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Returning to the Classics

Looking to Weber and Durkheim
to Resolve the Theoretical Inconsistencies
of Public Sociology

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Durkheim and Weber conceived of the enterprise of sociology as the scientific study of social phenomena (social facts and social action) and understood sociology to be necessarily engaged in public issues that transcend individual experience. As two of the classical founders of the discipline, Weber and Durkheim were concerned with developing the program of sociology and its relation to social change. Both thinkers understood the development of the object and subsequent program of sociological research as concurrent and intertwined with questions concerning the ethical, political, and normative valences of the discipline. For these early sociologists, doing sociology has political, ethical, and normative commitments specifically grounded in sociological practice.

Recent debates regarding Michael Burawoy's 2004 American Sociological Association (ASA) presidential address have stirred up much interest and controversy surrounding the endorsement of public sociology by the ASA.¹ Burawoy (2007) advocates for sociological engagement with public issues through practices that he terms *organic public sociology*. He describes this as bringing "sociology into a conversation with publics," a process in which "the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counter-public" (28). For Burawoy, the relationship between the researcher and the "researched" is "mutual education" to "make a better world" (28). The commitments of public sociology to make a better world,

however, prescribe a “sociological” relationship to publics at the expense of metatheoretically grounded and reflexive sociological practice.

In this chapter, I develop the relationship between knowledge and sociologically construed political projects. I argue that public sociology is overdetermined by its normative commitments and is, in fact, ideological, moral philosophy. Following this demonstration, I retrieve the sociological commitments of public sociology by considering the sociological and political practice of Weber and Durkheim. Looking to Weber and Durkheim will resolve both the inconsistencies and the moralizing tone of public sociology.

A Guilty Reading of Public Sociology

This chapter demonstrates that public sociology is not sociological by giving it a “guilty reading,” in the Althusserian sense. Guilty readings begin by posing a question to a discourse (in this case, public sociology) about its “relation to its object” (Althusser and Balibar 1997, 14). I do so by asking if the object of public sociology is consistent with the ontological, epistemological, and normative commitments of sociological terrain,² as expressed by Burawoy’s (2005a) category of professional sociology and the sociological problematics of Weber and Durkheim. I conceive of the “terrain” of sociology by employing the spatial metaphor described by Louis Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1997), a visuality that represents an epistemological structure where questions are posed and answers may be “sighted.” The metatheoretical commitments that comprise a sociological terrain are the production condition for asking and investigating sociological questions in order to say something substantial about the social world and its phenomena. Reading any sociological statement symptomatically “helps to identify its useful parts and to discover symptoms (of incoherence) and to assess whether these merely indicate inadequacies or a point at which discourses intersect” (Pearce 1989, 5). My goal is not to show how public sociology inadequately explains its objects or epistemological terrain; instead, I show how the normative commitments of public sociology are inconsistent with the terrain of its sociological problematic and metatheoretical commitments. I demonstrate how the normative commitments of public sociology are inconsistent with metatheoretical commitments of Burawoy’s “professional sociology” category and the sociologies of Weber and Durkheim.

Burawoy’s (2005a) public sociology leaves behind constitutive sociological metatheoretical commitments and becomes a movement of advocacy – to make a better world – disconnected from its sociological terrain

and amounts to what Durkheim (1982) refers to as moral philosophy. Moral philosophy is the method of the moralists who philosophize on the moral worth of a concept. If the concern of public sociology is making the world a better place, this is an example of a moralist philosophizing, taking as its concern what actions are morally good and worthwhile.³ I argue that public sociology, while trying to specify how and why sociological practice should relate to broader publics by making the world better, actually generates a series of “oversights” (Althusser and Balibar 1997), unwittingly rendering visible a normative problematic formulated outside of a consistent sociological problematic.⁴ In short, the answer rendered by public sociology about how to relate sociological knowledge to broader publics is an answer to a question that belongs to the terrain of moral philosophy.

To make my argument, I read selected materials on public sociology symptomatically to assess how questions and answers are connected (and not), and whether both questions and answers share the same metatheoretical commitments, suppositions that are the production condition for understanding the discourse-object relation. Next, I retheorize public sociology to retrieve public sociology on sociological terrain, specifically the sociology of Weber and Durkheim. I do this by establishing Weber’s and Durkheim’s respective sociological commitments and explicate what public sociology would look like if practised in each social theorist’s sociological terms. Concluding remarks discuss the contours of a sociologically coherent public sociology.

The Programmatic of Public Sociology: A Symptomatic Reading

The public sociology debate touches on significant issues surrounding the sociological production of knowledge, knowledge transfer, and political projects. In Burawoy’s (2005a) terms, these concerns are articulated in the relationship between professional and public sociology. Professional sociology is the “accumulated body of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks” carried out by way of “true and tested methods” (10). Burawoy considers professional sociology to be the heart of the discipline, concerned with the methods by which the projects of sociology are accomplished – how knowledge is produced and accumulated. Public sociology, on the other hand, takes as its task the provision of solutions to public and social problems (as discovered and verified by the methods of professional sociology). The goals of these projects are mutually defined through a “dialogic relation between sociologist and public”: “the agenda of each is brought

to the table, in which each adjusts to the other” (Burawoy 2005a, 7-8). Burawoy distinguishes between the practice of the professional and public sociologist through the idea of the production and accumulation of sociological knowledge. For Burawoy (2005a), the professional sociologist produces knowledge for instrumental purposes – for the sake of knowing more about the social world, society, and so on – whereas the public sociologist is committed to reflexive knowledge, asking what knowledge is for and acting based on that reflection. If the reflexive commitment of public sociology is asking what knowledge is for, then the mandate of public sociology lies in a normative dimension. The public sociologist’s orientation to the task of any given project and the knowledge gained from it involves asking what the phenomenon of investigation is and acknowledging that it requires a normative judgment – that something *must* be done, a judgment *must* be made to act on the accumulated knowledge of sociology. Knowledge then becomes subservient to the aim of making normative judgments in providing and proposing solutions to social problems. The public sociologist is not concerned with the social context that makes certain forms of knowledge/statements possible, or more or less influential. Instead, the public sociologist is interested in acting on the knowledge accumulated and produced by sociology and its projects.

This normative dimension of public sociology that I am highlighting also circulates in statements by some of Burawoy’s supporters. For example, Smith-Lovin (2007, 125) contends that knowledge “should be used to improve the lot of others, when it is relevant to their potential interests”; thus, moral questions of what knowledge should be for become predominant. Scholars who agree that sociologists should be “sharing insights of sociology with the public and contributing to the common good” caution that this implies thoughtful and critical engagement with publics, not merely sound bites (Hays 2007, 81).⁵ While some supporters of Burawoy advise that the public sociology mandate heed such warnings as the problems of truth and prediction (Stinchcombe 2007, 136; Abbott 2007, 200), Glenn (2009, 137), for example, goes on to develop standards for public sociological practice and the role of “experts” providing knowledge to the community: “a good public sociologist will ... refrain from dogmatic adherence to ‘derivative values.’” Despite the contradiction that Glenn sets forth in developing a public sociologist who adheres (perhaps dogmatically) to Glenn’s own standard of not being “dogmatic” about any “derivative value,” he takes up Burawoy’s version of public sociology by engaging with the academic dialogue regarding

how public sociology should be practised. This line of thinking, while supportive of Burawoy, is also normatively prescriptive. Supporters such as Stinchcombe, Abbott, and Glenn remain faithful to the normative commitments of public sociology, concerning themselves with the necessary use of sociological knowledge rather than questions of how social problems are generated and instead emphasize standards and techniques one ought to adhere to when practising public sociology.

While public sociology seems desirable to sociologists concerned with human rights, public sociology has also met with controversy and its share of skepticism since Burawoy's statements (e.g., 2005a, 2005b, 2007). For example, Collins (2007) suggests that, for the classical theorists, bettering humanity meant doing sociology. Additionally, Brint (2007, 239) comments, public sociology may "undermine the development of our disciplinary core." Brint speculates that public sociology makes trouble for the rigour with which sociologists study and make statements about what is happening in the social world, as well as possible consequence for the discipline's body of research and writing. Both Collins and Brint indicate that sociology is compromised by the overdetermined normative problematic of public sociology,⁶ shifting from the sociological concern with "what *is* the case" to the terrain consistent with moral philosophy concerning "what *ought to be* the case."

The Oversight of Public Sociology

The normative commitments of public sociology risk fostering a discipline that is dedicated to the public not through doing sociology and studying the happenings of the social world but through advocacy. To be "for" a public sociology, sociologists represent "the interests of humanity" (Burawoy 2007, 56) by prescribing that sociologists "act in the political arena" (30), and share the "insights of sociology with the public ... contributing to the common good" (Hays 2007, 81). I have briefly shown how public sociology is overdetermined by its normative commitments. In this section I explicate the metatheoretical commitments of public sociology to show how it has left sociological grounds.

The main concern of public sociology is with political intervention (e.g., activism, advocacy) in a social problem. This activity depends upon a model of the dissemination of knowledge, passed from the vast pool of accumulated sociological knowledge (i.e., experts who claim to know how to make the world better) to a public taken to be ignorant but that could be made knowledgeable by an interaction with sociology.⁷ The sociological

dissemination of knowledge to a public is concerned with advocating for the “good/right” way to live in the world: what *ought to be* in the world overdetermines consideration of what *is* in the world. The problem of producing a better world is associated with knowledge accumulation, its dissemination, and political action. By being engaged in political action, sociologists pass on their knowledge to make a better world under the auspices of public sociology. And the knowledge produced by professional sociology provides the legitimacy and expertise that allows public sociology to advocate for its normative judgments. The public sociologist is committed to a world where more knowledge about the social world produces desirable social change.

Further, Burawoy (2007, 30) acknowledges that “public sociology has no intrinsic normative valence, other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology.” He goes on to say, “In this sense, sociology’s affiliation with civil society, that is public sociology, represents the interests of humanity – interests in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny” (56). At first, Burawoy is saying that public sociology is committed to mutual education about the knowledge produced by sociological research. Then Burawoy says that there are normative valences, those of representing “the interests of humanity” against oppression or cruelty (which he associates here with state despotism and market tyranny). Here lies the incoherence with the metatheoretical commitments of sociology: on the one hand, public sociology is committed to an open dialogue based on issues raised by doing sociology. On the other hand, public sociology resonates on another terrain, one overdetermined by normative commitments to make a better world in the interests of humanity.

Burawoy’s slip from the sociological problematic to a solution overdetermined by moralizing (doing the right/good thing to end oppression and cruelty) is what Durkheim calls the *ideological method*. Durkheim (1982, 86) notes that it is desirable to use science for the bettering of humanity, but cautions that it is not scientific to classify social phenomena in relation to an “overriding concept” (in this case, the interests of humanity). “The use of notions to govern the collation of facts, rather than deriving notions from them” is not scientific (86). Instead, this is ideological science. When a concept (such as the good/right in the interests of humanity) normatively determines the organization of facts, the concept reproduces itself upon the facts. For example, if a policy maker searches out evidence for why cell phone use while driving leads to poor driving (e.g., motor vehicle accidents) to advocate for creating a law that prohibits the use of cell phones while

driving, the collection of facts has been pre-organized by the normative interest in demonstrating that cell phone use produces bad driving. Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1997, 45) refers to this kind of a priori organization of facts as *dogmatic*.⁸ Similarly, public sociology slips into normative ideology because it looks for instances of injustice against humanity (e.g., cruelty, oppression) in the facts or knowledge accumulated by sociology. A scientific (i.e., not dogmatic) sociology would examine the phenomena and events and ask under what social relations the phenomena and events can be understood as unjust as well as examine the social conditions that gave rise to the phenomena and events themselves.

Touraine (2007, 78) anticipates my intervention here and reasons that sociology is committed to “discovering in which sectors of social life ‘committed’ sociology can most probably make clear the *nature of social problems* and the conditions of politically and morally efficient reform programs” (emphasis added). Here, Touraine marks a break between public sociology and the sociological problematic. The terrain of public sociology is concerned with normative engagements, advocacy for making a better world, acting in a political arena to generate social change. What counts as bettering humanity is understood according to the ideological criteria of acting in the interests of humanity. What might instead be perceived as the strength of the program of sociology is its ability to analyze and explain the circumstances under which certain social phenomena come to be understood as “good” for humanity. Public sociology is not reflexively committed to its knowledge, knowledge objects, or programs for advocating on behalf of publics based on that knowledge.⁹ Public sociology is not reflexive insofar as it fails to be critically aware of its own assumptions and preconceptions; it is not concerned with the “interrelationships between knowledge and power that obtain [the sociological] field” (Woodiwiss 2005, 88-89). Burawoy’s answer to the question of what knowledge is for assumes that knowledge is separated from its history and its relationship to a broader community, social (inter)relationships, and power. The ideological method of public sociology ignores the facts that produce knowledge about human rights; they are themselves conditions of social relations.

As Nichols (2009, 41) contends, sociologists “cannot be the moral vanguard of humanity, as Burawoy seems to believe,” if they are to be committed to doing sociology. A reflexive public sociology is metatheoretically committed to how knowledge about the social world is understood in particular ways by particular publics in contingent circumstances.

The Epistemic Problem of Public Sociology

Agger's (2007) position on public sociology, as proposed by Burawoy, is that positivism remains the problem with public sociology – indeed, with all sociology. As Agger states,

On the one hand, I welcome discussion of public sociology in the discipline. This helps diminish the emphasis on method that has distracted sociology since the 1970s from broad-gauged issues of practice, problems, and policy. On the other hand, I confess to a degree of cynicism when I see the American Sociological Association endorsing the brand of “public sociology”... I think Burawoy's version of public sociology is problematic, essentially ceding the core of disciplinary power to the positivists who edit the journals and control the major departments. (Agger 2007, 267)¹⁰

The concern with the improvement of humanity by employing the knowledge of the social sciences is a reemergence of earlier sociological discussions. The discipline of sociology appeared in a historical conjuncture characterized by the rise of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the decline of Christian theology and the Catholic Church, and the Restoration in France. Saint-Simon and his student, Comte, developed sociology as a normative enterprise that not only collects knowledge about the social realm but also uses that knowledge to better the social world. For these early sociologists, “the world ... contained no natural healing element. They body-social was neither self-healing, nor did it bring into life new social forces capable of providing a natural basis for a new society. New religious and moral principles had therefore to be introduced in order to make the world normal and natural” (Therborn 1976, 222).

Building on these principles of Saint-Simon, Comte's central ideas relate to the evolution of societies through what he termed “theological” to “positive” states (Gane 2006, 2). The “arrival of a new society” would have to be brought about based on the “fundamental characteristics of the new epoch” that sociology could determine (Therborn 1976, 222). Like other sciences, sociology would have a principle role in bringing about this important shift in the social world. Sociology was to revolutionize European society brought by the “triumphant march of reason” (Gane 2006, 3). For Comte, the necessary task of sociology is to use scientific reason to help society evolve, through scientific development, into the positive state (the best state). The object of Comte's sociology is the study of this very transformation between

the theological and the positive society: “the correct and objective logic entailed ... first to discover the logic of the past, then that of the future and only then could the present state ... be determined” (3). At this time, the *raison d’être* of sociology was to determine how to improve the state of society. Comte simultaneously announced the creation of sociology as well as the completion of its task: the improvement of society to its “positive state.”

Further, Comte considered the desire to improve society an innate human drive: “Comte relates all the drive for progress of the human species to this basic tendency, ‘which directly impels man continually to improve his condition in all respects’” (Durkheim 1982, 89). Comte’s main conception of the human condition was that humans tended toward progress, greater happiness, improving society’s condition. This interest is parallel to Burawoy’s project: knowledge to make a better world reflects Comte’s principle of the drive of the social sciences as the innate drive to make society better.

Durkheim disagrees with this aspect of Comte’s positivism:

To demonstrate the utility of a fact does not explain its origins, nor how it is what it is. The uses which it serves presume the specific properties characteristic of it, but do not create it. Our need for things cannot cause them to be of a particular nature; consequently, that need cannot produce them out of nothing, conferring in this way existence upon them. They spring from causes of another kind. The feeling we have regarding their utility can stimulate us to set these causes in motion and draw upon the effects they bring in their train, but it cannot conjure up these results out of nothing. (Durkheim 1982, 89)

For Durkheim, the crux of sociology is to explain the relationship between the object or nature of social phenomenon and history – that is, the nature of social phenomena and their conditions of existence (Durkheim 1982). For this reason, Durkheim does not believe that the work of sociology is finished, as Comte declared. Durkheim points out that a concern with the utility of facts, as proposed by Comte, reveals a reflexive problem with sociology. Comte’s science is dedicated to the improvement of the human condition through an instrumental relation to knowledge, one unaware of its social relations or historical conditions in the broader social context. A commitment to the normative project of making knowledge useful ignores the social conditions of moral facts. Durkheim supports a form of sociology

that is reflexively grounded and committed to exploring and interpreting the broader social history and social conditions that make it possible to understand or explain phenomena in a certain way. Durkheim took what we might today recognize as public sociology seriously, but in different terms; it is not a matter of for whom or for what utility, nor for the improvement of humanity in the sense suggested by Comte and echoed by Burawoy and others.

“To the extent that sociology exists,” Durkheim (1973b, 42) states, “it is more and more sharply separated from what is called, rather inappropriately, the political sciences, those bastard speculations, half theoretical and half practical, half science and half art, which are sometimes still confused, but wrongly, with sociology. The latter, like any science, studies what is and what has been, seeks laws, but is not interested in the future ... This is not sociologist’s advice – it will be the societies themselves which will find the solution.” Sociology is concerned with the relation between the phenomenon as it exists (what it is) and how it emerged (its social history); it does not predict the future.

In the second preface to *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1984, 1) states that “the sociologist’s task is not that of the statesman. Accordingly we do not have to set out in detail what that reform should be. We need only indicate its general principles as they appear to emerge from the facts.” Durkheim makes this argument in the context of his discussion of the corporation as an “essential organ of public life” (liv). He concludes that “in the present state of scientific knowledge we cannot foresee what it [the laws regarding the regulation of corporations] should be, except in ever approximate and uncertain terms. How much more important it is to set to work immediately in constituting the moral forces which alone can give that law substance and shape” (lvii). For Durkheim, the role of sociology is demonstrating the conditions that give way to the malfunction of an “organ” of the state/civil society. By locating the conditions that affect the cohesion or functioning of an institution or social phenomenon, the sociologist can demonstrate under what conditions the malfunction can be repaired. The contribution that sociology makes to better humanity is theorizing the possibilities for social change.

Retrieving the Sociology in Public Sociology

In this section, I take the works and sociological terrain of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim and, symptomatically, reread public sociology on their respective terrains and problematics. Agger (2007, 285) states that “sociology

rethink [its] relationship to politics and the public sphere.” The slip from public sociology to moral philosophy risks losing the already present, socially construed political commitments of sociology. I contend that it is necessary to retheorize public sociology and its call for political and public engagements by demonstrating how one may do public sociology by doing sociology. Here, I outline Weber and Durkheim’s metatheoretical commitments, how each conceived of politics, and what public sociology would look like on their respective terrains.

Public Sociology on the Weberian Terrain

Burawoy’s (2007, 30) claim that sociologists must “act in the political arena” and have a “collaborative relation between sociology and journalism” (57) would be supported by Weber’s version of politics and sociology. However, Weber’s metatheoretical commitments put these obligations in a different light. To begin, Weber’s ontological commitments state,

Sociology ... is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of “action” insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behaviour – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is “social” insofar as its subjective meaning takes into account the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. (Weber 1978, 4)

For Weber, the individual (or collections of individuals) engaged in social action is the ontological object of sociological knowledge.

All individual action involves subjective meaning. For Weber, the “social” is the individual’s self-understanding in a social context; it is one’s relation to the world that is subjectively meaningful. Knowledge is always already possible because of one being spontaneously oriented to a world that one finds meaningful or where one finds meaning. The sociologist studies the social action of an individual or group to find the social value in which the social action finds its significance.

For Weberian sociological investigation of political action, the individual engaged in political practice (social action) is one who is oriented to politics as her vocation. Weber (1946b, 77-78) understands politics as the leadership of or influencing of a political association of a state, “a community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” Weber describes a social commitment to politics as follows:

There are two ways of making politics one's vocation: either one lives "for" politics or one lives "off" politics. By no means is this contract an exclusive one. The rule is, rather, that man does both, at least in thought, and certainly he also does both in practice. He who lives "for" politics makes politics his life, in an internal sense. Either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or he nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has *meaning* in the service of a "cause." In this sense, every sincere man who lives for a cause also lives off this cause. (Weber 1946b, 9, emphasis in original)

For Weber, politics as one's vocation is both subjectively meaningful, that "his [or her] life has meaning in service of a cause," and the cause to which one is oriented takes into account the current and anticipated subjective meanings of others. Weber's version of public sociology would consider the public sociologist as oriented to a meaningful political cause; this is similar to Burawoy's version. But, in asking what sociological knowledge is for, Weber cautions that sociologists, as teachers, being like leaders, do not relay worthwhile knowledge to a public, thus telling them what to think and how to act. Instead, the sociologist, as a teacher, demonstrates and offers a way of thinking, which is sociological (scientific) thinking (Weber 1946a, 143-45). In the following passage, Weber outlines the relation between doing sociology and being politically oriented:

If you take such and such a stand, then, according to scientific experience, you have to use such and such a means in order to carry out your conviction practically. Now, these means are perhaps such that you believe you must reject them. Then you simply must choose between the end and the inevitable means. Does the end "justify" the means? Or does it not? The teacher can confront you with the necessity of this choice. He cannot do more, so long as he wishes to remain a teacher and not to become a demagogue. He can, of course, also tell you that if you want such and such an end, then you must take into the bargain the subsidiary consequences which according to all experience will occur. Again we find ourselves in the same situation as before. These are still problems that can also emerge for the technician, who in numerous instances has to make decisions according to the principle of the lesser evil or of the relatively best. Only to him one thing, the main thing, is usually given, namely, the end. But as soon as truly "ultimate" problems are at stake for us this is not the case. With this, at long last, we come

to the final service that science as such can render to the aim of clarity, and at the same time we come to the limits of science. (Weber 1946a, 151)

For Weber, science cannot give us a worldview, that is, prescribe the choices we should make or how to act within the world: sociologists are not the world's "demagogue." Instead, sociology places current issues within the context of the social situation, showing ("teaching") inquirers the possible consequences of certain choices and actions. The Weberian public sociologist would be committed to demonstrating (through teaching, for instance) how a sociological orientation to a problem brings out the ethical and moral issues at stake in the social world with each particular choice (as that choice appears in the context of being an oriented course of action). This means, for Weber, showing both the strengths and limitations of each course of action. Doing science is a way of knowing the powers and limitations of each oriented course of action in the world.

The sociologist as politically oriented does not make "academic prophecy ... [as this] will create only fanatical sects but never a genuine community" (Weber 1946a, 155). Weber's version of the genuine community is one where individuals consider choices of action as oriented social action – action that is subjectively meaningful and takes into account the meanings of others, and considers the possible causes and consequences of each course of action. In other words, genuine community is a community of sociological thinkers in Weber's view. The Weberian public sociologist is not a prophet or demagogue, advocating for any one particular worldview on a given issue; the Weberian public sociologist is committed to demonstrating and teaching the possible ends from each means laid before the group or individual by examining the course of action's dynamics of social context and meaning.¹¹ Further, the Weberian public sociologist acts after sociological, thoughtful consideration of the choice and circumstance at hand with integrity to the moral excellence of the best, ethical course of action according the principle of "lesser evil."

For Weber, this notion of integrity is where politics converges with its calling:

It is immensely moving when a mature man – no matter whether old or young in years – is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the

point where he says “Here I stand; I can do no other.” That is something genuinely human and moving. And every one of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in that position. Insofar as this is true, an ethics of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man – a man who can have the “calling for politics.” (Weber 1946b, 53-54).

The ethics of the public sociologist, then, is intertwined with her action. The ethics of ultimate ends is the public sociologist’s (or individual’s) orientation to a desired consequence after recognizing its social nature. The ethical responsibility is understood to be a subjectively meaningful orientation, a decision of agency, recognizing its consequences and limitations as well as the strengths of a given orientation to that ultimate end. The public sociologist is a demonstration of ethical action taking into account the broader social world and community. If public sociologists, as teachers, are able to lead by demonstration, being principled to a genuine community, then the political obligations of the sociologist is fulfilled.

This picture of the public sociologist is a contrast to Burawoy’s version of Weber’s political message. Weber’s sociology maintains normative commitments; however, those commitments are in (reflexive) relation to the causes and consequences of present and potential social action, as well as the subjective meanings of others and oneself.

Public Sociology on the Durkheimian Terrain

Like Weber, Durkheim’s sociological problematic consists of political and ethical commitments for sociological practice. For Durkheim, sociology is the study of social forces as carried by the degrees of crystallization of collective representations. The social fact is that which is external to the individual and his personality, actions, and practices, and that constrains or influences social activity; social facts are “rules of conduct that have sanction” and real consequences in social life (Durkheim 1957, 2). Morality is a social fact, the body of rules that constitutes, enables, and constrains everyday actors to definite goals, actions, and obligations in and to the social order (Durkheim 1984, 13).

Morality is “the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society” (Durkheim 1984, 38). This totality of beliefs “forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or

common consciousness ... By definition it is diffused over society as a whole, but nonetheless possesses specific characteristics that make it a distinctive reality" (38-39). The rules that constrain individuals exist as a reality that has real implications for individuals' lives. The rules can be observed and theorized insofar as they exist by the real consequences they have for social action. Action is social because it is constrained and oriented by the collective consciousness (*conscience collective*), which constitutes all dimensions of social life. It is the sociologist's obligation to examine and theorize "how these rules were established in the course of time: that is, what were the causes that gave rise to them and the useful ends they serve" (Durkheim 1957, 1). The sociologist traces the system of the collective consciousness and the causes that give rise to morality to examine "the way in which they operate in society; that is, how they are applied by individuals" (1). For Durkheim (1957), ethics are the individual's obligations to oneself, family, or professional group, as constituted by morality.

Durkheim "claimed that positive social change required a morality that could be reflected upon, criticized and modified" (Pearce 1989, 47). Durkheim's interest in social change, however, was distinct from that of Comte and Saint-Simon. Durkheim was against the popular socialist philosophy of his time. He describes Saint-Simon's socialist program as follows: "Socialism ... is entirely oriented toward the future. It is above all a plan for the reconstruction of societies, a program for a collective life which does not exist as of yet ... and which is proposed to men as worthy of their preference" (Durkheim 1928, 5). Durkheim understood socialism in much the same way as he described moral philosophy. Socialism was not a science: "Science is a study bearing on a delimited portion of reality which it aims at knowing and, if possible, understanding" (5). Durkheim argues that for Saint-Simon and the socialists, there was no limit or measure for the proposed goals. This is the problem with socialism and its moral philosophy: how would it know when it had reached its goal of the just society? For Durkheim, the problem was a methodological blind alley.

A public sociology in Durkheim's terms would be concerned with explaining morality and would examine the history of the social facts that constrain a particular group (and subsequently its individuals), specifically how a particular morality came to be established over time, the causes that led to its establishment, and the ends it serves for both the individual and the state. The Durkheimian public sociologist would demonstrate what possible consequences the function of morality has at the level of the state, institution,

and individual. From here, the public sociologist would be able to sociologically explain what is happening and how it came to happen in a given situation: “The problem is to know, under the present conditions of social life, what moderating functions are necessary and what forces are capable of executing them. The past not only helps us to pose the problem – it also indicates the direction in which the solution should be sought” (Durkheim 1928, 201).

In “Individualism and the Intellectual” (1973a), Durkheim examines individualism as a product of social facts, showing its development throughout history, as well as taking it as an occasion to respond to the political climate of his times, particularly Dreyfusard principles (cf. Lukes 1969). Durkheim sociologically explores and defends the implications of individualism to confront “the central issues of the moral basis of individual rights, the limits of political obligation, the legitimacy of authority, the responsibility of intellectuals and the positive implications of liberalism” (Lukes 1969, 14). Unlike Burawoy’s appeal and defence of human rights in public sociology, Durkheim demonstrates that individual human rights are constituted and constrained by social and moral facts. As well, the way that those rights came into existence and how they operate in society are connected to its social history. Burawoy (2006) argues that human rights are the basis for a public sociologist’s advocacy but does not account for how it is that these rights have come into existence in particular ways and function at various levels of society, for various publics (e.g., for the individual, or for the state). Durkheim maintains that in any given social context or situation in which the sociologist is engaging, it is important to explain the relation between moral facts and individual human rights.

Durkheimian public sociology thus implies making sound judgments about the issue at hand using the scientific method of examination. It is a problem of “practical ethics” to reserve judgment, or, as Durkheim (1973a, 50) puts it, to “yield less easily to the sway of the masses and the prestige of authority.” The public sociologist should not necessarily advocate on behalf of what the group under study is asking for, yielding to the sway of the group. Instead, the public sociologist makes sociologically scientific judgments about the social facts, their function in and for the group, and their consequences. From there, the Durkheimian public sociologist, with an understanding of the history of a social fact, development, and modes of operation of a social fact, then makes an ethical judgment about the situation and its effect on the individual and group with whom she is working.

While Durkheim believes that scholars, as citizens, should participate in public life, he clearly states that the scholar and statesman have different orientations of “mind (*esprit*) and will” (Durkheim 1973b, 59). The role of the sociologist is an educator: “It is our function to help our contemporaries know themselves in their ideas and in their feelings, far more than to govern them” (Durkheim 1973b, 59). Sociology, as a science of morality, can tell us why certain things are understood as moral and others are not by developing the nature and history of moral facts. Durkheim’s science of morality invites us to examine how certain conceptions of “making a better world” come to be understood as moral while others are not. It is likely that Durkheim would not agree with Burawoy’s project as it currently stands. Unlike the advocacy of Burawoy’s project, the ethical obligation of sociological knowledge is to do science. Durkheim argues that the ethical responsibility of the scientist as an educator is to evaluate whether the conditions of existence for moral facts are just and under what conditions those moral facts arose, are sustained, and who benefits (e.g., state, institution, or individual) from them. This intersection of (social) science, ethical contemplation, and education is how Durkheim would conceive of a public sociology.

Contours of a (Rethorized) Public Sociology

Public sociology is the concern with the production of knowledge and its usefulness for generating social change. Public sociology draws on the knowledge produced by sociology but its problematic is overdetermined by normative commitments and resembles moral philosophy. A sociological vocation dedicated to the amelioration of social problems and public issues is desirable but requires a reflexive relation between the sociologist and the social world to avoid practicing ideological science. Generating social change is an important part of the practice of sociology, as Weber’s and Durkheim’s sociology suggests.

Generating change, Durkheim would contend, comes from thoughtful consideration of the social conditions that produce public issues, and such issues are made visible by doing social science. To conclude, the meta-theoretical contours of a public sociology has strong relations to political and ethical action, namely by: (a) sociologically articulating the social conditions and social relations that produce social issues, facts, and phenomena; through (b) a reflexive relation to the social world (and oneself in it); (c) resisting the reproduction of ideological categories and concepts; and (d) being ethically obliged to change the causes of social issues wherever

possible through a pedagogical commitment to doing sociology. For Weber and Durkheim, sociology is an obligation to living, understanding, and being within a structured world. Being a public sociologist is to be ethically committed to practising sociology according to one's sociological principles.¹²

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Notes

- 1 For examples of texts that engage with the public sociology debates, see Zimmer (2004), and Helmes-Hayes and McLaughlin (2009), Burawoy (2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007), Blau and Smith (2006), Nichols (2007), Agger (2007), and Jeffries (2009).
- 2 For my discussion here, *metatheory* refers to the ontological, epistemological, and the normative dimensions in any given sociological piece of work. *Ontology* refers to questions and statements regarding what the nature of a social action *is* or what society *is* (Woodiwiss 2005, 9). *Epistemology* is the concerned with the nature of what is known about the social world and those objects within it; epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Benton and Craib 2010, 4). Assumptions regarding the best practices for gaining knowledge about the phenomenon of investigation are also epistemological concerns (Woodiwiss 2005, 9). The normative is concerned with what “ought” to be, particularly morality, ethics, and politics (Benton and Craib 2010, 6).
- 3 Durkheim contests that moral philosophy is neither scientific nor sociological. I return to Durkheim's case against moral philosophy later with discussion of both Saint-Simon and Comte.
- 4 For Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1997, 27), an oversight is when an object is “invisible” on a terrain and does not “answer” to the question posed by the visibility of the terrain. Oversight is the “production of the fleeting presence of an aspect of its invisible within the visible field of an existing problematic.” This is an instance where the text “slips,” producing a “change of terrain,” as the object cannot be sighted upon the terrain that produced the initial question (Althusser and Balibar 1997, 27). Where there is a slip, the text is generated as the result of an answer to a different question on a different terrain.
- 5 For a thorough and rigorous critique of expert intellectuals, see Honneth (2009). Honneth contends that public intellectuals of the kind referred to by Walzer (2000) (indeed, Burawoy and his supporters) are able to identify with the public in order to say what is sayable, to “win a public hearing” (Honneth 2009, 183). What Honneth terms the “social critic,” however, instead aims at “interrogating the descriptive system” to change the orientation of publics to social systems and culture (Honneth 2009, 184).

- 6 Brewster summarizes Althusser's concept of overdetermination as follows: "Althusser uses [this] term to describe the effects of the contradictions in each practice (q.v.) constituting the social formation (q.v.) on the social formation as a whole, and hence back on each practice and each contradiction, and non-antagonism of the contradictions in the structure in dominance (q.v.) at an given historical moment. More precisely, the overdetermination of a contradiction is the reflection in it of its conditions of existence within the complex whole, that is, of the other contradictions in the complex whole, in other words its uneven development" (Althusser 1990, 253). In this case, the normative dimensions of the discourse of public sociology (the complex whole) are the conditions of existence (ontology) for the practice of public sociology. The normative commitments determine the projects of public sociology (the ontological dimension is unevenly represented).
- 7 For a discussion of this relationship between sociologists as "knowers" conveying knowledge to lay people, see Mesny (2009) and Bucklaschuk, this volume.
- 8 To further illustrate the distinction between ideology and science, Althusser's (Althusser and Balibar 1997, 45-46) method highlights the epistemological conditions that produce research questions, such as the one in the above example – under what conditions do concerns with "good driving" and cell phone use become relevant? Questioning the circumstances and conditions that give rise theoretically (or also, for Althusser, historically) to particular research questions avoids doing ideological science. Thus, ideological science practically executes the collection of facts by using an overriding concept, whereas scientific endeavours consider the production conditions that render facts intelligible (at a particular historical conjuncture).
- 9 Burawoy (2005b, 163) defines reflexivity in "third-wave sociology" as "reflecting on who we are and what we do." To take my argument seriously, doing reflexive public sociology means engaging in socially construed political practice. It does not only mean self-reflection on possible bias in professional sociology or policy sociology as doing sociology for ultimate ends of knowledge production or policy production ("instrumental knowledge") (Burawoy 2005a). Doing reflexive public sociology means considering under what social and historical conditions a "common interest in human freedom" becomes a desirable and necessary project (Burawoy 2005b, 165). Under what conditions does human freedom become an issue? How did these conditions arise? Under what conditions might this change? Reflexivity is more than just asking who we are and what we do; it is the metatheoretical commitments that make what we do possible and being responsible and accountable to them in our political activities.
- 10 The endorsement by the ASA of the "brand of public sociology" may be less of a surprise than Agger (2007) infers. Consider how early American sociologists often employed moralist rhetoric, informing many of their social reform projects during the early days of the academic discipline of sociology (Coser 1978, 287). In the words of early American sociologist Albion Small, who, "in his presidential address to the American Sociological Society [now, ASA], meeting of 1913...stated emphatically, "The social problem of the twentieth century is whether the civilized nations can *restore themselves to sanity* after the nineteenth-century aberrations of individualism and capitalism" (Coser 1978, 291, emphasis added). Indeed, according to early

American sociologists, society had lost its moral way, and the discipline of sociology would be able to better humanity and restore its morality and “sanity.” For a lengthier discussion of early American trends in sociology, see Coser (1978).

- 11 Further theoretical analysis may very well lead to a version of combating Weber’s own pessimism, where we can imagine that being a Weberian sociologist may provide a means of reflecting on the moral good (significance to others) of the ends themselves inherent in any form of rationalization. A Weberian public sociology that provides the theoretical means of questioning the rules and ideological rule following in legal-rational domination may indeed free the individual from the “essentially fixed route of march” in the “machine” of bureaucratic rationalization and instrumental rationality (Weber 1978, 988).
- 12 For other examples of public intellectuals who are principled to their respective theoretical problematics, see Schaffer, this volume.

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