EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The Promise and Pitfalls of Public Sociology

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Though I was fortunate enough to go to a high school which offered sociology as an elective, it was via Ben Agger's (2000) work *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts* that I began to think about some of the bigger questions surrounding the idea of publicly-facing, socially-conscious writing and social research (see also Szrot 2018, 2019). American sociology has seemingly become increasingly "public." In 2004, American Sociological Association (ASA) President Michael Buroway addressed public sociological engagement, and an anthology featuring leading U.S. sociologists followed three years later (see Clawson et al. 2007). Scores of conversations have issued forth in the intervening years.

Last year, the annual ASA conference theme was, "Feeling Race: An Invitation To Explore Racialized Emotions," and before that, "Culture, Inequalities, and Social Inclusion across the Globe." This year (2019), the theme is "Engaging Social Justice for a Better World," and in 2020, the theme is slated to be, "Power, Inequality, and Resistance at Work." Writing as a U.S. sociologist, these developments suggest a trend toward publicly-engaged sociology becoming more mainstream. Perhaps sociology has always had the potential for deeper and more constructive public engagement, but what does "public sociology" look like? What can public sociology offer? *What is the promise, and what are the pitfalls, of public sociology?*

The idea that sociology can be, or should be, public raises questions that dance lithely across the conceptual space of age-old

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philosophical questions. For practicing sociologists, these questions can be framed largely as problems of method. Public sociologies must address questions of *epistemology—how do we know what we know?* In doing so, we must ask whether there is a universal, humanistic "we" who can do the knowing, or whether knowledge is too culturally-conditioned or saturated with power relations to continue such "we" talk. In the universal, humanistic vein, the questions of epistemology primarily become a matter of translation: in particular, translating "our" specialized knowledge of sociology to a language that makes sense to the "we" outside the Ivory Tower. Using words like "epistemology," for example, is probably not the way to do that.

For critics of universalism and defenders of difference, *who has the right to speak for whom?* Are the tools of (often quantitative) academic social science, wedded to a human capacity for sympathy, sufficient, or are new and different methods which presume a different relationship between researchers and researched, between known and knower, necessary? How can public sociologists square their findings with the beliefs and experiences of the people with whom they engage? Does the distinction between "knower" and "known" construct an artificial divide between sociologists and the social world in which they participate? Both the sociologist and the "public" each experiences something the other does not—can bridges be built across this chasm? Perhaps public sociologists can build relationships with people whose lives they may seek to improve, and improve their own lives and work in the process.

Public sociology must also address problems of *praxis— now what? what should we do?* Praxis invites honest engagement with the intentions, possibilities, horizons, and limitations of human intelligence and human nature, and leads into the domain of political philosophy, among others. What sort of society is a good society? Can societies be made better piecemeal, or does "the system" need to be fundamentally changed? Should we envision the maximally good society—the *utopia*—or focus on gradual, hard-won reform toward improving permanently imperfect social worlds? Can present-day humans reimagine and intelligently guide wholly new and better social structures and processes, or are social structures the unconsciously evolved products of need, habit, custom, and tradition, to be uprooted only at our collective peril? To

ask such questions is to turn to face the complexity of the social world, the depth of disagreement about the methods and stakes surrounding social change, and the assumptions that guide sociology as a discipline and activity. These issues take on new importance in a culturally, politically, and economically fractured social cosmos (see, for example, Rodgers 2011).

Finally, there is the question of *pedagogy—how do we learn?*—which takes on the difficulties of the aforementioned while adding still others. As Weber (1946) famously remarked in *Science as a Vocation*: "the true teacher will beware of imposing from the platform any political position upon the student, whether it is expressed or suggested…speak where criticism is possible…teach his students to recognize 'inconvenient' facts—I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions" (145-7). Weber urged us as instructors to avoid imposing our politics on our students, for they are not in a position to criticize us on equal footing. He implied that politics and social science are separate, and that the relationship between teacher and student is inescapably hierarchical. A common retort is that nothing human is untouched by politics, but this important if banal truism offers no guidance as to how to negotiate politics in the classroom. Should instructors impart knowledge, examine perspectives, advocate for change? To what extent are these activities incommensurable?

Maybe the public sociologist can address these issues by moving away from the traditional lecture-room format and transgressing the Weberian presumption of hierarchy, for surely each and every one of our students knows something we do not. Every person in a classroom is the product of a dizzying array of personal and shared experiences, and has undoubtedly been shaped by them. But if this is the case, then where, and in whom, does sociological expertise really reside? For me, Dewey (2016) offers guidance as to the relationship between teacher and student, as well as between expert and public, when he says: "the man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (223-24). For some, perhaps this goes too far; for others, not far enough.

These are not simple questions, and I offer no simple answers. Often, I don't even know for sure whether these are the right questions to ask. But such questions animate the works that are

featured in Volume 35 of Social Thought and Research. Two interviews offer methodological and pedagogical insights: First, Angie Carter directly discusses her work as a publicly-engaged sociologist, drawing upon innovative research methods, experiences with community involvement, and insightful pedagogical experiences. Second, René D. Flores discusses how his experiences surrounding the politics of race and immigration, and the challenges of international research, led him to greater sociological insight. Both interviewees offer their thoughts in terms of methods, as well as pedagogy and graduate education.

Three articles are included in this issue. In the first, Anson Au addresses Adorno's stance on democracy, and how the social transformation it prescribes compares with trends in contemporary protests. Then, Andrea P. Herrera examines the theoretical and analytic groundwork for a liberatory sexual politics through social research, particularly through the lenses of gender, sexuality, and race. Finally, Steven T. Anderson examines the existence of, and reasons for, the stereotypes that surround an under-studied marginalized group: trailer park residents. Each of these in-depth works explores socially-conscious and praxis-relevant aspects of social thought and research. The issue concludes with a review of Thomas Shapiro's 2017 book *Toxic Inequality: How America's Wealth Gap Destroys Mobility, Deepens the Racial Divide, & Threatens our Future* by Walter Goettlich. In keeping with the spirit of public sociology, I hope that this issue sparks controversy, and forwards important conversations surrounding the promise, and pitfalls, of public sociology. I am deeply grateful to the contributors, the peer reviewers, and everyone who has been a part of it.

Enjoy!

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Volume 35, *STAR*

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