

# The Critical Turn to Public Sociology<sup>1</sup>

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The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity.

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

– Karl Marx

Revisiting “radical sociology” of the 1970s one cannot but be struck by its unrepentant academic character, both in its analytic style and its substantive remoteness. It mirrored the world it sought to conquer. For all its radicalism its immediate object was the transformation of sociology not of society. Like those Young Hegelians of whom Marx and Engels spoke so contemptuously we were fighting phrases with phrases, making revolutions with words. Our theoretical obsessions came not from the lived experience or common sense of subaltern classes, but from the contradictions and anomalies of our abstract research programs. The audiences for our reinventions of Marxism, and our earnest diatribes against bourgeois sociology were not agents of history – workers, peasants, minorities – but a narrow body of intellectuals, largely cut off from the world they claimed to represent. The grand exception was feminism of which Catharine MacKinnon (1989: 83) wrote that it was the “first theory to emerge from those whose interests it affirms,” although it too could enter flights of abstract theorizing, even as it demanded connection with experience.

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To be sure some radical sociologists pursued political work in the trenches of civil society, but only for a chasm to separate it from academic work – an ironic endorsement of Max Weber’s division between politics and science. Such political activity might have been a hidden impetus behind critical sociology, but it rarely gave the latter content or direction. The purpose of this essay is to bring this hidden impetus into the limelight, name it, validate it, cultivate it and expand it into public sociologies. My thesis here is that critical sociology is, and should be, ever more concerned with promoting public sociologies, albeit of a special kind.

### **Fifty Years of Sociology: From Ideology to Utopia**

If the collection reproduced here is typical then the task of “radical sociology” was not to produce a concrete vision that would seize the imagination and galvanize the will of some subordinate class, but rather it was to convince intellectuals, and especially academics, of the power of Marxist thinking. Reversing the prevailing wisdom, we tried to demonstrate that Marxism was the true science while sociology was but ideology. In appealing to fellow academics, we sometimes even believed that we were the class, or a fraction thereof, that was about to make history – whether Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich’s (1977) “professional-managerial class” or the ubiquitous “new class” as it was so often called. This is rather ironic since for the most part, we behaved like run-of-the-mill scholars, scavenging the writings of Marx and Engels (and their successors) for material that would help us comprehend the limits and possibilities of contemporary capitalism.

With *Capital* and other iconic texts, as our exemplars, we interrogated capitalism’s tendency toward self-destruction. Was overproduction or the falling rate of profit the root cause of capitalism’s deepening crises? How precarious was the international capitalist system? How did the capitalist state – or was it the state in capitalist society? – contain those crises, and how, at the same time, did it regulate class struggle? What was the relation of the state to the ruling class? Did the ruling class even rule? And further, what after all were classes? Are they observable? How does one know one when one sees one? Or more concretely, how could one move beyond Marx’s bipolar conception of class structure? What was middle about the middle class? And, moving into the realm of the superstructures, how were classes reproduced? Who produced the ruling ideas – ideology – and how were those ideas accepted by the ruled? What was the function of education – an instrument of mobility or the preparation

of class subordination? And what of gender? Could Marxists accommodate patriarchy in their class analysis? Or was the marriage of Marxism and Feminism doomed from the beginning? And race? Was race merely a way of dividing the working class, or the reproduction of cheap labor power? What chance for a class coalition of white and black? Could race be reduced to class or did it require a framework of its own? These were some of the issues, reproduced in the articles in Levine (2004) that consumed our passion for a new world.

There is no doubt that we were writing first and foremost for ourselves – we were aspiring to produce, in Dick Flacks’s (1972) words, a “*socialist sociology*.” We staged a two-pronged attack to replace sociology with Marxism – trenchant criticisms of the former and creative reinvention of the latter. Our efforts were largely geared to what Louis Althusser enthroned as “theoretical practice” – his attempt to liberate Marxism-Leninism from the Stalinist vice of the French Communist Party. Was it not strange, however, that Marxists should think ideas to be so important? Was it not strange that we made so little effort to persuade people beyond the academy of the validity and power of our ideas! What were we up to?

We were not as absurd as I am implying. A little context might help. The world had just been in flames – student movements had made vigorous and often violent assaults on the citadels of power from Mexico to Beijing (remember Victor Nee’s (1969) *The Cultural Revolution at Peking University!*) from Berlin to Tokyo, from Manila to Seoul, from Berkeley to Paris. This was an era of civil rights protests across the United States, the anti-Vietnam War solidarity movement across advanced capitalism and beyond. This was the period of the Prague Spring, of the Third World revolution of Régis Debray, Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara. And there was the women’s movement battering against so many institutions. The American Sociological Association did not escape: militant Blacks, Hispanics, women, liberation sociologists all demanded access to and representation in their association. A new order was being born which initially faced fierce resistance from mainstream sociology. The radical sociologists of the 1970s were trying to carve into theory what was happening in practice, trying to catch up with a world pregnant with its opposite. We were merely continuing the revolution in the university – bastion of power in the knowledge society.

Sociology, after all, was still in the hands of a messianic professoriate, who, when the ghettos were in flames and the napalm bombs were falling, were celebrating the undying virtues of “America” – its liberal democracy, its openness, its economic dynamism, its affluence, exalting its model as “the first new nation.” Schooled in structural functionalism,

these missionary-sociologists saw themselves as the guardians of value consensus, inventors of stratification theory, the debunkers of collective behavior as pure irrationality, celebrants of racial accommodation and complementary sex roles and, of course, apostles of the end of ideology. As disinterred by Alvin Gouldner (1970) – critical sociologist par excellence – sociology was in deep crisis because its domain assumptions, its guiding theories were out of keeping with the society they sought to comprehend. Gouldner claimed that structural functionalism's days were numbered, and he was right.

The radical assault on postwar sociology was surprisingly successful. From the early 1970s on, trench after trench succumbed to invading forces: stratification gave way to class analysis and later more broadly to the study of inequality, conditions of liberal democracy gave way to studies of state and revolution, social psychological adaptation to work gave way to theories of alienation and the transformation of work, sex roles gave way to gender domination, value consensus turned into the diffusion of ruling ideologies through school and media, irrational collective behavior became the politics of social movements. Fortresses fell as old classics went into abeyance and new ones appeared. Marx and Engels became part of the canon while Durkheim and Weber were given radical interpretations. Feminism and then Foucault were soon knocking at the door.

It seemed to many as though sociology was suffering defeat after defeat, but it was actually reorganizing itself, albeit with our help. In a barely-conscious war of position sociology-in-crisis had reinvented itself by selective appropriation of radical sociology. The result, therefore, was a far cry from our imagined socialist sociology. Indeed, the very notion of socialism was now expunged from sociological vocabulary, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall. To be sure mainstream sociology had imbibed a near fatal dose of Marxism and feminism. But it didn't die, it only choked, vomiting up much of the critical ingredient. We had been warned. From the beginning Frankfurt-influenced critical theorists had been skeptical of competing with bourgeois science on its own terrain, the danger of losing sight of critique, of subjugating what could be to what is. Science was the problem not the solution. By sidestepping debate over goals and values, the new Marxism was in danger of reproducing the very domination it criticized. Foucault would claim to put the final nail in the coffin of science with his adumbration of the iron embrace of knowledge and power. This put radical sociology on the defensive, trapped in a black hole – remote from its historic agents and absorbed into disciplinary practices.

The critical theorists and poststructuralists were not entirely off the mark but they did miss what was gained. Even if Marxism and feminism proved to be the saviors rather than the gravediggers of sociology, still

the new discipline had displaced the old guard of structural functionalism together with their anointed successors. They, in turn, confirmed their displacement with displays of displeasure at the state of the discipline. Through the 1980s and into the 1990s we heard about the dissolution of sociology, its incoherence, its fragmentation, its lack of center. We heard lament after lament about the sorry state of our discipline in, for example, Stephen Turner and Jonathan Turner's (1990) *The Impossible Science*, Irving Louis Horowitz's (1993) *The Decomposition of Sociology*, Stephen Cole's (2001) edited collection of mainly the old guard, *What's Wrong with Sociology?* In that volume Seymour Martin Lipset complained of politicization – when he was young he learned to separate politics from science, but not the new generation. James Coleman (1990-1991) penned various articles about the invasion of “norms” (always potentially dangerous in a rational choice world) to disrupt the free play of ideas in the university. The Turners (1990) rewrote the history of sociology – now an impossible science. From its inception it was too weak to stand on its own two feet, bereft of resources and sponsors, overrun by public controversies. What a departure from the earlier triumphalism of the 1950s and 1960s when Merton, Lazarsfeld, Stouffer, Parsons and Shils saw sociology as the science of the new age!

Nor was the displaced generation completely wrong, sociology had lost its singular program, that amalgam of grand theory and abstracted empiricism, with “middle range theory” holding both to the fire, all controlled by an old boy network that spanned a few elite departments. Since then the American Sociological Association has undergone democratic decentralization with the proliferation of journals, sections, and awards. For those who lost control this was anarchy, disrupting the consensus necessary for the growth of science, and therefore prefiguring the decline of sociology. Those of the old guard with a political will sought to turn the clock back. During the 1980s and 1990s, they tried to engineer an authoritarian recentralization, to reassert their control over journals or create new ones, bolster the command of elite institutions, destroy democratic committee representation in the ASA, terminate the careers of infidels, design new hegemonic projects based on the supremacy of quantification or rational choice theory. All to little avail. The old guard could not outlive its defeat. The successor generation, weaned on critical sociology, held sway, embraced democratic decentralization, widened the doors to minority groups, deepened participation, and set about creating alternative sociologies.

If the impulse behind the “radical sociology” of the 1970s was to catch up with a turbulent world that we thought harbored revolutionary change, today the situation is moving in reverse. The world lags behind sociology. Now, the point is not to transform sociology but to transform the

world. Invoking Karl Mannheim (1936), we may say that over the last 50 years sociology has moved from an “ideology” affirming the status quo to become something more akin to a “utopia” threatening “the bonds of the existing order.” It is not only that sociology has become more “radical,” but the world has become more reactionary (and more insidious and astute in normalizing its appalling deeds). To put it crudely, market tyrannies and state despotisms have deepened inequalities and abrogated freedoms both within and among nations – both tendencies unleashed by the Fall of Communism and consolidated in the aftermath of September 11th. If there are fortifications holding up the advance of these two forces, they lie, broadly speaking, within civil society, the breeding ground of movements for the defense of human rights, environmental justice, labor conditions, etc. This is sociology’s home ground. It has an important role to play in these struggles, both in sustaining civil society itself and in nurturing organizations and movements on its terrain.

Why should such a burden fall on the shoulders of sociology? If political science can be distinguished by its object and value, namely the state and the defense of order, and if economics can be distinguished by its object and value, the market and its expansion, then sociology’s object and value are civil society and its resilience. To be sure, these are sweeping generalizations that overlook the internal heterogeneity of these disciplines, that ignore, for example, the perestroika movement in political science and the prominent dissidents within economics – Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Paul Krugman to name but three. Indeed, all disciplines are contested fields, but, that having been said, they all have their defining projects, their central tendencies which set the terms of opposition. Thus, sociology too, is no unitary vanguard party, fanning the flames of civil society. It too has its oppositions – radical and conservative – that borrow from economics and political science as well as more thinly from anthropology, the humanities, and even biology. Indeed, disciplines are not watertight compartments. Just as sociology borrows from its neighbors, so the perestroika opposition and the dissident economists draw from sociology. But again this transplanting takes place within the framework of the overall disciplinary project. Thus, states and markets are of great interest to sociologists but from the standpoint of their connection to civil society or their embeddedness in the social.

Let me be clear, our disciplinary project cannot and should not be reduced to *critical sociology*, which makes no sense without a *professional sociology* to criticize or even without a *public sociology* to infuse with its commitments, just as all three find their complement in a *policy sociology* with its more instrumental deployment of knowledge. It would take me far afield here to elaborate this quadripartite division of our discipline,

suffice to say that its health depends upon the interdependence and interconnection among the four sociologies even while recognizing their unequal power. (See Burawoy et al. 2004.) Professional sociology, in particular, by which I mean the development of our research programs primarily within an academic context, gives legitimacy and expertise to the other three sociologies, but it also defines our overall project as one inextricably connected to civil society.

Sociology's connection to civil society is as immediate as the connection of economics to the economy, and both connections are the product of history.<sup>2</sup> Sociology grew up in the 19th century with the birth of civil society – in the United States it was born in the reform movements, amelioration associations, religious communities, in Europe it came of age in the late 19th century with mass education, political parties, trade unions, organs of public opinion, and a panoply of voluntary associations. Where civil society died, as in Stalinist Russia, Fascist Italy, or Pinochet's Chile, sociology also disappeared. Where civil society was resurgent, as in the perestroika twilight of the Soviet Union, in the proliferation of community-labor organizations in South Africa or civil rights in the United States – then sociology too was resurgent. Sociology's fate today depends on its connection to a vibrant civil society, and therefore the interest of sociology coincides with the universal interest – humanity's interest – in containing if not repelling the terrorist state and the commodification of everything, that ruinous combination we call neoliberalism.

### The 21st Century: Prospects for a Public Sociology

My thesis, then, is that critical sociologists should focus less on radicalizing professional sociology, although there is *always* room for that, and more on fostering public sociologies to bolster the organs of civil society. So much for the critical need for public sociology, but what are its prospects? There is much evidence that such an outward looking project is supported by a growing sentiment among United States sociologists themselves.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As Marion Fourcade-Gourinchas (2003) has shown, the relation between economists and the economy is far more self-conscious and transparent, which is, of course, in part, the secret of its success.

<sup>3</sup> Needless to say in many third world countries sociology *is* public sociology. Only in the United States, where professional sociology is so strong do we have to coin the very notion of "public sociology." I am, in this essay, only concerned with the United States. But see, for example, Burawoy (2003a).

The initiatives span a spectrum of political stances. We can begin with the least radical, which must include the new magazine *Contexts*, that broadcasts the best and most publicly relevant of sociological research. It has been enthusiastically received by sociologists even if it has not yet found a wider audience. Another index of outward engagement is the activities of the executive office of the ASA. Acting at the insistence of its members, it has campaigned to defend research interests around human subjects protocols and in specific areas such as sexual behavior that have come under attack from within Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services. Further afield it has defended sociologists imprisoned for human rights activism such as the Egyptian, Saad Ibrahim. And it has supported sociology departments threatened with closure, both at home and abroad.

In 2003, the ASA went beyond its own corporate interests on a number of issues. It submitted an Amicus Curiae brief to the Supreme Court in defense of affirmative action in the Michigan Law School case, and later in the year it opposed California's Racial Privacy initiative. More controversially but no less decisively a two-thirds majority supported a member resolution to oppose the war in Iraq. Members voted in full cognizance of possible adverse effects for sociology. In 1968, at the height of the anti-Vietnam-War protests, a similar resolution was *defeated* by a two-thirds majority. While in a personal opinion poll just over half (54%) were opposed to the Vietnam War, 35 years later a full 75% of voters were opposed to the Iraq War. All of which suggests that sociologists have become more critical of the state and more prepared to voice that criticism.<sup>4</sup>

It's not only that collective sentiments predispose sociology to take a public turn, the decentralized structure of the discipline has become better equipped to address multiple publics. If the proliferation of sections, journals, prestige hierarchies, etc. heralds the dissolution of sociology for some, for others it harbors and advances public dialogue. The division into overlapping but coherent subfields – sex and gender, medical, work

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<sup>4</sup> This, of course, did not go unopposed. Seventy-six sociologists signed a petition addressed to the ethics committee of the ASA to declare the resolution as being in violation of its code of conduct. There was a fear that the ASA was becoming a political pressure group rather than a body concerned with the pursuit of science. The ethics committee rejected the petition as being beyond its purview and there the matter rested. Again the democratic structure of the ASA stands out, requiring any member resolution that garners support from 3% of the membership to be endorsed by the Executive Council or, if it is not endorsed, it then goes to the vote of the membership at large. The American Political Science Association and American Economics Association by contrast are constitutionally barred from resolutions that go beyond their immediate professional interests.

and occupations, labor and labor movements, race and ethnicity, crime and deviance, immigration, etc. – map the terrain of actual publics for sociologists to address. It is important to give some underlying coherence to these diverse fields and hence the larger sections – culture, political sociology, theory – also have a role to play. Underpinning these larger visions are the broadest understandings of our discipline, visions that are nurtured, sustained, channeled, reconstructed by critical sociologies – the reflexive heart of our discipline, its collective conscience if you will.

The dissolutionists – the hegemon of yesteryear – would prefer a very different discipline, more akin to that of economics where precepts and presuppositions do not form a diffuse collective conscience but a singular set of assumptions, models, exemplars that all have to accept as the price of admission. Economics is organized along the lines of the communist party with a politburo that directs the profession at home and spreads market doctrine abroad – all under the banner of freedom of choice. Such a centralized despotism is conducive to effective interventions in the policy arena where definitive answers are at a premium. This is so different from sociology's array of overlapping research programs. Its decentered universe encourages reflexivity, and multiple conversations with diverse publics. We are less effective as servants of power but more effective as facilitators, educators, raising consciousness, turning private problems into public issues. Our heterogeneity is better suited to a public rather than a policy role.

Of course, it may not be simply the structure of our discipline that handicaps us in the policy field, but also the messages we carry. The United States government is ever less interested in assuring social and economic rights – guaranteeing minimum welfare, protecting civil liberties, reducing racism, improving medical benefits for all, creating a more secure world for all. Perhaps at the local level where municipal administration is more sensitive to the needs of its citizens there is more scope for sociological intervention. Indeed, as the national state becomes more socially irresponsible, as it becomes less concerned with its public mission and more with the private interest, so more and more of the welfare, caring, education, security burden is downloaded onto the locality. Here is a more likely terrain for a policy sociology.<sup>5</sup> Leaving the question

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<sup>5</sup> The possibility of a public sociology, therefore, varies by state. In the New Deal or Civil Rights Era sociology made deeper inroads into federal agencies than in the era of the neoliberal state. Equally, we note that in some countries, such as Norway, Finland and Sweden, sociology enjoys a much stronger presence in government. Still, I would argue that sociology's comparative advantage and spontaneous object lies with civil society and that the autonomy of policy sociology will depend upon the strength of public sociology.

of policy sociology aside, however, we must ask whether our message is also too left of publics let alone states? Can we produce the ignition to spark the conversation?

It would be a mistake to underestimate the gap but it would be equally foolish to ignore our accomplishments. I note, for example, the excitement around the creation of the new labor and labor movements section in the ASA, and the University of California's Institute of Labor and Employment which in its short life has fostered a rare collaborative engagement between labor and sociology around a myriad of issues, including substandard working conditions, strategies for organizing campaigns, the changing face of the labor market, family leave, not to mention the educative role of its labor centers.<sup>6</sup> Its vitality and success is underlined by the hostile attention it has received from right wing think tanks, and the conservative press. Despite an earnest battle it is one of the first victims of the Schwarzenegger Regime. Moving to other terrains sociologists have for a long time been engaged in a dialogue with communities of faith, prison communities, neighborhood associations, and immigrant groups. Thus, one should be careful not to reduce public sociology to its "traditional" form as opinion pieces in national newspapers. Although these national interventions are important they obscure the vast swathe of grass roots or "organic" public sociologies, less visible but no less important. We need to recognize what has hitherto been marginalized and privatized, to validate public sociology – in all its varieties – by bringing it into the company of professional sociology. It is truism that students are our first public and, moreover, they take sociology to other publics, what we might call secondary publics, but we could think more broadly of public sociology as an extension of our educative role, bringing sociology directly to diverse publics. Just as students may initially resist our messages only later to be gripped by them, so the same can be true beyond the academy.

Still, we have not finished with the doom and gloom school. Political scientists, such as Robert Putnam (2000) and Theda Skocpol (2003), aided and abetted by some sociologists, have been sounding the alarm about the decline of civil society, gobbled up by the state, by bureaucratization, by the media. Their results are far from unequivocal, but leaving that issue aside, if social capital is indeed diminishing then surely we should be in the business of shoring it up. Here we would do well to

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, Edna Bonacich, author of articles on the split labor market, one of which is reproduced in this collection, has followed the road to public sociology by researching the apparel industry in close collaboration with the union (UNITE) and the anti-sweatshop campaign (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000).

think of the success of feminists, sociologists among them, in turning women from an inert social category into an active public, ready to march for its interests. As sociologists we not only invent new categories but also give them normative and political valence. To fail to do so is to give *carte blanche* to state and market to fill the vacuum with their own needs. We are in the business of fostering such publics as the poor, the delinquent, the incarcerated, women with breast cancer, people with AIDS, single women, gays and so on not to control them but to expand their powers of self-determination. We should not abandon them to the regulatory state but engage them directly. When we study social movements we simultaneously endorse their presence as a public. We should be more self-conscious about our relation to the people we study, and the effects we produce in the act of research.

If skeptics remain – those who believe that the terrain of civil society is too arid, too infertile for us to cultivate publics – then to them I say, we have always recourse to our own organizations. One of the peculiar features of US civil society is the presence of strong and independent professional associations. To be sure they have generally fought for their own corporate interests but not always. Lawyers, for example, have led the way in civic professionalism, concerned themselves with the defense of human and civic rights. It may amount to no more than a public relations face that camouflages enormous power, but it is nonetheless important for all that. As a discipline sociology was born in close proximity to moral reform just as individual sociologists are often born in moral combat. Professionalism has tried to smother the moral impetus in a cloak of science, just as it has forced us into careers that disparage moral commitment. The moral moment, however, may be repressed or marginalized, it may be suspended or put into remission, but it never disappears. It springs back to life when and where it is least expected. As we saw above the sentiments behind civic professionalism within sociology are strong and growing. Still, it is ironic, but also hopeful, that when publics were strong critical sociology turned inward, whereas now, when publics are weaker, critical sociology turns outwards.

In rebutting the nay-sayers I do not want to sound an overly triumphant note. We should not forget that we are still critical sociologists, trained to see the negative as well as the positive! In underscoring the opportunities as well as the urgency of the issues at stake, we should not lose sight of the continuing professional opposition to public sociology. It's not just a matter of one recalcitrant generation, but, as Andrew Abbott (1988) has noted, of the inbuilt tendencies of professions to establish their status by distancing themselves from publics, by fetishizing the inaccessibility of their knowledge. There will always be a tension, a symbiotic

opposition if you will, between professional and public sociology that critical sociology will have to navigate.

### Real Utopias: An Agenda for a Critical Public Sociology

The “critical turn” to public sociology has two very different meanings. So far we have only focused on one meaning, namely the *necessity and possibility* of public sociology, the necessity and possibility of moving from interpretation to engagement, from theory to practice, from the academy to its publics. Thus, the *necessity* for public sociology comes from the “scissors” movement – the disciplinary field of sociology drifting leftwards as broader politics and economics moves rightwards. The *possibility* for public sociology comes from sociology’s spontaneous connection to – its reflexive relation with – civil society.

There is, however, a second meaning to the “critical turn,” namely a turn to *critique*, that is a public sociology that is “*critical of*” as well as “*critical to*” the world it engages, a public sociology that seeks to transcend rather than uphold what exists. To put it another way, a critical sociology cannot endorse every turning outwards, every strengthening of civil society. We should be wary of the communitarian tendency, seeing civil society and the publics that traverse it as inherently virtuous, always repelling the evil forces of state despotism and market tyranny. Civil society can be the arm of authoritarian and fascist regimes just as easily as it can defend humanity against dictatorship. Its expansion and resilience are necessary but not sufficient conditions for defensive struggles against the terrorist state. More generally, civil society is the collaborative arm of all capitalist states, to which it is connected by a thousand threads, reproducing consent to capitalist domination. Furthermore, increasingly, states themselves promote civil society in order to make it the overburdened recipient of civic responsibilities – offloading responsibility for welfare, medical care, care for the elderly, education, unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation and the like onto social markets and voluntary associations. Finally, civil society originates its own forms of domination – racial divides, scattered hegemonies of gender and sexuality, capillary powers – that call for their own war of position. Still, if civil society is no panacea it is nonetheless the best possible, indeed the only, terrain for sociologists to organize their public initiatives.

Given the Janus faced character of civil society – simultaneously an instrument of domination and a launching pad for enhanced self-determination – we need to develop normative and institutional criteria for progressive intervention. We need to foster a civil society that is not only strong and autonomous but also democratically self-governing, responsive

to multiple interests, and moreover one that penetrates the state itself. We need to make the state responsive to civil society, facilitating, promoting and protecting the conditions of participatory democracy. This is the vision that lies behind Archon Fung and Erik Wright's (2003) empowered participatory governance (EPG) – a model of an active, self-governing civil society that they derive from the interrogation of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Panchayat Reform in Kerala, neighborhood governance of public schools in Chicago, and habitat conservation planning in the United States. From these experiments Fung and Wright have developed a set of political principles, design characteristics and background conditions for EPG that have been debated in many venues around the world.

This sets out an agenda for a critical approach to public sociology. It begins from the common sense of different communities; it interrogates that common sense for generalizable principles; it draws up a design that is accessible to and thereby an object for discussion by other communities. In other words, it becomes a *real utopia*, that is a utopia based in the existing world. But the analysis doesn't stop here. It draws on sociology's wealth of knowledge, its scientific heritage, to ask of any such real utopia three further questions: What are the conditions of its genesis – can it be transplanted? What are the conditions of its existence – how can it be reproduced over time? What are its internal and external contradictions – what is its long term trajectory? Here once again there are possibilities for an exciting convergence of professional, public and policy sociology on terms defined by critical sociology.

We might say that critical engagement with real utopias is today an integral part of the project of *sociological socialism*. It is a vision of socialism that places *human society, or social humanity* at its organizing center, a vision that was central to Marx but that was too often lost before it was again picked up by Gramsci and Polanyi (Burawoy 2003b). If public sociology is to have a progressive impact it will have to hold itself continuously accountable to some such vision of democratic socialism.

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