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POINT OF VIEW

To Advance, Sociology Must Not Retreat

By MICHAEL BURAWOY

A few years ago we heard much about the demise of the "public intellectual," who was said to have fallen victim to the parochialism, careerism, and professionalization of the academy. Today, however, there is a new conservatism afoot, in which laments by intellectuals about their lack of public visibility are being replaced by a full-scale retreat from public life. At a time when they are being attacked as too political, some institutions and scholars have begun to pull back. The ivory tower was built for isolation, and we should not venture beyond it.

In a provocative opinion piece in *The New York Times* this past spring, Stanley Fish, just stepping down as a dean at the University of Illinois at Chicago, offered a "three-part piece of wisdom for those who work in higher education: Do your job; don't try to do someone else's job, as you are unlikely to be qualified; and don't let anyone else do your job." Fish told us not to cross the boundary between academic work and partisan activity, not to engage in the business of forming character or fashioning citizens. We should just stick to the "search for truth and the dissemination of it through teaching." We should dabble only in the mundane politics of academic life: curricula, department leadership, the direction of research, the content and manner of teaching, and so on. Real politics should be left to the professional politicians, those who know what they are doing.

Academics are living in a fool's paradise if they think they can hold on to their ivory tower, fashioned for another era, another world. For too long too many of us have been hiding behind academic freedom and university autonomy -- all in the name of truth. But the chickens are coming home to roost as the public is no longer interested in our truth, no longer prepared to subsidize our academic pursuits. So our budgets fall, and we increase fees, commodify learning, turn admissions into marketing ventures, contract out research to corporations, and search out donors. With that kind of privatization of higher education there will be no search for truth, no fidelity to its sacred values, except, of course, for the cream who rise to the top of our elite universities. Fish would have us draw the curtains, close our eyes, and either accede to privatization or hope that the passion for the market will evaporate. It won't. We have to demonstrate our public worth.

I am a sociologist, and sociology is probably one of the most egregious violators of Fish's nostrums. Many of us believe in the public relevance of our discipline. From where I stand, there are four types of politics. The first is one that even Fish might concede -- the

defense of our conditions of work against external intervention, whether from nosy states or noisy markets. In sociology we do that all the time. To take three recent examples: our defense of the right to do research into sexual behavior, research that may lend insight into sexually transmitted diseases; our defense of the human rights of imprisoned colleagues, like Saad Eddin Ibrahim in Egypt; and our defense of the right to determine what to publish, free of government oversight. Those are a minimalist politics, what I call *professional politics*.

A second, more controversial politics concerns *policy issues*. It is here that sociologists take their findings or their theories back to the world they have studied with a view to solving some social problem. They may be on contract to a state agency, serving as expert witnesses, or selling their expertise to a nongovernmental organization. This type of politics has a long, complex, and not always happy history.

For example, sociologists have devoted enormous resources over decades to the question of the nature, causes, and consequences of racial discrimination. On the basis of that voluminous body of research, last year the American Sociological Association submitted a brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in support of the University of Michigan Law School's admissions policies. The association argued that affirmative action enhances the educational experience for all and reverses injustices that will perpetuate themselves if not redressed. While such collective representation of sociology in policy formation is rare, individual sociologists do it all the time. Perhaps one of the most celebrated was James S. Coleman, who provided the rationale for busing children to desegregate schools in his 1966 report "Equality of Educational Opportunity," only to reverse himself nine years later when he saw white flight to the suburbs. In 2002 the sociology association created a magazine, *Contexts*, to make our most interesting research findings available and accessible to audiences beyond the university.

That brings me to the third type of politics, which aims less at solving a particular problem and more at stimulating *public discussion*. I think of such widely read books as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, and Robert N. Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart*. All of them prompted and continue to prompt dialogue about the character and values of American society. Such traditional forms of public sociology are supplemented by a less-visible engagement with local, specialized publics. I am thinking of sociologists who work, for example, with communities of faith or social movements. At the University of California we have developed an exciting multicampus dialogue with the labor movement to find solutions to labor problems in the state, under the auspices of the newly created Institute for Labor and Employment.

Sociologists, however, at least in the United States, are not well positioned in the world of policy, because the ethos of our federal government is so hostile to what sociology stands for -- social rather than individual explanations of behavior. Today, of course, it is the economists, with their celebration of competitive individualism, who are the favored tribe, while sociologists find their niche in reaching various publics -- even if much of their work goes unrecognized.

One way in which all academics are engaged with the public is through engagement with the students we teach. Here it is often assumed that our responsibility is limited to disseminating truth. Students are empty vessels. We should just pour our pearls of wisdom into them. In reality, students do not come to our lecture halls as blank slates, but overflowing with lived experience. We teach little if we ignore that. As C. Wright Mills, one of America's great sociologists, put it, we turn "private troubles" into "public issues." We are in the business of educating citizens who think critically about the world around them. Those who view teaching simply as a drain on our time should remember that students are our first public, ambassadors to a range of other publics beyond the university.

Let me now turn to a more controversial public -- *ourselves*. In the United States professional associations are powerful entities within civil society, not just in defending their special interests or proposing specific policies, but also as participants in the wider democratic arena. Last year, in the run-up to the Iraq war, the membership of our sociology association considered a resolution against the war, stating that pre-emptive military strikes against other nations, without support from the international community, would create more problems than they solved. There were many sociological reasons for opposing the war, not least the elementary proposition that nation building is infinitely more difficult than military conquest. Still, some scholars were worried about entering political waters, either because they believed that politics should be left to the politicians or because they feared reprisals from powerful bodies, be they homeland-security agents or financing agencies. Yet the resolution, initiated by the membership, passed with a two-thirds majority.

It is especially interesting that a similar resolution against the Vietnam War, in 1968, failed by a two-thirds majority. According to our association's opinion polls, sociologists in 1968 reflected patterns in the wider society, with about 50 percent opposing the war. In 2003, 75 percent of sociologists opposed the Iraq war at the end of April, while a similar percentage of Americans favored it. What that suggests is that the political gap between sociologists and the public has widened over the past 35 years, stimulating the interest in public sociology but also making it a more challenging enterprise.

I am not suggesting that public sociology have a particular orientation. After all, one-third of our membership voted against the Iraq resolution. We must be vigilant in protecting the rights of all to articulate their views publicly. That is to say, we must defend the fourth type of politics, which underpins the others -- dialogue among ourselves. At the annual meeting of our association in San Francisco in a few days' time (August 13-17), more than 5,000 sociologists will assemble for the biggest annual meeting in our history. We will be focusing on the pros and cons, limits and possibilities, models and countermodels of public sociologies. Participants are coming from all over the globe to discuss their experiences with diverse publics, because such publics can no longer be sealed in national containers.

If we are to pursue public sociologies, we had better have a tough internal democracy,

one that allows critical deliberation, and not just over the mundane politics of bureaucratic life, but also over the big questions of politics and science, of ethical neutrality and partisanship, of university privatization and corporate sponsorship, of social responsibility and individual careers. Those are the questions that have marked sociology since its birth. They are the questions that inspired us to become sociologists and to stay sociologists. We need to discuss them openly and thereby give meaning to our more mundane politics. The vocation of science cannot survive without the vocation of politics, in all four senses of the word.

Michael Burawoy is a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley and president of the American Sociological Association.

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