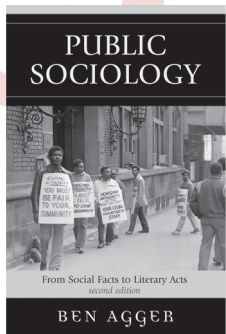


writing to be read

by monte bute



Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts 2nd ed.
by Ben Agger
Rowman & Littlefield Publishers,
2007, 316 pages

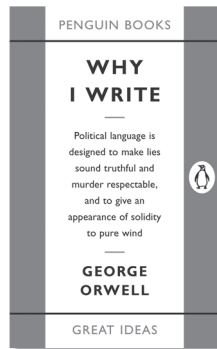
Our discipline has long been notorious for its use of jargon and impenetrable prose. Sociologists writing badly inspired the editor of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* to coin a new word—sociologese. These bad habits have rendered scholarly articles and books mostly unreadable. In short, the monograph has become a charnel house for academic prose.

Kai Erikson, himself a fine prose stylist, took umbrage with Fowler's definition. George Orwell's translation of a passage from *Ecclesiastes* into sociologese likewise incurred Erikson's wrath:

We would be quite right, then, to dismiss the rebukes of critics like Fowler and Orwell out of hand: they have no idea what sociology is. But in the quiet of our own counsels we can admit that most of us do not write well, or not as well as we think we should. Why?

Why indeed?

What Erikson's thin-skinned reaction overlooks is the possibility that Fowler and Orwell may have had no idea what sociology is because the sociologists they read didn't write very well. Herbert Gans challenged this sort of defensive insularity in his *American*



Why I Write
by George Orwell
Penguin Books, 2005, 120 pages

Sociological Association (ASA) presidential address in 1988. Nothing written or said since matches his eloquent claim that good writing, particularly in non-scholarly venues, is essential for a truly public sociology.

right problem, wrong solution

Ben Agger first published *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts* in 2001. This revised edition adds a new concluding chapter, which includes a blistering attack on Michael Burawoy and the "brand" of public sociology associated with him. The book remains, however, a bewilderingly disjointed publication.

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In truth, Agger has written two different volumes. The first two and last two chapters seem an alien appendage, gushing with postmodernist gibberish and the ideological posturing of a self-proclaimed "third generation" critical theorist:

I advocate attention to disciplinary

discourse that 'reads' sociology qua social physics as a *disciplining* discourse and also points the way toward de-disciplining sociological discourse that does not suppress the author but goes public with its animating assumptions and broad-based social concerns.

In spite of these chapters, the rest of the book is astute. Agger seeks to make transparent "the hegemony of positivist journal science" as represented by the *American Sociological Review (ASR)* of the 1990s. He unpacks the conventions of journal sociology, demonstrating that editorial policy has less to do with good writing and more to do with creating a "science aura." This "secret writing," according to Agger, "displaces the author, argument, prose, and passion into the margins."

His study is also an exposé of the apprenticeship and academic career building that begins in graduate school and ends, ideally, with a long obituary in *ASA's Footnotes* newsletter and a flow of citations for decades to come in the *Social Sciences Citation Index*.

Authors write *ASR* articles not primarily to be read but to appear in print as badges of status. Well, Agger *really did* read some of these publications. His close textual analysis reveals a pattern of lifeless abstracts, excessive citations,

turbocharged methodologies, exceedingly figural findings, and timid conclusions. Agger illustrates these claims with a wealth of evidence: egregious examples include two different authors who each reference 20 publications in single daisy-chain citations.

Following this analysis of *ASR* articles

from the 1990s, Agger has a chapter on the obvious question: "Was Sociology Always Like This?" He analyzes the shifts in *ASR* from 1938 to 1988. His principal findings are that, despite pretensions of scientism, the pre-1970 journal was more accessible, more literary, and far less methods-driven.

These five chapters reflect what's good about *Public Sociology*. That leaves the bad and the ugly. Agger claims "postmodern theory enables us to view sociology as writing, and thus to write it differently, more publicly. This book is structured around six main concepts, all but one of which derive from postmodern perspectives." The five ideas he refers to are *authoriality*, *iterability*, *undecidability*, *narrativity*, and *polyvocality*. After reviewing this list, I concede that these obfuscating abstractions may indeed enable us "to write it differently," but differently is not necessarily better.

One key that unlocks postmodern thought is Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of "language games," that each is a different social universe with its own cognitive criteria. It is the language game of mainstream sociology that Agger so convincingly debunks, particularly its claims to universality and objectivity. Postmodern sociologists, however, are not content with just deflating neo-positivism; they create a language game of their own—a parallel universe of "secret writing."

Agger *talks* a lot about good writing. "By good *writing* I do not necessarily mean felicitous writing or writing that has been carefully crafted...Good sociological writing, or public sociology, admits it tells a story, invites other stories and addresses important public issues." In other words, good writing is an instrumental tool rather than an artistic virtue. For as much as he makes of good writing, Agger does not write very well. "To overcome the academic prose," C. Wright Mills once said, "you first have to overcome the academic pose."

a man of intellectual honesty

When Agger was writing *Public*

Sociology, his young son asked him if there was a monster in his story. Yes, he replied, and its name is "Method." Sociologists writing for scholarly journals believe this friendly monster called "Method" will capture the "Truth." Asserting the antithesis, postmodernists see method as little more than a form of rhetoric and all truth-claims as relative.

Why Orwell? George Orwell had a single-minded devotion to truth but he

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sought it without any of the esoteric methodologies of professional sociology; rather, he pursued the truths of experience. "He did of course deploy a 'subjective' and unquantifiable tool," writes Christopher Hitchens, "something that cannot be taught or inherited, but the old name for it is intellectual honesty."

Even though he knew English prose was in a bad way, Orwell disagreed with what has become a postmodernist mantra: language is a prison without parole—and "that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it." Instead, he argued that if we took the trouble to rid ourselves of bad writing habits, we might think more clearly, "and to think more clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration."

Why I Write, a short collection of his essays, is a good introduction to Orwell. The volume's title essay is an autobiographical meditation upon the motives of writers. It recounts how a lonely and unpopular but imaginative young Eric Blair eventually became George Orwell, the courageous man of letters and a master of 20th century English prose.

We get hints of his experiments with truth: as a colonial police officer in Burma, a dishwasher in Paris, a hobo in London, a chronicler of England's industrial working class, and a participant in

the Spanish Civil War. His biography, shaped by world history, led him "to make political writing into an art."

In this essay, Orwell lists what he sees as the four motives for writing prose:

- "Sheer egoism." This is why sociologists desire an obituary in *Footnotes* and posthumous citations.
- "Aesthetic enthusiasm." It stimulates us to do "felicitous writing or writing

that has been carefully crafted."

- "Historical impulse." This is my rationale for reviewing an author who died in 1950.
- "Political purpose." It is why Gans, Burawoy, and Agger promote public sociology.

Orwell manages to get all this, and more, into a 10-page essay. His credo is that "good prose is like a window pane." If you want to think and write for yourself rather than relying on the thinking and writing of others, he suggests asking yourself six questions: "What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?... Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly?"

"Why Orwell?" Timothy Garton Ash, historian and eyewitness to Eastern Europe's Velvet Revolutions, asked this question at century's end. "Anyone who wants to understand the twentieth century," he answers, "will still have to read Orwell."

"We need him still," Ash concludes, "because Orwell's work is never done."

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