

Burawoy, M. (2021). *Public Sociology: Between Utopia and Anti-Utopia*. Polity Press, 238 pages, ISBN 978-1-5095-1915-6

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Michael Burawoy's *Public sociology: Between utopia and anti-utopia* advocates for a more engaged and activist approach to the practice of sociology through the lens of Burawoy's own intellectual development and career. Burawoy argues that sociologists should not limit themselves to 'academic sociology' but should work to address critical social issues and promote social change within wider society. The sociology that Burawoy advocates for is not isolated within an ivory tower but is connected to the world around it.

Burawoy's journey into sociology began as a disaffected mathematics student at the University of Cambridge, with a happenstance finding of Durkheim's *Suicide* (1966 [1897]). Reflecting on his subsequent journey through sociology, Burawoy has come to believe that sociology is "a science that is built on moral commitment, on values that we hold deeply with others – freedom, reason, equality and solidarity" (p. 4). For Burawoy, the practice of sociology should be a "value-based science, rooted in lived experience and focused on the tension between utopian and anti-utopian thinking" (p. 5). Burawoy suggests that sociology is often "caught between the *utopian imagination* reaching beyond the constraints on human action and the *anti-utopian science* that reveals their existence and power" (p. 2, original emphasis). Burawoy is clear to point out that by anti-utopian he is not meaning a dystopian society, but rather "the limits on the realisation of a 'good society'" (p. 2).

The book is split up into six parts that represent different stages of awakening throughout his sociological journey. The book begins by outlining Burawoy's journey into sociology by way of the Manchester School of Social Anthropology in Zambia, but the work also charts the theoretical genealogy of a public sociology. For Burawoy, contemporary orthodox sociology was born in the post-World War II efforts of Talcott Parsons, who sought to create a dominant narrative of the founding fathers of sociology: Durkheim, Weber, Marshall, and Pareto, with Marx added after the countercultural movements of the 1960s. However, Burawoy suggests that sociology is founded on four types of knowledge: 1) *Professional knowledge* – a scientific research programme intended for fellow sociologists; 2) *Policy knowledge* – offering its knowledge and service to clients such as governments, corporations, and many others; 3) *Public knowledge* – that is a "cultivated discussion and debate in the public sphere about the general direction of sociology" (p. 13); and 4) *Critical knowledge* – that calls into question the fundamental assumptions of professional knowledge. Burawoy suggests that a public sociology seeks to restore these contradictory forms of knowledge that create sociology and focus on the utopian and anti-utopian essence of sociology. By this, Burawoy means sociology must seek to understand the ills of our modernity, such as anomie, alienation, inequality etc., but at the same time seek to be utopian, to create a more hopeful potential for society. For Burawoy, the work of W. E. B. Du Bois provided the foundation for his vision of public sociology. This

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was because Du Bois challenged orthodox sociology at the time by examining his own lived experience as an African American that placed 'race' at the centre of his sociological analysis. It was not only Du Bois' reflexive sociology, but the fact that he straddled academic and public worlds, such as his sociologically informed policy advocacy and interventions, which really inspired Burawoy to pursue public sociology.

While Burawoy is reflexive about his journey and outlines some hard-won lessons from his experience of exploring what a more public sociology looks like, he also asserts that social problems cannot be divorced from the context out of which they arise (p. 63). His exploration into a more policy-oriented sociology made him aware that "behind any solution to a social problem were a set of interests" (p. 63). Like Bourdieu, Burawoy acknowledges that the social context is a field of forces competing and conflicting over a multitude of interests. These competing and conflicting interests are also reflected in many of the later parts of the book, such as when Burawoy reflects on the growth of Marxism within sociology through American academia and his ethnographic work in communist Eastern Europe, which helped build his career into the intellectual giant we know today. These fields of forces are also explored within the rise of the neoliberal university and Burawoy's drive to reconceptualise the practice of sociology within the confines of academia.

A real strength of the book is the openness in which Burawoy shares his success and failures as a sociologist as he has navigated his career and intellectual journey. Burawoy should be commended for the integrity to outline and live his beliefs—too few sociologists have had the guts to do this. As a reader, I had two key reservations, although only one about the book. The first, is that we gain insight into some of Burawoy's intellectual development as a sociologist, but in many ways some of the more personal thoughts that have driven this development are not shared. Given that Burawoy's father was born in the Ukraine and that Burawoy has spent a great deal of time immersed in communist eastern Europe and post-communist Russia, insight into these more personal motivations would help provide greater understanding into his journey and intellectual development.

My second reservation is more of a conceptual one, mainly about what is 'public sociology' and why is it useful? Burawoy describes public sociology as not merely transmitting the result of research to broad publics, but a "conversation between sociologists and publics concerning the devastation of society" (p. x). I raise this as the book is marketed as simply, *Public Sociology*, but does not offer much guidance about the *practice* of a public sociology. While this criticism may be a little unfair, as a key concern of the book is Burawoy's own intellectual development—which can be understood as a conversation between a sociologist (Burawoy) and publics concerning the devastation of society that he has seen and experienced as part of his research career. However, I would suggest that the book in many ways is illustrating just one trajectory that a public sociology could take. Is Burawoy's vision for public sociology one that can allow us to engage with the critical issues of our times and reconceptualise the practice of contemporary sociology?

As Patricia Hill Collins warned, "the banner of public sociology may foster a kind of sociological ghettoization, primarily because those who gravitate towards public sociology may already hold subordinate status within the discipline itself" (2007, p. 104). In many ways, a public sociology that seeks to engage with the world is the antithesis of academic sociology, especially as many practitioners of public sociology are marginalised within orthodox sociology (Collins, 2007, p. 103). Moreover, Collins' public sociology is also about values, but for her these values are democracy, social justice, colour blindness, and feminism, among others. These values, in comparison to Burawoy's humanistic values, are embedded in people's lived experiences and realities of living under contemporary capitalism. In her critique of public sociology, Collins (2007, p. 103) reflects: "I wonder how discussions about public sociology will assist sociologists who currently practice public sociology?" Burawoy's book does provide an answer, but I would argue more work needs to be done within the discipline to reconceptualise sociological practice to reflect today's realities.

I would also argue that Burawoy's intellectual history of a public sociology resembles a history of the fall of communism—a nostalgic encounter with a former utopian life that held much promise but does

not provide much substance of how we can engage with the challenges of our times. Burawoy engages with some reflections on the neoliberal university but does not reflect on the implications for the practice of a public or engaged sociology within this context. For sociology to try and continue to be relevant in our present times and into the future, we need to reconceptualise sociology away from a purely academic form of practice. By this I mean we need at the centre of the practice of sociology an *engaged* sociology—sociology as a profession. By sociology as a profession, I mean expertise and competencies that enable the practice of sociology outside of the academic context, away from misguided attempts to classify sociology as ‘applied’ or ‘outside academia’. The practice of sociology and especially the practice of an engaged sociology is about more than misguided attempts at securing symbolic and cultural capital. Here I would suggest we need to co-opt Burawoy’s misuse of the term professional sociology. In his book, Burawoy uses the term professional sociology to basically mean academic sociology. I believe this is somewhat too narrow, we need to configure engaged sociology as a *professional sociology*. If we see professional sociology as a profession, at its core is an engaged sociology that is supported by institutional practices that enable and nurture the development of sociological expertise with a focus on skills, competencies that helps guide sociologists to engage with the wider world. This version of sociology sees sociology as a craft that offers tools for practitioners to create a more hopeful sociology and world. Indeed, a professional sociology needs to be guided by the sociological practices that are currently taking place within the discipline but are often ignored. For example, the sociologists who practice within medical schools, hospitals, engineering schools, teacher colleges and within industry.

In summary, Burawoy’s *Public sociology* is required reading for anyone embarking or reflecting on their sociological journey and practice. Burawoy has made a career of walking where others fear to tread. The book is a worthy account of his career. It is my hope that it will inspire other canonical sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Nik Rose, Alan Petersen and others to also share their journeys to help us all reflect and think critically about our decisions and journeys so we can use our sociological skills and expertise to make the world a better place.

References

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