

Public Sociology and Global World Perspective: a Critical View

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Andrea Borghini, University of Pisa (Italy)

The aim of my paper is to analyze the role that a properly reformed public sociology can play in enhancing the role of sociology in a global world. While it is true that the Burawoy's proposal, launched in 2004, has reached a great echo in the world's sociological community in order to revive the place of sociology, revitalize its moral fiber and make it what I define as a *sociological style*, capable of affecting the living flesh of problems of Western societies and not, it is equally true that it has to become aware of some of the problematic nodes that the critical debate aroused over time has gradually come to light and that, in my opinion, can be traced back to what I call the *fundamental dualism* that runs through it and that I will try to clarify.

To this end, the paper will be organized in three parts.

In the first part, I summarize the main aspects of Burawoy's proposal, developed from 2004 to date. As we know, it has been a positive shock for the world's sociological community, causing wide debate and the publication of numerous books and articles. Over time, the moral thrust of this proposal has not failed, and the awareness that public sociology can assume the features of a global sociological proposal, by surpassing the size of the nation state and provincializing the point of view of the United States, makes it the best proposal in order to represent the point of view from below, – «...the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology—and in particular its public face—defends the interests of humanity» [Burawoy, 2004] – and, at the same time, «without abandoning public engagement, sociology's challenge today is to go global» [Burawoy, 2016].

In the second part, I will focus on the reasons for that fundamental dualism that afflicts public sociology, especially in its globalist and democratic aspirations, and which is likely to frustrate that goal. And I will outline, based on critical literature, the solutions hypotheses that have been promoted.

In particular, I highlight the dualism in three dimensions:

- a) Communicative dimension: it deals with the notion of public, understood as building a sociology of publics. As Burawoy presents it, speaking in particular of organic public sociology and traditional public sociology, it highlights a first dualism that creates an empty space between those who produce sociological knowledge and the public often lacking the skills to understand the sense of sociological language. The communicative dimension should therefore not only necessarily focus on the social network and Internet as a communicative tool, which is a completely new medium to reach the public, even in a new part. But, as Schneider [2014] points out, the problem is to build an 'e-public sociology' where the distance between organic and traditional public sociology is pragmatically exceeded by the network's own configuration: «Social media *bridge* the two genres of public sociology, advancing a new component, one that consists simultaneously of both organic and traditional elements of public sociology, or e-public sociology» [Schneider, 2014].
- b) Political dimension: this issue will be reflected in the relationship between values and politics, between what Burawoy calls the professional dimension and the reflective dimension of sociology. Even in this second case, a duality emerges again, which, as Abbott points out, risks harnessing and emptying the moral horizon of Burawoy's proposal or bending the cognitive action to an end, considered superior to others. According to Abbott [2007], while the core of Burawoy's public sociology is to take a political position as a sociologist, that is «the sociologist brings his or her skills to the aid of some particular project of action that he or she judges to be a worthy end of human life», his alternative proposal, the *humanistic* sociology, «is interested in understanding the social world (as a value enterprise) rather than in changing it [...] Burawoy's

mistake in dismissing this position flows from his belief that the only form of moral behavior is political behavior in the broadest sense. That is, he thinks that a moral person who understands the moral nature of the social process must of necessity want to change it. I think he is wrong about that. The project of understanding the social process—which is in itself a moral process and cannot be otherwise analyzed—is inherently a moral project, whether we go on to exercise our undoubted political right to urge change or not» [Abbott, 2007].

- c) Epistemological dimension: it is the most delicate element of Burawoy's proposal because in the last reflections where he aspires to make public sociology a global sociology, the local, regional and global dimension of social problems must be reconciled. Again, in order to avoid the risk to let an empty space within local and global point of view, literature has recently proposed a solution defined by Go [2016] as the Southern social point of entry that is based on the philosophy of science and in particular on Giere's scientific perspectivism [2006]. It identifies a middle ground between the extremism of 'objective realism' on the one hand, and radical 'constructivism' in science on the other, and tries to solve the problem of how, if it is widely accepted that some kind of global sociology is needed to advance social knowledge and transcend sociology's parochial origins, to do so. The solution is the «*social entry point* of analysis [...] the *standpoint* of analysis [...]. All knowledge is socially positioned; so-called objective reality can be differentially perceived – or 'known' – in the sense that different aspects of the same thing might be viewed or discovered as opposed to others» [Go, 2016].

In the third part, I intend to emphasize the substantial analogy of the three forms of dualism that characterize Burawoy's proposal, whose common element is precisely the risk of leaving an empty space between sociologist and public, reflective and professional sociology, local and global knowledge, or North and South. And I hypothesize a solution applicable, especially, to the epistemological question. Taking up the recent debate, that we mentioned above, «rooting the social point of analysis in an epistemological and ontological frame – perspectival realism – that renders this strategy feasible and desirable» [Go, 2016], I would emphasize the importance of borrowing from some disciplines far from sociology some concepts used by them, introducing in the sociological analysis the notion of 'neighbourhood of a point', (circle or complete neighbourhood) which is borrowed by mathematical analysis and that identifies the concept of an open set/range, but bounded by a radius and centered in a precise point. Transforming the mathematical notion of 'neighbourhood of a point' in the notion of 'social neighbourhood of a point', it allows us to identify a sufficiently flexible range and at the same time defined concept in order both to look and to connect the local dimension to the regional and global dimensions.

This concept is a working hypothesis to be pursued to respond to the goal of making public sociology an instrument capable of responding to the need to make sociological knowledge relevant and applicable to global, regional and local problems. Combining this notion with the Go's notion, it avoids the risk to make the viewpoint of South of the world either as a mere reflection of the North or to repeat the same self-referential error of what it wants to eliminate (just the metrocentrism).

Finally, I reiterate how public sociology, aware of such methodological limits, can be a formidable tool for reviving the role of sociology as public knowledge, as an antidote to the neoliberal drift, and above all as a means to express, without falling into a rhetoric of the 'South', the view of the South.

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