
Theory

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Newsletter

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Deprovincializing Global Sociology. Views from the Periphery

The last issue of our Newsletter was a special issue on sociological theory in Brazil. In this issue, we wanted to radicalize our attempts to “deprovincialize” sociology and invited colleagues from the “periphery” to send in contributions on sociological theory in their countries. We got a very good response, more than we could possibly publish, and are happy to present contributions from Chile, Australia, Turkey, Morocco, Uruguay and Israel. The contribution of Devorah Kalekin on public sociology is not strictly regional, but it allows us to raise the central question which is subjacent to the debate, namely if, and if so how, a

global cosmopolitan public sociology could contribute to “the advent of a wider motherland of which ours would only be a province” (Durkheim, *La science sociale et l’action*, p. 295).

José Maurício Domingues
Frédéric Vandenberghe

After Postmodernism and Globalism: Rethinking Universalism Sociologically

By the time we had almost come to believe in postmodernism’s claim on the *end-of-everything*, globalization theorists began to advance the opposite claim on the *novelty-of-everything*. Both claims do indeed mirror each other in their excesses, but we must nonetheless be able to extract their gem of truth: we should learn from the postmodern attempts at the debunking of unwarranted metaphysics as much as from globalism’s empirical demonstration that we are now actually living in a world society. Insofar as they control one another, moreover, we avoid falling into a position where the fact that I was born in Chile in the late twentieth century prevents me from reaching a sociological understanding of British rule in India; where the fact that planes can fly is explicated by reference to “European” or “African” science; or where torture and psychological abuse are justifiable because local custom so prescribes them. After both postmodernism and globalism, then, I suggest that the constitutive crossroad of modernity’s current condition is the *radical decoupling* between the particularity of its historical and geographical birth in Europe and the fact that its main developments are eventually reaching the kind of universalistic impact that was inscribed in their original vocation.

Rather than leading to a state of complete incommensurability among worldviews, I suggest that we are now in an interesting position to reassess

modernity’s truly original universalistic aspirations because we need to come to terms, simultaneously, with its global expansion *and* the decline of its Eurocentric matrix: the task is that of comprehending those general trends and events that mark the *truly worldwide condition of current modernity* without, in the same move, continue advancing unsound generalizations *from the West to the rest*. My main proposition for this short intervention is that this situation opens up a complex yet exciting challenge for sociological theory in which working in the centre or the periphery of current modernity does not constitute a defining feature of one’s theorizing. I believe we need to rethink universalism sociologically as a *claim* that it is *inescapable* to the actual worldwide condition of modernity, *fallible* as it remains always open to better or more abstract ways of grounding it and *non-Eurocentric* with regards to cross-cultural comparisons and normative assessments.

Indeed, a certain *claim to universalism* has in fact underlined the way in which the tradition of modern social theory understands its own emergence and main features *vis-à-vis* those of modernity itself (Chernilo 2007). For our comprehension of social theory’s *intellectual trajectory*, the centrality of this claim to universalism pushes us to trace its origins back to the tradition of natural law theory (Fine 2007). It is only by rejecting the standard view that natural law theory is only part of social theory’s pre-history that we realize that social theory’s claim to universalism pushes its explanations beyond both the ethnographic description that mimics the participants’ viewpoints and the discovery of ahistorical laws of progress.

For our *theoretical* comprehension of modernity’s current condition, this claim to universalism may help us redefine modernity’s core institutions

but now our conceptualizations of the different passages to modernity do not have need to accommodate to any immaculate (western) model. The notion of *differentiated trajectories to modernity* seems an excellent strategy to come to terms with the relationship between modernity's universalistic tendencies and its particularistic actualizations – be they national, regional or otherwise – all across the globe (Larraín 2000, Mascareño 2008). Furthermore, insofar as these trajectories are more consistently conceptualized as part of a single idea of world society, it is possible to give space to the truly universalistic features of such institutions as science and capitalism as well as to the specific features they adopt in different geographical settings.

At the *normative* level, this new scenario leads to a reassessment of a number of normative propositions and institutions such as democratic self-determination and the rule of law whose ultimate validity depends upon the fact that they underpin a universalistic conception of human rights. Their legitimacy cannot be assessed against the specific way in which they have been implemented in Europe or in the US – nor indeed against their own failure to live up to those standards. Their validity lies rather in the realization that they have increasingly grown *independent* from any specific version and become the framework within which normative debates can have real purchase. And although we are bound to be disappointed as these standards are unable to prevent armed conflicts, torture or even genocide, I suggest that, after postmodernism and globalism, our best hopes remain in keep trying to uphold them as an inescapable, fallible and non-Eurocentric way of re-thinking universalism sociologically.

Daniel Chernilo

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Social Theory in Australia

Australia has been occupied for at least sixty thousand years; its indigenous culture appears to be the world's oldest continuously existing civilization. Modern Australia is the child of British imperialism, which two hundred years ago planted a penal colony at Sydney. In the 19th century CE, settler colonialism spread across the continent, and most indigenous communities were disrupted or destroyed. The modern population of 20 million is mainly of European descent.

In the 1950s the literary critic A. A. Phillips famously defined the prevailing attitude as a “cultural cringe” towards Britain. A tension between dependence and autonomy has remained characteristic of Australian politics and literature, and also social science.

Social science emerged in these colonies in the later 19th century. The first notable publication in sociology was *The Aryan Household* (1878) by W. E. Hearn, a professor at the University of Melbourne, a contribution from the colonies to the European literature of speculation about social progress. This book had no Australian content. Australian indigenous cultures, however, provided metropolitan theorists such as Tylor, Spencer, Durkheim and Sumner – who never visited Australia – with many examples of what they took to

be the most “primitive” societies, in their schemes of social evolution.

Australia's most brilliant and influential social scientist worked in the generation after the collapse of evolutionary sociology, and worked mostly in exile. Vere Gordon Childe began as a labour movement intellectual and wrote a scathing critique of Australian social democracy, *How Labour Governs* (1923). He moved to Europe and there wrote the books that went far to create prehistory as an empirical, conceptually sophisticated social science: first the technical studies of cultural transmission *The Dawn of European Civilization* (1925), *The Danube in Prehistory* (1929), etc., and later his magnificent cross-cultural syntheses including *Man Makes Himself* (1937), *What Happened in History* (1942), and *Society and Knowledge* (1956).

Few in Australia followed Childe's lead. When sociology emerged as an academic discipline in Australia around 1960 it followed the understanding of modernity that had emerged in US sociology, and imported its theory from the USA and Europe. Parsonian functionalism and Weberian stratification theory were influential at first, followed, after a movement to the left associated with the student movement, by several varieties of neo-Marxism. More recently Bourdieu, Giddens, Habermas, and especially Foucault, have been influential. The characteristic structure of knowledge in Australian sociology is a theoretical framework imported from the metropole, combined with empirical data from Australia.

Several possibilities for Australian theorists now exist. They can simply participate in a metropolitan debate; they can bridge between metropolitan theory and Australian experience; or, more recently, can turn towards the global periphery.

Among notable works in the first style are Peter Beilharz's *Labour's Utopias* (1992), a reconstruction of the social models underlying bolshevism, fabianism and German social democracy. Jack Barbalet's *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure* (1998) is a macro-sociological contribution to the new sociology of emotions. Pauline Johnson's *Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere* (2006) provides a history and critique of Habermas's thought on this theme. One might include my *Gender and Power* (1987) in this genre, an attempt to create a structural sociology of gender that draws mostly on European sources.

Since the 1970s feminism has been a strong influence in Australian sociology. Clare Burton's *Subordination: Feminism and Social Theory* (1985) addresses metropolitan theories of gender, but does so from a basis in Australian research, developing a new account of social reproduction processes. With Chilla Bulbeck, feminism led further outward. Her *One World Women's Movement* (1988) addressed global diversity in feminism, prompted by encounters in the UN Decade for Women. In *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms* (1998), Bulbeck moved to a more conceptual level, exploring differing episteme and movement strategies, and arguing for a complex relativism that allows cooperation but not first-world domination. Gay liberation thought has also led to new departures in theorizing sexuality. Dennis Altman's *Global Sex* (2001) is an international synthesis of constructionist theory, globalization and political experience. In *Practicing Desire* (1996), Gary Dowsett draws on Australian research to theorize the autonomy of sexuality as an embodied social process.

In recent decades the Aboriginal land rights movement re-ignited concern with Australia's settler-colonial history and the situation of indigenous people.

Sociology is responding with a growing interest in race relations and indigenous perspectives, as well as ideas from the global periphery. In *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (2007) I explore autonomous social thought in the periphery, studying texts from Africa, Iran, India and Latin America as well as Australia, reflecting on the conceptual significance of the land, and trying to discover what it might be to have a genuinely inclusive social science on a world scale.

Raewyn Connell

Sociological Theory: A View from Spain

If Spanish sociological theory is somehow peripheral in global knowledge circuits it is due to the non-hegemonic language we use (Spanish) not to the issues, perspectives or paradigms we work with. For the last three decades, we have witnessed an increasing confluence of problems, methodological trends and theoretical tendencies with other cultural traditions. Even more, we share a basic common situation with other Western countries: we are suffering the new empiricism that results from the practices and agendas of most financial and scientific instances, private and public. What cannot be measured and evaluated in accordance to that measurement or what has not an immediate application to some practical interest is put aside and devaluated as not scientific: pure (meaning bad) literature.

It is more and more difficult to get any kind of credit (economic, academic, etc.) when you work at the core of the sociological theory endeavour, where we have to deal with conceptual development, model building or epistemic problems. But, nevertheless, there is a bunch of us working in those theoretical questions. Shame on us, but

we still believe that some theoretical or conceptual improvement is not only possible but also necessary if we want some relevant scientific development. Besides, we are lucky enough to have a governmental Office for Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas: CIS) willing to publish good sociological work according just to scientific and academic standards. For the last fifteen years the main publications in this area are filled up with similar issues (complexity, reflexivity, postmodernity, information or fluid society, relativism, risk) and related theoretical tendencies (post-structuralist, feminist, systemic theories, Actor-Network Theory or, even, rational choice) to those in other countries. We can point to some specific features of our sociological theory such as a sort of mainstream reluctance to feminist inputs and to criticisms of modern assumptions and utopias, as well as an unresolved relation to our Marxist heritage. In less than three decades we have moved from a general acceptance of a Marxist framework to a general denial of it, mixed with minority and uncritical application of a XIXth century worldview.

The other two fields usually linked to our theoretical endeavour, History of Social Thought and Social Philosophy, have not been so much implicated in the scientific wars against empiricism. Sociologists working in these areas do not bother when they are allocated outside science, as humanist.

Of course we find historical researches about our classics, with a renewed interest in Simmel and Etnomethodology, as well as relevant studies about contemporary theorists such as Bourdieu, Luhmann or Giddens. However, I want to underline here, as more specific, that, for the last two decades, we have seen a growing interest in the History of the Spanish Sociology. Some collective works and monographic review numbers are the

outcome of that kind of research, bringing to the forefront the ideas of thinkers such as Medina Echevarría, Francisco Ayala or Manuel Salas y Ferré, showing how the implications of our Civil War came to increase our longstanding interrelation with Latin-American sociological problems and thoughts.

Ortega y Gasset and his disciples prompted the field of Social Philosophy in our country. In a sort of a Nietzschean application of German metaphysics they wrote about our (Spanish) historical condition, about the more general features of mass society, about beliefs and mentalities and so on. It is a tradition where Sociology mingles with Ethics, Social Philosophy engages with Political Philosophy and leftist-liberal thought reigns. There are not many sociologists working within this area, but they remain very visible in the public arena because of the popularity of their main topics such as citizenship, republican politics, values and beliefs, moral implications of social theories, accountability and freedom, and because they have become kind of a priesthood of civil religion.

Finally, I would like to introduce an open question I have found in my researches about “the body and the meaning of action”; a question that points to a possible break between southern (including Mediterranean) and northern (micro) sociologies. Why is it much easier for us, in the south, to think of the idea of “embodiment” where body (including body dispositions, positions and movements) is the background and the source for our more basic meanings and values, instead of just a result or medium for the transmission of those meanings and values? Are there two different ways of living our (imaginary) mind-body or meaning-body relations, which feed two different sociological mentalities? Should we introduce here some shades

about different women’s and men’s sensitivities to these issues, before answering?

Fernando García Selgas

A Short Look at Sociology in Turkey

It can be argued that sociology in Turkey has developed, roughly, along two lines. Along the first line, Turkish society is seen as a modern one. The individual and collective actors that make up the social system overcame tradition and constructed a brand new market, public and political sphere. “Society-centered” Turkish sociologists, as I call them, assumed that traditional elements of both institutional structure and cultural values of Turkish society were pathological residues and they were to fade away in modernization process anyway. Main representatives of this line are Mubeccel Kiray, Emre Kongar, Birsen Gokce, Ozer Ozankaya. Also orthodox or revisionist Marxists produced class analyses of Turkish society along the same modernist lines of interpretation. Behice Boran, Muzaffer Sencer, Nihat Erdogan, Ulgen Oskay are the most prominent sociologists among the Marxists. This line of thought has lost its prominence over time.

Sociologists of the other theoretical framework prefer to examine actual Turkish society beyond limitations of the modern-traditional dichotomy. I call this line “socius-centered” and divide it into two sub-groups: Some of socius-centered sociologists see the historical roots and cultural heritage only as auxiliary elements, while some others of them pay special attention to their power and effect on actual Turkish society. Some representatives of the first sub-group are Caglar Keyder, Haldun Gulalp, Bahattin Aksit who were influenced by dependency theory and/or centre-periphery theorizations. Members of second sub-group studied history of culture,

history of economy, history of political thought alongside social theory. Sabri Ulgener from economics and Serif Mardin from politics are prominent members of this sub-group. Within this group Baykan Sezer represents the more nationalist voice. Baykan Sezer looks for almost an authentic sociology.

Members of the second sub-group of socius-centered sociologists typically assume that one should not start with an abstract conception of 'society' if one wants to take an accurate picture of society and be able to both explain and understand the occurrences in Turkey. For them every conception of society is history-and-culture-bound. The standard image of society as an abstract entity is Eurocentric. In Turkey, the market, the public and political sphere have been shaped through different historical experiences and cultural codes. Younger representatives of this second are Nur Vergin, Nilufer Gole, Korkut Tuna, Hasan Unal Nalbantoglu, Mesut Yegen.

This authentic perspective is also at work in applied sociology. In some new problem-solving researches it is observed that in order to discharge the tension between old and new elements of society it is necessary to develop solving mechanisms well adapted to cultural and institutional needs of actual Turkish society. For example, a juvenile delinquency research completed by Ebru Yucel tackles the issue by explicitly focusing on the cultural dimension.

To know what is culture-and-history-bound and how it is possible to discern and transcend these boundaries without going down the alley of cultural relativism and subjectivism, communication among sociologists of different languages and cultures is important. Some years ago I did a research in Turkish language that aimed to overcome the limitations of a cultural perspective. Interestingly, I

found that adjective type of words are more culture-bound than the nouns. Maybe this can be a good starting point to catch some conceptual misunderstandings in different language spheres.

Nilgun Celebi

Sociology in Morocco

Sociology as a discipline has not been prominent within North Africa just as sociology of the Middle East and North Africa has not been popular in the West, with the exception of Israel. The most important reason within the region for sociology's limited scope has been political suspicion, if not outright repression. In Morocco, the discipline was banned for years during "les années de plomb", or the authoritarian period of the 1960s-1970s. In an obituary for Pierre Bourdieu, *Al-Bayane*, the Socialist Party newspaper, claimed that during this period, "Sociology was dangerous and it sufficed to be a sociologist to be outside the law" (January 25, 2002).

The logical follow-up to this suspicion has been restrictions on research permits and likewise, distrust or fear among older generations of Moroccans around participating in sociological research. Sociological questions have thus conventionally been left to historians, political scientists, and anthropologists, from Abdellah Laroui (1967, 1977) and John Waterbury (1977) in the 1960s and 1970s to Susan Ossman (1994, 2001, 2007), Myriam Catusse (2004, 2005), Mounia Bennani – Chraïbi (1998, 2004, 2007) and Moroccan literary figures like Bensalem Himmich (1997), over the last two decades. The notable exception is the sociologist Fatema Mernissi (1984, 1987), although she has focused explicitly on the status of women.

The political and academic situation in Morocco is changing, creating the possibility for sociology to grow in

relevance and prominence as a social science. How, though, should sociologists proceed? Far behind other disciplines in research and theoretical work, sociology needs to evolve to “compete” with social science disciplines long entrenched in the region, particularly anthropology and political science.

I suggest in my own work that we need to pursue two strategies: first, return to classical sociological questions about social structure, social relations, and existential meaning within a social system or the social world and second, collapse disciplinary boundaries in order to explore these questions in the North African context. The first strategy not only should fill in the “gap” left by the lack of sociological research, but also promote sociological concepts and theoretical perspectives as a way to deliver social and political critique and engage in moral thinking, particularly in light of the troubles in the region. The second strategy allows sociologists to move forward epistemologically while reflecting on the relevance of classical sociological ideas and developing the appropriate interpretive frameworks for Morocco.

In my own research, I have asked two questions that figure among the issues facing the region. The first concerns mass political and social alienation among younger generations. The second involves the religious identity of “serial migrants”, or individuals that move from country to country for economic and personal reasons instead of from a home nation to a destination.

I situated the first question within class analysis because this allowed me to explore the structural, institutional, and ideological factors behind alienation without either assuming alienation due to frustrated expectations and deprivation, a popular political explanation, or interpreting alienation without structural analysis, as might be the case in cultural studies. In the end, I argued that in contrast to an older

middle class born out of modernization and political allegiance to the post-colonial state, a new middle class had formed within global market integration through separation from the nation-state and marginalization within globalization. This new middle class, which I called the global middle class, was founded in economic insecurity and the loss of an identity rooted in historical location and purpose.

Yet, though sociology could offer an analytic framework in class formation, only concepts from outside of sociology – in this case, the psychoanalytic theory of Judith Butler, the reflections on statelessness of Mahmoud Darwish, and the effacement of the ‘I’ in front of the Other developed by Emmanuel Levinas – could help in interpreting the process of loss of identity within the nation-state and its re-constitution in face of an amorphous globe.

Likewise, in attempting to understand the existential significance of religion to serial migrants leaving and coming to the region, I used sociological analysis to indicate the loss of common institutional and social references for individuals travelling from place to place. However, to interpret their identification with religion, I cited thinkers like Žižek to show how transhistorical religious ideals could fill the place of the institutional Other, the religious establishment, that such individuals could never access because of instability. These ideals did not have to champion violence, but could do the opposite, as in leave a trace on the world through positive action for humanity.

Shana Cohen

The Social Capital Theory: A Problematic Source for Policy Making in Latin America

In recent years there has been a proliferation of documents produced by international bodies (UNDP, ECLAC, IDB) developing a “Theory of Social Capital”. This theory, developed by Coleman, Putnam, Fukuyama and others, sheds new light on known social phenomena, changing their significance and the *valuation* of the different types of social rules and norms that govern integration and exclusion processes, which in turn has important consequences for development model proposals and public policy making.

In spite of its apparent simplicity and its evident success, this is a problematic theory, mostly if we want to apply it to the Latin American context.

In the first place, the discovery of “social” capital by most authors who follow Coleman, is in reality a false discovery. As pointed out by F. Hernández, capital itself implies relationship, because the production of “goods” cannot exist without social relating. The discovery that social organisation and ties can produce economic returns can only be a discovery if the problem is examined with the liberal assumption that “purely” economic exchanges take place between “Robinson Crusoes”.

From here, we have to recall P. Bourdieu’s perception: that the production of benefits derived from capital, their appropriation and their transmission requires multiple transformations of one type of capital into another, and that they in turn contribute to the legitimisation of that appropriation due to the mechanism of pretence surrounding the economic character of a good part of social life. If the capital is fungible, and each transformation from one type of capital into another involves a cost, it

is not easy to see how, starting from a situation of poverty and deprivation, it would be possible to overcome these underprivileged circumstances through the dynamic of capital transformations alone.

In the second place, there has been a successive widening of the concept that ultimately includes all the “rules” and “resources” that enable action. Although the theory – in the version of Coleman and his followers – is formulated in a way that attaches value to aspects not understood by state orientated or neo-liberal versions, it ends up including, often in a tacit way, the state, the market or their products: juridical norms and the probability of their application, the honesty of those in government, the validity of the judicial system, the transparency of the market, and even the construction of public works become integrated (together with friendship, kinship, neighbourliness and voluntary work) into a concept that, being so all-encompassing, loses its explanatory capacity. If we examine Fukuyama’s definition of social capital, we could say that his concept of it is almost identical to the concept of social structure developed by other theoreticians (Giddens, Archer, Beck) that simply designates it as rules and resources that are at the same time restricting and enabling.

In our view, the theory of social capital arose as a response to the following difficult dilemma: how to acknowledge the social sources of inequality without jeopardizing the appropriation of privilege by national elites. Furthermore, the theory legitimises the particularistic use of mechanisms that makes the appropriation possible. Ultimately, and put simply, if belonging to networks is favourable for the poor, who of course have access to poor networks, how much more favourable will it be for better positioned sectors that have access to better networks? With so

much emphasis on the social character of these relationships, the authors forget that in the last analysis they are talking of capital. In Bourdieu's terms, this could be a form of invisibilisation of benefits obtained by *privileged* sectors because of their *privileged* position.

Turned into policy, *the theory can manifest "liberal effects" without starting from liberal premises*: its initial premise is the social determination of inequality, but it does not obligate the state or governments to tackle the problem through redistributive policies. In emphasizing the dynamism or "health" of family and local networks that in the last analysis depend on individual "agency", it ends up holding people responsible for their fate and that of their children. Either through the biological reductionism seen in Fukuyama, or by the application of double-entry book keeping to the solidarity ties and links within many poor sectors and families, in the theory of social capital, the victims are frequently held culpable.

In fact, there is a certain irony in the pretension that exclusion can be overcome through the use of social ties *when it is exactly the lack of social ties that defines the situation of exclusion*, while at the other end of the social spectrum the use of abundant and beneficial networks of privilege are legitimised by a new conceptualisation that sees them as "assets" and "opportunities". Thus, society once again remains left to the mercy of its reproduction dynamic.

The theory of social capital can also be seen as a step back for the pretensions of modernity. Faced with a state and market that both have pretensions to universalism the theory of social capital legitimises particularistic family, communal and local ties arising from kinship, lineage or fraternity, as a foundation for acknowledgement and the distribution

– or simple appropriation – of social wealth. Although it can be said that this type of practice is not unknown in Latin American countries or the rest of the world, academic works that legitimise it do not seem necessary.

Adriana Marrero

Ironies of Public Sociology

"[T]he increased interest in human factors among engineers reflects the irony that the more advanced a control system is, so the more crucial may be the contribution of the human operator" (Bainbridge, 1983:775).

The increased interest in public sociology among Western sociologists reflects the irony that the more and the more complex social problems are, the less decisive the impact of sociological knowledge. Since Burawoy's ASA Presidential speech (2004), responses have run the gamut from unbridled enthusiasm (Burawoy et al., 2004), to respectful skepticism (Calhoun, 2005), to rejection by sociologists adamantly interpreting sociology as a strictly "scientific" endeavor (Nielsen, 2004; Tittle, 2004). For me, hearing, reading and then thinking about public sociology began with enthusiasm, led to queries, and turned into an exploration of "irony" (Perrine, 1983). In Burawoy's claims there is, overall, a double-edged irony: the irony of the gap between his theoretical intentions and the concrete "product", and the irony in the relatively local significance of this attempt at promoting a universalistic generalization.

Carrying on from the exhortations of Lee (1970s) and Gans (1980s), Burawoy describes public sociology as different from "policy", "critical", or "professional" sociology along dimensions of knowledge, legitimacy, accountability, and politics, as well as in the kind of pathology that may ambush it. Ironically, while intending

(on his own evidence) to talk about the substance of sociology as a discipline and the substance of sociological practice, he has actually provided no more than a sketchy outline.

Burawoy does not frame a theoretical discussion of how sociological activism can impact state processes although the products of a public sociology must necessarily involve the state, and he leaves the complex issues of how to describe and how to understand civil society untouched (Brady, 2004). Nor does Burawoy provide concrete proposals for differentiating the practice of public sociology from that of other types of sociology, or propose criteria for assessing success as a public sociologist. What incentives can spur people to decide to be “public sociologists” (assuming that sociologists who need jobs are not free to pick and choose)? Who, after all, is to decide what questions are suitable for sociologists' interventions? Who is to listen to sociologists' counsels and why? If the “client” does not choose the questions to be grappled with, can public sociologists be trusted to locate the issues that have to be resolved? And in seeking solutions, are public sociologists doomed to “feed on” the work of others? If, as Burawoy (2004: 267) says, “professional” sociology supplies “true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks”, shouldn't public sociologists first of all be “professional sociologists”?

There is also an inescapable irony related to outcomes. Can even the sociologist certain of her knowledge of relevant research and of its (necessarily probabilistic) implications, predict that the outcome of her own intervention will indeed be the one that is intended (Merton, 1967; Stacey, 2004)? Why should sociologists' interventions be more successful than those of people with

common sense who have on-site information about the history-in-context? There is irony in this implied hubris of the public sociologist, which belies the avowed commitment to reflexivity and negates the claim that public sociology is justified by democratic participation.

The enthusiasm for public sociology must be tempered by the threat that it will turn into an ironic kind of imperialism – eager sociologists armed with methodologies forcing little old ladies to cross the street, and sometimes explaining their unfortunate situation to the homeless. Or, to be cynical, can the call for public sociology as a vocation be seen as a transparent attempt to thin out the competition for jobs in the elite research universities?

Moreover, it turns out that public sociology is not really for export. Burawoy himself points out that in Latin America it is taken for granted that sociologists are active and that sociology has an impact on the community. In many Asian countries, including the Middle East, the public tends to be dispersed in political parties with platforms providing for appropriate action no matter what political question arises. Sociologists are among the members of all of them, contributing to the doctrines of all the parties!

And yet, none of these objections counters the moral message. It certainly behooves sociologists, all sociologists, to examine the world and its malevolence; sociological analysis and research is by definition work to be shared. There should be writing that is accessible; there should be courage to deal with problems that present themselves for analysis - and the generosity to act. But while we are convinced of the importance of what we are doing and of what we are looking at, there is no logical reason for us to assume that we necessarily “know better”.

It seems that Burawoy's well-intentioned proposal is best read as a call to remind us all that a professional sociologist (equipped with a wide repertoire of research tools and a good knowledge of theory, including critical theory) is likely to be able to propose solutions for some urgent public questions even though it is impossible to ascribe consensus to the community of sociologists or unanimity to the "public" with any certainty (Nielsen, 2004). At universities and colleges, it makes sense to teach undergraduates as well as graduate students that doing sociology has many *aspects*. For these purposes, reading Burawoy's outline as a structured reminder of all that is involved in doing sociology (rather than as a charter) is a valuable contribution to current debates on the viability of the discipline.

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Message from the Chairs

We are pleased to announce there has been a good response to the call for papers for the RC16 Interim Conference in Pusan in June next year.

In the next few weeks we will be organizing the papers into a full program of sessions, assisted in this task by the active local organizing committee. Once the schedule is finalized the participants will be notified and a brief outline will be included in Theory. The conference will be a true global meeting, with presenters from five continents. It will also offer a unique window into sociological theory in East Asia.

Members might also note that there will be a joint session of RC16 and RC7 (Futures Research) at the forthcoming World Sociology Forum in Barcelona, September 5-8 2008. The session is on "The role of 'future' in Sociological Theorizing". Former RC16 Chair Elisa Reis will be representing our section. Members of RC16 with an interest in this session might like to contact her (epreis@alternex.com.br).

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