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Sociology and Its Publics: Reframing Engagement and Revitalizing the Field

2016 Midwest Sociological Society Presidential Address

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines how sociologists can and do engage a range of general, nonacademic public audiences, organizations, and interests. It begins with a discussion and critique of the notion of public sociology that emerged from Michael Burawoy's 2004 American Sociological Association (ASA) presidency and draws upon recent commentaries and classical theories to formulate a more pluralist vision of sociology's publics. The article concludes by arguing that embracing a multidimensional vision of the relationships between sociology and its publics not only provides a foundation for better public engagement, but also can help renew and revitalize of sociology.

KEYWORDS

Sociology; public sociology; engagement; public sphere; social media

Sociology has a long and distinguished history of social advocacy and public engagement. Whether in the tradition of Marx, DuBois, Adams, or Durkheim, some believe the field itself was born out of a commitment to social analysis for the purposes of societal intervention and improvement (see, e.g., Burawoy 2005). That is, sociology has not only studied society but also has been an independent force for change within society.

Certainly, there is no shortage of engaged sociology and sociologists today. At the national level, scholars such as Frances Fox Piven or William Julius Wilson are shaping public understandings of class, race, and social policy. Others, like Doug Massey, testify before Congress about immigration policy, and develop outreach and informational organizations such as the Scholars Strategy Network (Skocpol 2014) or the Council on Contemporary Families. Then, there are sociologists, such as Adia Harvey Wingfield, who serve as contributing editors for wide-reaching publications such as the *Atlantic*, and Lisa Wade, Tressie McMillan Cottom, Philip Cohen, Jessie Daniels, and Tina Fetner, who create online communities and conversations. The American Sociological Association has gotten involved as well, filing Amicus Briefs on landmark court cases such as *Obergefell v. Hodges* and launching the award-winning *Contexts* magazine.

State, regional, and other aligned organizations like the Midwest Sociological Society provide their own exemplars and unique approaches. Michael Stout and his group at Missouri State University create data sets with ongoing community surveys and studies, while Meg Kraush leads her University of Wisconsin-Superior students in interviews about race and diversity to spur community conversation. Monte Bute bucks the corporatization of higher education in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system with

provocative op-eds; and countless others are involved in community-based research, intervention studies, experimental policy work, participatory action projects, community organizing (Kleidman 2006), and simply teaching their students—our first public—how to apply textbook knowledge, concepts, and techniques to real world organizations, social problems, and experiences.

I do not believe it is a stretch to suggest we are living in a new, golden age of sociological engagement, visibility, and influence. In this process, whole new forms of sociology and subfields within the discipline have taken shape, from action-oriented research with its focus on “applied sociology,” “service sociology” (Trevino and McCormack 2014), and community organizing, to legislative and legal consulting and the development of new and “old” media as innovative platforms toward various public “goods.”

Yet, for all this, sociology, as an academic discipline and a scientific enterprise, has often had an awkward relationship in its engagement with the larger nonacademic world (Calhoun 2007). That discomfort goes back to the separation of sociology from social work (if not all its gendered undertones; see Lengermann and Niebrugge 2007) in the early days of the field. Sometimes, the engaged side of our discipline, whether in its most activist forms or more modest, reform-oriented manifestations, has marginalized those who seek to make sociology a more objectivist, detached model of science. At other times, those who simply believe that the job of professional, academic sociologists is to produce knowledge, information, and critical perspective see application, dissemination, and intervention as better left to other actors in society. No matter the justification or reason, the acknowledgment and embrace of public engagement has an uneven history, marked by ebbs and flows of embrace and disavowal.

I think the ambivalence and unevenness of our acknowledgment and embrace of our more activist, interventionist, and engaged sides is unfortunate. I say this not only because it compromises sociology’s ability to contribute to making the world a better place, but also because it diminishes sociology itself by making the field a narrower, less rich enterprise, less able to grapple with the complexities of social life and the deeper questions of the human condition.

Fortunately, in the past decade or so, a renewed energy and attention to sociology’s direct, deliberate engagement with the world outside of the ivory tower has emerged. Motivated and framed in large part by Michael Burawoy’s tireless campaign on behalf of “public sociology,” we have seen not only the emergence of new forms and commitments to public engagement, but a renewed dialogue and healthy debate about the value and function of public engagement in all its forms.

This, in my view, is good, right, and necessary. But I am also somewhat worried that this discussion has been a bit one-sided and that the debate has stagnated. With all of the new forms and technologies of engagement; with all of the organizations and communities in turmoil and in need of help; with all of the new studies and types of data and modes of analysis available to us; and with the social sciences and higher education, especially public higher education, under attack in states ranging from Wisconsin to North Carolina to Louisiana, we must rededicate ourselves to the work of refreshing and refining our understanding of sociology in relation to our various public audiences, initiatives, and agendas. It is time, in other words, for a “next generation” framework for sociological engagement.

My goal as president of the Midwest Sociological Association (MSS) and in this essay is to help instigate that project. I do not provide a how-to guide for public engagement from a social scientific perspective (though such resources are already beginning to appear: see, for examples, Daniels (2016), Bladgett (2015), and Stein and Daniels (forthcoming); see also the new “Communication Tools” on the ASA website (<http://www.asanet.org/press-center/communication-tools>). Rather, I attempt to sketch out a new framework for understanding and conceptualizing the relationships between sociology and its various publics. It is an exercise I believe that will not only enrich and enable our collective ability to make a contribution to public life but also enlarge and revitalize the discipline of sociology itself.

I should note that the ideas presented here are based upon several different sources and sets of experience. First is my own interest and experience in bringing sociological research and writing—my own work and that of others in the field—to larger public visibility and influence. I have cared about this from the very beginning of my career; indeed, it is one of the reasons that so much of my own research and writing is about sports and race in the United States, topics I believe many people care about and can engage directly. My work has been nurtured and sustained in the Sociology Department at the University of Minnesota, a department with a long history of engaged scholarship. The University of Minnesota lineage includes its inaugural chair of sociology and social work, Stuart Chapin; onetime sociology major and national civil rights leader Roy Wilkins; and Arnold Rose of the ASA’s eponymous Rose series; as well as current scholars like Phyllis Moen, who studies work and family balance in the life course, Cawa Abdi, who investigates the incorporation experience of Somalians in the Midwest, and Chris Uggen, whose work has influenced criminal justice policy at the state, regional, and national levels (for brief summary overviews, see Aminzade 2004; Uggen 2005).

Perhaps my most high-profile work in sociological engagement has come in editing *Contexts* magazine with Chris Uggen and our subsequent founding and ongoing publishing of TheSocietyPages.org, an open-access hub that draws together sociological findings, interpretive scholarship, and a public-facing sensibility. Subsequently, I have served on Annette Lareau’s ad hoc presidential Committee on Social Media; worked with state and regional sociological associations where public engagement plays heavily (if resonating somewhat differently than at the national level [Hartmann 2015]); and reaffirmed my own scholarly interests in social theory, media, culture, and civil society. These experiences have afforded me a certain preparation and unique vantage point, I believe, to help advance understanding of the complexities and challenges of sociological engagement that have in the past and can in the future revitalize and reinvigorate sociological research and scholarship.

Burawoy and Beyond

Any conversation about sociological engagement today must begin with Michael Burawoy and his advocacy of public sociology. As much as I see the need to go beyond Burawoy’s ideas and frame, my ideas about public engagement and much of my own work in this domain thoroughly and unapologetically work from the foundation he laid during his 2004 ASA presidency.

Burawoy made public sociology the focus of his remarkable, unprecedented, and even insurgent term in office. I daresay that no ASA president, at least none in recent memory,

has been so powerfully single-minded as Burawoy, who succeeded in putting the public, extra-academic dimensions of sociological research and labor on the front stage of the discipline. It is almost impossible to overestimate his contribution to the field and the extent to which he has dominated research, writing, and thinking on the topic. In just four years, Burawoy wrote at least nineteen separate articles and book chapters on public sociology between 2004 and 2008 (see, for example, Burawoy 2005a, 2005b, 2004). Eight different journals devoted special symposia or issues to the topic and, before the decade was over, at least four different readers on public sociology were published (Blau and Smith 2006; Clawson et al. 2007; Jeffries 2009; Nichols 2007).

Not only was Burawoy passionate and prolific, he was, as Kieran Healy (2015) has suggested, downright poetic in championing his vision of engagement:

I envision myriads of nodes, each forging collaborations of sociologists with their publics, flowing together into a single current. They will draw on a century of extensive research, elaborate theories, practical interventions, and critical thinking, reaching common understandings across multiple boundaries ... and in so doing shedding insularities of old. Our angel of history will then spread her wings and soar above the storm. (Burawoy 2005a:25)

Among Burawoy's (2005a) scholarly and theoretical contributions, I find two most striking and essential. The first is the clear distinction he draws between academic and nonacademic work. The second is the renewed emphasis he places upon the latter. Burawoy was not the first sociologist to call attention to this point, but among our generation of scholars, he placed primacy on nonacademic work (or extra-academic work) in a way that reinvigorated our mission.

Burawoy is also well-known for the two-by-two typology he generates in the process of defining public sociology and distinguishing it from other orientations to sociological research and practice. In the process, he enumerates four types of sociology—public, professional, policy, and critical—organized by academic versus nonacademic and by a distinction between normal science and interpretive or reflexive social research and knowledge production. Given sociology's big field, famously marked by multiple and often competing methods, theoretical orientations, and substantive specialties (and sub-specialties), I much appreciate Burawoy's effort to put some additional structure on types of sociological practice and their relationship to the broader social world. In fact, I have taught this typology to my graduating seniors every year for the better part of the past decade. And there is absolutely no doubt that Burawoy's emphasis on the public sociology box has inspired and empowered an entire generation of activist scholars and advocates.

However, for all their clarity, I think these distinctions have also wrought certain blind spots or limitations. For one, in the most often-cited entanglement, Burawoy's distinction between policy sociology and public sociology marginalizes whole bodies of sociological research and writing that are clearly influential and perhaps even socially essential outside the ivory tower, relegating them to a status of "mere policy" work. By conferring a higher status upon his conception of public sociology, Burawoy has left scholars—who are otherwise fully committed to engagement but using methods or political orientations toward engagement and change that may clash with his own—feeling unappreciated or snubbed.

The other side of this distinction is perhaps a less appreciated but deeper conceptual problem. If distinguishing policy sociology from public engagement and if associating it

only with conventional, epistemological approaches marginalizes policy work, it also diminishes the importance of interpretive work in policy. That is, this association eschews the value of basic, fact-based sociology in advocacy and activism. This particular scheme makes it seem as if critically oriented, interpretive work has little or no place in the policy world *and* that basic, fact-based or explanatory social science has no real contribution to make to more activist, interventionist work. This is unfortunate on both fronts. Activists and public actors often need and use social facts and basic social scientific research to justify and legitimate their advocacy and interventions; conversely, policymakers and state actors regularly benefit from being forced to confront and consider radically new and different approaches to solving public problems, let alone entirely new ways of conceiving of those problems.

A third and final problem with Burawoy's presentation of public sociology stems from its widespread association with critical-theoretical work. In general, this has equated public sociology with a leftist political orientation. This is not entirely Burawoy's fault—it stems from his own political engagement and orientation as well as his tendency to lift up more radically oriented sociologists and studies. Further, a good deal of sociological research and writing these days actually does spring from a leftist, social change orientation. But this smuggles in a number of political assumptions, including the dismissal of more state-based, reformist approaches to social change. My real concern is that sociological research and knowledge is not, at least not in any ontological sense, inherently or automatically radical, reformist, or reactionary. It does not have a particular political position or orientation. Sometimes its radical critiques come from progressive sides, and at other times it can be more ideologically conservative, as seen in Judith Stacey's (2004) argument about research on the family; and then there is James Coleman's (1993) Weberian vision of dispassionate, information-based sociology as contributing to a "rational reconstruction" of modern social life. Whether we are talking about canonical sociology or contemporary classics, it can be difficult to locate the immediate political orientations of great sociological work—it is, as often as not, created out of a combination of critical thinking and empirical grounding and adopted in ways that are both progressive and conservative.

This simple, two-by-two typology of public sociology has dominated our discussions of and embrace of engagement to such an extent that it has started to resemble the end of the discussion rather than its beginning. It is time, I think, for a new frame for defining and cataloging sociological outreach and engagement, one that can accommodate the full range of extra-academic outreaches and interventions in which sociologists participate. What we need, more concretely, is a theory that realizes the value of *both* sociology's critical/interventionist side and its more normal science approaches in all arenas—regardless of political orientation or approach to social change.

Rethinking the Public(s)

Among the many recent writings and conceptual resources that can contribute to a more expansive view of sociological engagement and its place in social life, I want to start with two pieces that have appeared in the past year or so—one by a member of the generation of sociologists that preceded Burawoy, the other from a leading scholar and practitioner of the new generation of engaged sociological scholars.

The first is a piece by Herbert Gans (1997), published in the *American Sociologist*, titled “Sociology and Its Publics.” I have sometimes identified Gans as the “godfather” of the current rebirth or revitalization of sociological engagement, both because of his 1989 ASA “Presidential Address” (Gans 1989), which arguably led to the establishment of *Contexts* magazine, and because of his 1990s-era study of best-selling books by sociology (Gans 1997). His work on mass attention has helped alert and focus scholars on the circulation and dissemination of sociological knowledge and insight in the broader culture. Now, in this newest piece, Gans tries to shift the conversation from the *production* of public sociology (as has been Burawoy’s emphasis) to its consumption and consumers—the nonacademic audiences toward whom sociological engagement is aimed and intended.

Gans is really most interested in the translation and dissemination of sociological research and knowledge to audiences and constituencies outside the academy. Thus, Gans talks about what he calls “presenters”: teachers; journalists, editors, and websites and blogs; book publishers; electronic media; and social media. He sees sociology and journalism as partners in the process of public engagement. But the core of Gans’s contribution here, at least in my reading, is to distinguish between different sociological publics rather than naming a singular, monolithic “public.” He names and discusses several publics, including sociology students in college; nonsociology university students; an educated set of public readers; and “media” and mass audiences, who are, he believes, the hardest to reach (think here of the decline of national publications like *Newsweek* or the fragmentation of television viewing audiences with the rise of cable). For Gans, many of these audiences need sociology, although they recognize this need in different degrees (if at all). This framework has its limits—both in terms of thinking of the public, more or less, as individual citizens or consumers, and in terms of its assumptions about scholars being the sole producers of social knowledge. But it offers one very basic, core insight: that there *are* different public audiences and different needs for sociological knowledge.

A second guiding paper comes from Kieran Healy (2015), a sociologist among the leaders of the electronic, online generation of sociologists. Healy’s paper—derived from a lecture he gave at Burawoy’s home department at the University of California, Berkeley—takes a somewhat different tack. Under the title “Public Sociology in the Age of Social Media,” Healy’s initial and primary contribution is to insist that the social, institutional, and technological conditions under which sociologists engage and interact with the public (however conceived and defined) are fundamentally different today compared to a decade ago, when Burawoy first formulated his influential ideas. Healy focuses primarily on new social media, pointing out that blogs—a now archaic, dinosaur-era format—saw all the “action” ten years ago, Facebook was just coming into its own, and other social media like Twitter as well as technologies like iPhones had yet to appear. These media and technologies have gone on to fundamentally transform the way in which sociologists engage and interact with publics, whether or not sociologists are intentional and self-conscious about the fact that they are doing so. For Healy, the upshot is that we are *all* doing our sociological work in public these days, regardless of whether we are attuned to that fact. He calls this the “latently public” nature of all sociological work today.

With his emphasis on social conditions, Healy is on to something profoundly sociological. But what I find most provocative and theoretically useful about Healy’s piece is that he comes *back* to Burawoy’s use and conception of “civil society.” Healy points out that in the actual papers and chapters in which Burawoy articulates his analysis, he talks

not only and not even very much about the public. He focuses instead on civil society and predicates his whole analytical scheme on a social scientific division of labor that posits “civil society” as the key object of study and analysis for sociologists.

Economists, according to Burawoy’s gloss on classic political economy, study the market and the economy; political scientists’ turf is the government or the state; and sociologists study everything that stands as a bulwark against power and money—all else remaining, that is, “outside of both state and economy.” This includes “political parties, trade unions, schools, communities of faith, print media, and a variety of voluntary organizations”—“civil society,” in Burawoy’s lexicon (Burawoy 2005a:24). In this way, Burawoy—and I think this is crucial—believes sociologists are not just analysts of civil society, they are its advocates and champions. In studying civil society, sociologists provide social actors with the information and resources to organize and inform themselves and stand up to the countervailing powers of the market and state.

This emphasis on civil society is an important if not always fully appreciated dimension of Burawoy’s thought, one that helps us understand his distinction between “policy sociology” and “public sociology” as well as his preference for the latter over the former. Policy, in this scheme, is not so much the institutions of the government or state as it is the organizations, agendas, and institutions of the rich and powerful. Policy is the social status quo. So Burawoy’s conception of “public” is always aligned with the forces of the weak and the marginal, or at least those pushing for social progress and change. I can appreciate Burawoy’s normative stance here—more often than not, it is where my own sympathies and commitments lie. However, I am also convinced that sociology and sociologists have contributions to make to institutions and organizations that represent the status quo. Moreover, civil society actors need not only critical theories but basic social facts and information of normative social science. This, of course, brings me back to my third critique of Burawoy: the assumption that policy sociology is never reflexive or activist and that public sociology, which almost always exhibits those characteristics, is thus preferable to the status quo of policy sociology.

Rethinking the Public(s), II: Dewey, Lippman, Habermas

Among my frustrations with the various meta-level theorizing and reflection on public sociology in the decade since Burawoy first forced us all to think and talk about it is the almost complete lack of empirical research on public engagement in all its forms. For a scholarly enterprise that fancies itself an empirical science, there is almost no actual research (beyond a few case studies and ethnographic descriptions [cf. Vaughan 2006]) about the actual organization and structure of sociological engagement, much less any serious, systematic analysis of the utility or efficacy of our attempts to engage the extra-academic empirical world.

I have remarked on this many times over the past decade or so as I have tried to champion public engagement and embark upon my own forms of engagement. It was a standard line in the “stump speech” for public sociology I gave during my time at the editor’s desk of *Contexts*. But what I have been struck by in the process of preparing this MSS address, is something different: namely, how little sociologists have theorized the notion of “the public” in talking about public sociology. My sense is that scholars like Gans and Healy are opening us up to this exploration, but that there is a lot of work yet to do. This is somewhat peculiar or ironic because, when it comes to theorizing the public,

the public sphere, and civil society, social theorists (at least from de Tocqueville onward) have been at the forefront of the action. Obviously, I cannot do justice to that legacy here. Still, I do want to note some theoretical resources and insights from the canon that I think can indeed be useful in rethinking the public and sociology's role therein.

Perhaps the first and most familiar theoretical resource is John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1954), which experienced something of a renaissance in the Obama era of community organizing and participatory democratic change. Dewey's is a classic, liberal account of the challenges embedded in how individual citizens participate in public reflection, debate, and decision making in a democratic context otherwise marked by large, powerful bureaucracies and economic forces. As he touches on issues of knowledge and information flow, political process, public discourse, and debate, Dewey clarifies that, to him, "the public" is that constellation or aggregation of more or less informed individual citizens. Thus the challenge from the point of view of a more moral and efficient social action orientation is how to properly educate and inform the public for collective action and decision making.

Much as I respect and draw from his pragmatic legacy—and love Dewey in the abstract—I find myself intellectually more drawn to and swayed by one of his great critics and nemeses: Walter Lippman. The essence of Lippman's critique, originally elaborated over a number of articles and commentaries collected in several different volumes, but perhaps best represented in the volume *Phantom Publics* (Lippman 1925; see also 1955), is that Dewey's notion of the public as composed primarily or even exclusively of all the possible individual citizens of a nation or community is essentially an illusory, utopian myth. (Note: even Gans's conception of audiences buys into this frame.) Instead, the real composition or operation of social organization and decision making in the modern, industrial world happens not in and through individual citizens, but in large-scale organizations and bureaucracies organized, operated, and run by elected leaders and institutional administrators. With this in mind, citizens interested in public affairs are far better advised, according to Lippman, to focus on the institutions, organizations, and systems, upon which, ultimately, they must rest and invest their trust.

Obviously, both Dewey and Lippman—whom I think of as "dueling theorists" of the public—have important contributions to make when it comes to thinking about the composition and function of "the public" or publics in the contemporary, democratic world. For myself, I cannot help thinking that it is Lippman, not the more beloved and better-known Dewey, who represents the more profoundly sociological vision of society and social action. His emphasis and understanding of institutions and organizations and the role of leadership, knowledge, and information within them represents our field and its mission in a more realistic way; it meets the public or publics within their social contexts.

I say all this because too often when we are talking about public sociology or even public engagement, we are thinking about individual citizens. But it is the large-scale organizations and institutions and their associated policies, practices, and programs that are probably more accurately and necessarily the units of analysis and action in the modern world. It is within and through them that individual citizens organize, interact, and act, and the institutions of civil society have proliferated and transformed in recent decades. In addition to the foundations and nonprofit, nongovernmental agencies and organizations that have always associated with the civil sector, consider the public affairs consultants (Walker 2014), the evolution of social movements and their relation to both the state and social service sector

(Bail 2015; Lee 2015; Soule 2009), and think tanks (Medvetz 2012), and shadow parties (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). Sociologists have been at the forefront of documenting and analyzing these powerful new actors and forces, and Lippman's organizational orientation helps us realize this civil sphere as much more than a collective of individual actors.

When it comes to better thinking through and theorizing all of this, I still find no single work more helpful than Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. One of the many great virtues of Habermas's study (originally his PhD dissertation) is that he works through the origin and evolution of the notion of the public and its relation to private forces in the history of Western thought. Grounded firmly in the normative, critical theory tradition, Habermas is insistent on treating the public not only as an analytic category but also as a moral force helping drive the ways that the institutions of democracy stand up to institutional power and authority. In his view, "the public" in a democratic context makes for a richer, more multifaceted vision of the workings of modern society and the exercise of power (both economic and political), standing as the bulwark against what he later called, in one of his most famous phrases, "the colonization of the lifeworld by the system."

At least for my purposes here, Habermas's emphasis on the conditions of public discussion and debate in contemporary society—the institutional underpinnings and the social structures—is key. Habermas has not been entirely fashionable in the field of late, at least not since the 1990s (Calhoun 1992), and others have written more recently about the relationships between sociological research and its role in public life in the neoliberal context (Nickel 2012; Turner 2007). But my takeaway is about institutions and the contexts under which knowledge, ideas, information, and perspectives are circulated. Sociologists have a unique and essential role to play, *especially* if they realize that publics are plural and cannot be reduced to the individual citizens that compose them. This, in fact, is why I think Habermas essentially invents and is so invested in the term "public sphere" as it refers *both* to individual citizens and the institutions and organizations in and through which they constitute themselves as a social force and collective actor. And for what it is worth, one of the reasons that I think public engagement is so complicated today is that we are clearly in the midst of a new, structural transformation of the public sphere under the conditions of neoliberalism (Block and Somers 2014; Brown 2015).

In any case, what we have here is a big, multidimensional, pluralistic (or just plural) view of "the public"—one that contains both individual citizens and all of the organizational bases and institutional actors that compose contemporary civil society. Sociologists interested in engagement and societal relevance can and probably should engage them all. We have a myriad of contributions to make for actors and organizations all across the civil sphere. So, if there are multiple publics, we must also realize that there are many different faces of public sociology. It is in unpacking this that the broader implications of my rethinking of sociological engagement with our publics that the larger implications for the field of sociology itself as an academic discipline should begin to take shape.

Sociology's Multiple Roles: Witnesses, Engineers, Storytellers, and Synthesizers

Sociology is an incredibly large and diverse field, often divided by subject area (the ASA has 52 different sections, by my latest count). These subfields represent an incredible array

of methods and types of data (the old qualitative/quantitative dichotomy seems almost comfortable and quaint), and starkly different visions of knowledge and purpose range from dispassionate, objective collections of facts and analyses to radically engaged, activist-oriented scholarship and critique. How does it all hang together? And what kinds of contributions do these various visions and orientations make to public engagement?

In the capstone class I teach to graduating sociology majors at the University of Minnesota, one of the readings I often use is a chapter from Peter Maris (1990) that talks about the different roles sociologists can take on when it comes to public policy. Maris distinguishes three in particular: expert witnesses, engineers, and storytellers. Expert witnesses are those who, more or less, provide objective, factual information and analysis about concrete social phenomena and social problems. They do not necessarily make specific recommendations or prescriptions for action; they simply provide data and information to inform other actors. Engineers, in contrast, are the social scientists whose research and analysis is *intended* to test, inform, and guide actual social policy, programs, and prescriptions grounded in empirical analysis. Storytellers, the third sociological group, provide larger, more critical narratives for new understandings of society and social problems and more radical, transformative strategies for social change. Visionaries and truth tellers, these storytellers are clearly within the critical, reflexive orientation. Together, these categories open up students to thinking about the range of sociologies and the varying contributions they make to public life.

To Maris's three categories, I often add my own, fourth category: the sociological synthesizer. This is the scholar who is able to take a step back and survey all the research (sociological and otherwise) in the area to provide a big-picture summary of knowledge and an overview of the different ways to interpret and engage the world accordingly. My colleague and regular collaborator Chris Uggen was invited, for instance, to a White House summit on crime and criminal justice policy a few years ago. Among a whole slew of expert lawyers, researchers, and policymakers, Uggen was not called upon to present any of his own, considerable research. Rather, he was asked to provide the concluding overview of what had been presented and how those findings should be understood and implemented in criminal justice policy. In another excellent example of sociological synthesizing, New York University's Eric Klinenberg (2013) wrote a piece for the *New Yorker* as a sort of high-end, science writer putting together research on the impacts of climate change on urban planning for a general public audience. These sociologists are studying not just civil society, but how all aspects of social life—civil, political, and economic—coalesce and construct the worlds around us. And just to be clear, these synthesizers work across the usual methodological and epistemological divides, combining both critical reflexive knowledge and normal science approaches.

Sociologists are uniquely positioned and prepared, I believe, to work across disciplines and methods in this way, putting pieces of data and evidence together to draw out big-picture implications for long-term social change and public policy efforts. One of the things I love so much about W. E. B. Dubois, especially in Aldon Morris's recent characterizations (Morris 2015; Morris and Chaziani 2005), is his commitment to a broad-based, synthetic vision of sociological research, analysis, critique, and intervention. His is one of the original, "big tent" visions of the field.

My point is not entirely different from one that Smith-Lovin (2007) made a few years back: when we are asking about what kinds of contributions sociology has to make to the public, part of the answer has to do with which kind of sociology we are talking about. But

here I want to stress that there are many different forms of sociology, each with its insights and contributions, but each still sociology. In this context, the point may have been even better made in Burawoy's 1998 *Contemporary Sociology* essay that painted sociology as the necessary and ongoing dialogue between normal science and a critical-reflexive orientation. This is actually one of my favorite of Burawoy's pieces. It goes beyond the old quantitative–qualitative split to highlight a whole set of different approaches to data, method, and theory and argues that all have important roles to play in the sociological enterprise. Sociology, as Burawoy explained in what I see as another example of the big tent, is the “dialogue between two sciences.”

If I were forced to generate a two-by-two table to make this point, I would keep Burawoy's distinction between instrumental and reflexive knowledge—the two different “faces” or “sciences” of the sociological enterprise, as he called them—but distinguish between more radical or reformist orientations to the social status quo. Maris's engineers and expert witnesses might lie in the more instrumentalist or normative science side of the field, while storytellers and synthesizers would operate in the more reflexive or directly engaged mode. A second distinction I would draw is with respect to the orientation of various organizations, social actors, or political projects to the social status quo: are they oriented toward radical critique and social change or toward working within the established social order?

I will not offer that as a formal table or typology here. (I did that in the public version of this talk back in March and it proved frustrating and confusing to many in the audience; “please don't include the typology,” one well-meaning critic counseled.) The important point is that sociologists operating in these various modes—as engineers or expert witnesses, storytellers or synthesizers—as well as even the contributions of basic, ethnographic fieldwork are often far more complicated and multifaceted than we assume (Becker et al. 2004; see also Matteson 2007), and *all* have contributions to make in informing social actors at every level of society and within every orientation to social change.

What It Means for the Field

So what are the implications of all this? A lot more could be said about how this framework can help us sociologists do a better job of engagement, acting in the social world; figuring out who our various constituent publics might be and what kind of information, knowledge, perspective, and assistance they are in need of; and being clear about using our knowledge, information, and perspectives properly. Indeed, one of the biggest complaints I hear (and see) when it comes to public sociology is how sociologists sometimes misuse the authority and credibility that comes with our status as social scientists, offering claims that are not grounded in research or go beyond the bounds of our expertise and data. We can offer ideas and information on a huge range of issues—but we need to be clear about what kind of knowledge we are offering, the research base it comes from, and the audiences to whom we are speaking.

In addition, better public engagement can help us begin to confront and challenge sociology's “public image” problem. People in the nonacademic world often have little or no idea what sociology *is*, confusing it with psychology, social work, or even socialism—if they know what it is at all. When we first brought *Contexts* to Minnesota, we had a

business school marketing class conduct focus groups with a range of college student readers. Their main conclusion: Do not use sociology in the title. “Just don’t call it *that!*” Michael Kimmel (2008) wrote a humorous piece for us about why no TV shows featured sociologists who had a similar message. Surely, being more visibly and effectively involved in public life can only help in cultivating a better public understanding of what sociology is and what it has to contribute—and, in doing so, provide some kind of pushback against the attack on social sciences (as well as public higher education) that has occurred too often in recent years across the country.

For my part, I am most interested these days in how thinking about sociological engagement can help us revitalize and enrich our understanding of scholarly sociology, of the discipline itself (Light 2005). In other words, I am convinced that this framework can help those of us within the academy cultivate a bigger, more ecumenical vision of our discipline, one that sees sociology as a healthy mix and necessary amalgam of methods and forms of data and theoretical orientations.

This big tent vision of sociology can obviously inform and inspire our teaching. From Gans to Burawoy and beyond, public sociologists have long recognized that our first “public” is our students in our classrooms. Sociology is marked by many different arenas of specialization, modes of scholarly inquiry, and contributions to the public good. The big, broad vision of the field required when we think about all of the different ways we engage our publics helps our students see the field in all its vastness and complexity. And it goes much further because this big tent that is sociology is in constant need of revitalization, rerigging, and renewal for us all (Kalekin-Fishman and Denis 2012).

When Chris Uggen and I first applied for the *Contexts* editorship, we were critical of the publication’s limited distribution and visibility to general public readers. Indeed, the primary readership of *Contexts* then and now remains academic sociologists. “Popularizing sociology to the sociologists!” we bemoaned. Given our interests in reaching broader visibility and influence, this was a pretty fundamental critique for us, and it has continued to frustrate *Contexts* editors since. In more recent years, however, Uggen and I have begun to realize that getting sociologists across the discipline reading the same material is a more important task (and accomplishment) than we initially realized. In a field marked not only by increasing methodological narrowness, empirical specialization, and journal-model publishing, there are few outlets that really capture and reflect the full range and scope of the field. Neither the general sociological journals (*American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, or *Social Problems*) nor the regional ones (*TSQ*) tend to publish big-picture, synthetic studies that cut across empirical sub-specialities or methods. Instead, we march steadily toward narrower, more focused, and more specialized studies. And the way that most scholars now access journal articles—not by reading any one journal cover to cover but by reading across journals those pieces that fit their particular interest areas or areas of expertise—further restricts the scope of available information to the scholars and scholarship with whom we are mostly already familiar. I first started to see this through publishing *Contexts* and registering the delight with which other researchers reacted to “Discoveries” (a feature pioneered by Claude Fischer and now known as “In Briefs”): these research reviews of new publications became an important source for establishing a general sense of sociology’s accomplishments across a whole range of areas. This sense has increased with *The Society Pages*—our readers, many of whom are

sociological researchers and teachers, get their sense of the field as a whole from our attempt to cover, summarize, translate, and engage broad public audiences.

Public engagement enriches scholarly, academic sociology in other ways as well. Sociological engagement is also about learning from our publics and from expert practitioners, giving us a better, more sophisticated understanding of the workings of social life as well as a set of “marching orders” for the project of better, more useful, and more accessible research topics. Doing media interviews, for example, as I wrote in a blog post called “Ears to the Ground,” has made the gaps in my own knowledge apparent and occasionally spurred new paths for research and analysis. On this point, I often cite the story that Stephanie Coontz (2005), the author of *The Way We Never Were*, told in an early *Contexts* volume about being on live, talk radio with those who viscerally disagreed with her book back in the late 1980s. Among other lessons, these exchanges forced Coontz to more fully confront the desolate social conditions that made many Americans nostalgic for an idealized past in the first place and to adjust her analyses accordingly.

These examples, of course, speak to the complicated, multifaceted nature of knowledge production that is typical when one is studying human life and human societies—and brings me to a final few points. Even in its most normative, instrumentalist, normal science vein, sociological knowledge is *produced* in social life and in concert with social communities as much if not more than in conference panels and statistical regressions. Public engagement, in short, can help lead us toward a more interactive, reciprocal vision of sociological knowledge and knowledge production itself (Boyte 2000; see also Burawoy 2005c).

When I was a graduate student, I remember reading Max Weber’s (1946) famous vocation essays, “Politics as Vocation” and “Science as Vocation,” and craving a third essay that staked out the habits of mind and orientation to the world that straddled the lines between politics and science as a more social scientific or sociological orientation requires. Finding that third path requires of us a range of abilities and mindsets, attitudes and orientations that are all-too-often presented only in opposition to one other. In some contexts and for certain questions and audiences, we are asked and expected to be scientific experts or engineers, providing reliable, more-or-less factual answers to questions. In other moments, we are called upon to provide broad context, critical perspectives, and real alternatives to the status quo—to imagine breaking away from how things already actually are, open up possibilities, and begin to conceive of how things might be made different. This discipline requires a lot of us: a critical-theoretical orientation, a broad base of knowledge, and theoretical sophistication and methodological rigor. When we engage with actors and organizations in society looking for help and guidance, the need for all of the pieces under the big tent of sociology is made manifest. In responding to such requests, we help ourselves realize our calling as sociologists, our vocation.

Over the past few years, some in the discipline have seen the attention to public engagement as mere matters of outreach, activism, and dissemination of social scientific research. Others, especially those of us in organizations like the MSS who engage so many public audiences in so many different ways and at so many levels, have come to realize that the challenge of engagement raises much deeper, more unsettling questions about sociology itself: What is this discipline? Why and for whom do we do sociology? And how can we do it better?

Ultimately, I see the significance of sociological engagement in the current moment as pushing us toward the reinvention and revitalization of sociology itself. We are so big and so easily divided. Every pressure is toward specialization. And yet the promise of our discipline, of its canon and great traditions, is not just what sociologists working together can do for the world, but how engagement with publics at every level can help us enrich, revitalize, and renew our sense of the discipline to which we have pledged our intellectual endeavors. Sociology, understood as standing beside all of the social sciences and cultural studies, is uniquely positioned and prepared to play a leading role in genuine mixed methods, mixed methodology, and genuinely interdisciplinary research (cf., Wallerstein et al. 1996). Thus, public sociological engagement is about living up to our legacy; recruiting new generations of scholars and thinking and actors into our field; and making good on the promise to understand, engage, and change the world around us through careful study, creative interaction, and big-tent synthesis available in the most vivid sociological imagination. With the explosion of new media, increasing political attacks on the social sciences, and the ongoing transformations of higher education, this is a calling worthy of renewal.

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