestic inequalities within the state. The second answer emerges from the frame of reference of the cosmopolitan perspective and relates to the ‘legitimation’ of global inequalities. It follows from this that it is only by systematically alternating between the national and the cosmopolitan perspective that the big blind spots – and sources of error – present in the methodological nationalism of inequality research can be brought to light. Only in the context of such a New Critical Theory of social inequalities can the *fundamental asymmetry of perceptions of inequality that are bound up with the national outlook be revealed from both a social and a social scientific perspective*. This illuminates the fact that the ‘legitimatory achievement’ of the nation-state lies in turning people’s attention exclusively towards domestic issues, thereby banishing global inequalities from the field of vision of the (relatively) privileged.

It makes sense in purely spatial terms to differentiate between *large* inequalities (which in turn can be divided into transnational, supranational, international and global inequalities) and *small* inequalities. ‘Small’ inequalities are located within the nation-state and, for perfectly good reasons, appear to the individuals and groups affected by them to be large ones; however, from a cosmopolitan perspective they are small because they coincide with nation-state frameworks of self-description, self-ascription and self-monitoring. The merit system allocates inequalities within the state, while at the same time legitimizing them. An appropriate paradigm for describing this situation is the written examination: everybody goes in on an equal footing but comes out again on an unequal footing (with different positions in the marking hierarchy). With the merit system, for example, income distribution can be both unequal *and* legitimate. In contrast, to speak of the nation-state principle as a ‘legitimation’ of social inequalities means that the nation-state focus on national inequalities makes global inequalities *disappear* – legitimation through blocking out. Large inequalities are banished beyond the bounds of the national perspective. What follows from this is that they can both grow into and be ‘legitimized’ as institutionalized irrelevance and unreality. Thus, large inequalities are ‘legitimized’ not so much through a lack of concern and debate about global inequalities, but rather through concern and debate about ‘small’ national inequalities.

The distinction between ‘large’ and ‘small’ thus relates to spaces of perception and population figures. Of course, this law of the nation-state exclusion of global inequalities is an overstatement of the issue – the national particularity of a state does not generally rule out the possibility of universal principles and perceptions. None the less, it is true to say that the nation-state outlook ‘frees’ people from having to look at the misery in the world. It works on the basis of a *double exclusion*: it excludes the excluded. The stability with which the large inequalities suffered by humanity are ‘legitimized’ in silent

complicity between state authority and state-fixated social science, through organized non-perception, is astonishing.

2. *Reconstructing the transnational sociology of inequalities*

My argument so far has already been part of a new ‘transnational’ (not to be confused with ‘international’) approach to social inequalities. A completely new field for boundary-crossing sociology research and theory comes into vision here. We need new definitions of the unit of research, new conceptualizations and theories of transnationalization, new forms of research organization etc.

In order to illustrate this necessary transformation of *all* kinds of sociologies (public, professional, political etc.) I just go on asking: what lends stability to the (negative) ‘legitimation’ of global inequalities through silence in the face of the growing permeability of borders? What destabilizes it? Four principles of the nation-state construction of irrelevance and unreality can be identified here.

The first of these is the *principle of nation-state fragmentation and attributability of global inequalities*.

As long as there is no global authority responsible for monitoring global inequalities, they disintegrate into a patchwork of nation-state inequalities. For every one of the roughly 200 states that exist, there are roughly 200 frameworks for observing and assessing the relevance of small social inequalities. However, the sum of these domestic inequalities recorded by each individual nation-state by no means equals the total of large, global inequalities because the logic of the national outlook is not the same as the logic of the cosmopolitan outlook. In particular, nation-state self-ascription and the associated assumption of endogenous causality contradicts the cosmopolitan point of view, which also draws on transnational interdependencies, power relations, decision-making bodies and causalities to explain nation-state domestic inequalities.

The nation-state principle is the analytic key to understanding why the connection between globalization and poverty has been so little researched within sociology, which is still prisoner of the nation-state. As long as the national outlook holds sway in the sphere of political action as well as in social scientific analysis, poverty and wealth will be localized in the national context as a matter of course. The very possibility that the negative consequences of globalization might make themselves felt in different historical contexts – in the form of growing inequalities, erosion of incomes, exploitation of natural resources and the undermining of democracy – is ruled out *analytically*. As far as social scientific research on inequality is concerned, then, the principle of nation-state fragmentation is linked to a large source of error: the danger of *reaching false conclusions from nation-state premises*.

The second principle is as follows: the *perception of social inequalities presupposes norms of equality*.

From the nation-state perspective, the stability with which large inequalities are excluded is based on the validity of national norms of equality, be they defined in terms of culture, ethnicity, law or politics. The objectivity of global social inequalities is not called into doubt politically as long as they stand in the shadow of institutionalized norms of equality. It follows from this that as national norms of equality are replaced by cosmopolitan ones, so the necessity and urgency of giving state legitimation to existing large inequalities grows. On what is this equality within western welfare states based in the national paradigm? On the formal equality implied by the status of being a citizen: differences in income between men and women, or differences in where people live, and so forth, should not provide grounds for grading citizens in terms of their status. All the members of a nation have the same rights and responsibilities. This legally sanctioned equality among state citizens is backed up by the nation-state model of cultural homogeneity (same language, history, cultural traditions). These national principles of inclusion and exclusion serve both to determine and stabilize the limits to people's perception of social inequalities.

This leads to a third principle, that of the *non-comparability of social inequalities between nation-states*.

The national perspective and the 'functional capacity' of the nation-state to legitimize global inequalities rest not least on the fact that politicizing comparisons can only be brought to bear *intra*-nationally and never *internationally*. Delegitimizing comparisons, on the other hand, presuppose national norms of equality. In this sense, for example, differences in income between Nigerians and Germans, South Americans and Finns, Russians and Chinese, Turks and Koreans can be as large as they like, even given the same qualifications and job descriptions, but the delegitimizing potential of these comparisons is only felt if they occur within a common framework of perceptions of institutionalized equality. This might be the case, for example, with membership of a nation or of a global corporation.

The interesting issue that emerges from all this is the extent to which international differences in income within the European Union can continue to be legitimized in future by the principle of non-comparability; or the extent to which, with increasing European self-awareness (and the institutionalization of European self-observation), the inequalities that have thus far been blocked out internationally will now be perceived as *intra*-national inequalities and therefore have to be legitimized (Beck 2005). As the barriers to comparing inequalities between nation-states come down (for whatever reasons), the European Union may be expected to enter a phase of acute turmoil, even if conditions of inequality remain constant. However, the role of the nation-state

in the system of global inequalities is by no means exhausted in its so-called legitimizing function.

The fourth principle is: *blocking out legitimizes inaction*; or rather, it legitimizes *action* that makes large inequalities worse because, for the national outlook, these 'external' effects find expression in a pre-determined unreality, that is, electoral irrelevance.

By talking about social inequalities exclusively as 'home grown' inequalities, it becomes possible to pursue a global politics of redistribution in which the risks are externalized and passed on to weaker Third World countries, while any benefits are maximized within the national context.

While western statesmen were enthusing about the fact that we had enjoyed a *decade of unexpected peace and prosperity*, a growing number of countries were sinking further into debt and unemployment and were witnessing the decline of their health and social services as well as urgently needed infrastructures. What may well be helpful to western corporations, for example, a rigorous enforcement of deregulation, privatization and greater flexibility in developing countries, is often disastrous for the latter themselves.

To sum up these principles: the nation-state world order fragments global inequalities; national norms of equality exclude global inequalities; the intra-national comparability of inequalities guarantees international incomparability; and the irrelevance of large-scale inequalities is predetermined. All these principles make it possible for powerful and rich nation-states to pass on the risks entailed by their decisions to poor states, a practice stabilized not least by the fact that the methodological nationalism of the social sciences confirms and supports actions based on the national perspective. Inequality research based on this approach compounds national myopia and turns itself and the object of its research into nation-state 'native science'. Something that is considered elsewhere to be problematic from a scientific point of view – self-oriented research – is raised here to a methodological principle. At best, this national autism is extended into a comparative autism along the lines of international comparative studies. But even this comparative methodological nationalism remains wedded to the big mistakes of methodological nationalism itself.

In this global era, sociology urgently needs a New Critical Theory with cosmopolitan intent: it must reveal and dismantle the wall of methodological nationalism built into the category systems and research routines of the social sciences so that, for example, it can bring into view the legitimacy role of the nation-state within the system of large inequalities. The established domestic maps of national social inequalities are elegant, highly detailed and may generally be adequate for managing the resultant potential for unrest among the relatively privileged part of the world's population at state level. But the demons that inhabit the large, unfamiliar, utterly under-researched worlds of inequality are no longer mere decorative motifs that serve to embellish the

margins. Belief in the nation-state, along with the national narratives that dominate public commentary and academic research, certainly cannot be overlooked or ignored. But since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, if not before, many people have come to realize that looking through the gaps in the wall of perception that separates the 'small' from the 'large' inequalities amounts to looking down the muzzle of a gun.

The idea is that only the cosmopolitan outlook, with its commitment to reality, can reveal the *disasters* that threaten us at the start of the twenty-first century. Critical Theory inquires into the *contradictions, dilemmas and unseen, unintentional side-effects* of a modernity that is becoming more cosmopolitan; it draws its critical definitional power from the tension between political self-description and social scientific observation of the same. The theory goes as follows: *the cosmopolitan outlook opens up spaces and strategies for action that the national outlook closes off*. This interpretation gains greater plausibility through the fact that the space for action opened up by the cosmopolitan outlook stands in contradiction to the lack of alternatives diagnosed by politicians and social scientists alike in the national perspective.

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Notes

1. See Beck and Bonß 1989; the relationship between sociology and praxis/politics/publics has been a major concern of my writings from the beginning, Beck (1972; 1974; 1982).

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