

## For Public Sociology

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*Responding to the growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study, the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways. These public sociologies should not be left out in the cold, but brought into the framework of our discipline. In this way we make public sociology a visible and legitimate enterprise, and, thereby, invigorate the discipline as a whole. Accordingly, if we map out the division of sociological labor, we discover antagonistic interdependence among four types of knowledge: professional, critical, policy, and public. In the best of all worlds the flourishing of each type of sociology is a condition for the flourishing of all, but they can just as easily assume pathological forms or become victims of exclusion and subordination. This field of power beckons us to explore the relations among the four types of sociology as they vary historically and nationally, and as they provide the template for divergent individual careers. Finally, comparing disciplines points to the umbilical chord that connects sociology to the world of publics, underlining sociology's particular investment in the defense of civil society, itself beleaguered by the encroachment of markets and states.*

*This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got*

*caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*

—Walter Benjamin

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Walter Benjamin wrote his famous ninth thesis on the philosophy of history as the Nazi army approached his beloved Paris, hallowed sanctuary of civilization's promise. He portrays this promise in the tragic figure of the angel of history, battling in vain against civilization's long march through destruction. To Benjamin, in 1940, the future had never looked bleaker with capitalism-become-fascism in a joint pact with socialism-become-Stalinism to overrun the world. Today, at the dawn of the 21st century, although communism has dissolved and fascism is a haunting memory, the debris continues to grow skyward. Unfettered capitalism fuels market tyrannies and untold inequities on a global scale, while resurgent democracy too often becomes a thin veil for

powerful interests, disenfranchisement, mendacity, and even violence. Once again the angel of history is swept up in a storm, a terrorist storm blowing from Paradise.

In its beginning sociology aspired to be such an angel of history, searching for order in the broken fragments of modernity, seeking to salvage the promise of progress. Thus, Karl Marx recovered socialism from alienation; Emile Durkheim redeemed organic solidarity from anomie and egoism. Max Weber, despite premonitions of “a polar night of icy darkness,” could discover freedom in rationalization, and extract meaning from disenchantment. On this side of the Atlantic W. E. B. Du Bois pioneered pan-Africanism in reaction to racism and imperialism, while Jane Addams tried to snatch peace and internationalism from the jaws of war. But then the storm of progress got caught in sociology’s wings. If our predecessors set out to change the world we have too often ended up conserving it. Fighting for a place in the academic sun, sociology developed its own specialized knowledge, whether in the form of the brilliant and lucid erudition of Robert Merton (1949), the arcane and grand design of Talcott Parsons (1937, 1951), or the early statistical treatment of mobility and stratification, culminating in the work of Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan (1967). Reviewing the 1950s, Seymour Martin Lipset and Neil Smelser (1961:1–8) could triumphantly declare sociology’s moral prehistory finally over and the path to science fully open. Not for the first time Comtean visions had gripped sociology’s professional elite. As before this burst of “pure science” was short lived. A few years later, campuses—especially those where sociology was strong—were ignited by political protest for free speech, civil rights, and peace, indicting consensus sociology and its uncritical embrace of science. The angel of history had once again fluttered in the storm.

The dialectic of progress governs our individual careers as well as our collective discipline. The original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom or simply a better world, that drew so many of us to sociology, is channeled into the pursuit of academic credentials. Progress becomes a battery of disciplinary techniques—standardized courses, validated reading lists, bureaucratic rankings,

intensive examinations, literature reviews, tailored dissertations, refereed publications, the all-mighty CV, the job search, the tenure file, and then policing one’s colleagues and successors to make sure we all march in step. Still, despite the normalizing pressures of careers, the originating moral impetus is rarely vanquished, the sociological spirit cannot be extinguished so easily.

Constrictions notwithstanding, discipline—in both the individual and collective senses of the word—has born its fruits. We have spent a century building professional knowledge, translating common sense into science, so that now, we are more than ready to embark on a systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology’s moral fiber. Herein lies the promise and challenge of public sociology, the complement and not the negation of professional sociology.

To understand the production of public sociology, its possibilities and its dangers, its potentialities and its contradictions, its successes and failures, during the last 18 months I have discussed and debated public sociology in over 40 venues, from community colleges to state associations to elite departments across the United States—as well as in England, Canada, Norway, Taiwan, Lebanon, and South Africa. The call for public sociology resonated with audiences wherever I went. Debates resulted in a series of symposia on public sociology, including ones in *Social Problems* (February, 2004), *Social Forces* (June, 2004), and *Critical Sociology* (Summer, 2005). *Footnotes*, the newsletter of the American Sociological Association (ASA), developed a special column on public sociology, the results of which are brought together in *An Invitation to Public Sociology* (American Sociological Association 2004). Departments have organized awards and blogs on public sociology, the ASA has unveiled its own site for public sociology, and introductory textbooks have taken up the theme of public sociology. Sociologists have appeared more regularly in the opinion pages of our national newspapers. The 2004 ASA annual meetings, devoted to the theme of public sociologies, broke all records for attendance and participation and did so by a considerable margin. These dark times have aroused the angel of history from his slumbers.



















































