

BOOK REVIEW

***Public Sociology:
Between Utopia and Anti-Utopia***

by Michael Burawoy
Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021, 232 pages

Michael Burawoy's *Public Sociology* provides the reader with an assortment of goods packed into an autobiographical portrait. In tracing his personal history and journey as a researcher, scholar, intellectual, and professor, he treats the reader to a veritable "Who's Who" of sociological thinkers and innovators, from the discipline's forebearers to Burawoy's own 20th and 21st century contemporaries. However, the book is neither merely a personal history nor merely a history of the field. He uses his story as a vehicle to discuss the vocation of sociology, the formative processes that practitioners encounter, and the exceedingly complex fields of contestation on which the story and study of humanity and society unfold.

Burawoy speaks with refreshing candor regarding the often tortuous and tumultuous journey from young, ambitious, idealistic young scholar, through experiences of enlightenment, disappointment, and hard realities, to seasoned and reflective scholar and practitioner. He recounts in detail experiences in his professional life – experiences with which so many sociologists can identify – of running headlong into the harsh realities of powerful structures and forces resistant and even hostile to transformation. In summarizing this revelation, he acknowledges that he "had still to learn that knowledge does not have its own impetus, truth does not have its own power; it can be mobilized and distorted by powerful actors for their own ends" (75).

Burawoy further discusses how growth as a scholar and a sociologist includes challenging that which may seem immovable by "advancing toward the impossible." On his journey, Burawoy manages to retain his hope for a better world, even while coming to terms with the ubiquity and extraordinary staying power of the marketization and commodification of scholarship both nationally and globally. One way in which he holds on to the promise of sociology is by expanding the utopian versus anti-utopian dialectic beyond a narrowly Marxist articulation into a dialogue between the canonical sociological traditions and even across disciplines. Here he references the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, suggesting that Du Bois, partly due to his expansive approach to sociology, deserves a place in the pantheon of sociology. Burawoy explains that Du Bois "abandoned the confines of professional sociology to develop critical,

policy, and public sociologies, aimed at an expanding audience, within the academic field and part of the world beyond, across disciplines and across countries. His attention to racial oppression in the context of capitalism led him to a global sociology, and, at the same time, brought reflexivity to the center of sociology, not to question its science, but to advance its science” (210).

Referring back to a typology he developed during his time as president of the American Sociological Association, Burawoy deftly outlines a “sociological division of labor” that is brilliant both in its simplicity and its utility for mapping the vocation of sociology. In asking the questions “Knowledge for whom? (academic or extra-academic)” and “Knowledge for what? (instrumental or reflexive),” Burawoy articulates four types of sociology: Professional, Policy, Critical, and Public.

		Knowledge for Whom?	
		<i>Academic Audience</i>	<i>Extra-Academic Audience</i>
Knowledge for What?	<i>Instrumental Knowledge</i>	Professional Sociology	Policy Sociology
	<i>Reflexive Knowledge</i>	Critical Sociology	Public Sociology

(Burawoy 2021:36)

In this meta reflection on the vocation itself, he articulates the competing interests that play out on a field of contestation, a field where powerful actors sometimes dominate the arena and subordinate other aspects of the field, resulting in an unstable equilibrium. On the other hand, when the “types” form an interdependent tension, Burawoy argues that the “four sociologies are necessary for a vibrant discipline...forming an organic division of labor in which each, potentially, contributes to the flourishing of the whole” (38).

Burawoy’s articulation of sociology as a vocation resonates with a theme among some Christian sociologists, namely that sociology should reflect critically on society and culture and employ theoretical frameworks to speak “prophetically” from the margins regarding what “is” and what “might be” (Hiebert 2013). Burawoy invokes Max Weber in suggesting that humanity must reach out for the impossible in order to attain that which is possible. His articulation of the utopian and anti-utopian dialectic mirrors Christian sociologists’ efforts to make sense of the Creation as it is versus the Creation as it was meant to be. Burawoy’s brand of critical sociology proclaims that “the world could be other than it is, while recognizing there are powerful forces thwarting that possibility” (121). In a refreshingly pointed rebuke of positivism, Burawoy declares sociology “a moral science built on values” (210). One of the gifts of the

critical tradition is its acknowledgement that all inquiry comes with a lens that includes a set of values, perceptions, convictions, and norms. This line of reasoning suggests that to deny our lens and assume “objectivity” without interrogating “common sense” constitutes complicity with the status quo and thereby props up the power brokers of the day, both within and beyond the academy.

Burawoy highlights the need for sociologists to apply a critically reflective lens to social problems and the structure of society, as well as to the structures of higher education and the field of sociology itself. Similarly, there is a growing need for Christian sociologists to apply a critically reflective lens to institutionalized religion, particularly in spaces where the culture wars, nationalism, and ideological extremism have contaminated and co-opted faith traditions. Burawoy’s articulation of sociology serves as a reminder that speaking critically from the margins in the face of apparent immutability and striving for the impossible is how we discover what *is* possible. To do so is to challenge the reproduction of power and oppression that perpetuates racism, ethnocentrism, misogyny, environmental destruction, massive inequality, rampant abuse of power, and the continued oppression of marginalized groups.

Burawoy clearly articulates the need for a critically reflective sociological approach to maintain a sense of optimism regarding what is possible. However, the book is clearer in its explanation of the scope and persistence of the destructive forces of marketization, hell-bent on the extinction of civil society, than it is in providing a road map for defending humanity and pulling civilization back from the brink amid “third-wave marketization.” That said, several of the latter chapters provide some thoughts and perspectives on current and future fields of contestation and paths forward, particularly within the realm of higher and professional sociology.

Public Sociology is well worth the read for many reasons, but in summary, I have listed five that rose to the forefront as I reviewed this work:

- The account of his journey as a sociologist, from naïve idealist to reflective sage.
- The contributions to Marxist and sociological theory, methodological innovations, and meta reflections on the production of knowledge and research.
- The candid assessment of our current national and global crises driven by the forces of marketization and commodification.
- The recasting of the discipline in a way that draws W.E.B. Du Bois into the pantheon and articulates a broader, multi-faceted division of labor that plays out on a contested field.
- Perhaps most centrally, his articulation of sociology as an explicitly value-laden vocation that, at its best, maintains hope and aspiration for a better world.

Reference

Hiebert, Dennis. 2013. "Problems and Possibilities of Sociology as Prophetic." *Christian Scholar's Review* 43(1):11-20.

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