Towards an affirmative sociology: the role of hope in making a better world

by

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Through a series of articles, debates and symposia, the US sociologist Michael Burawoy has been calling for a renewed public sociology (2005a; 2005b; Burawoy et al. 2004), reaffirming the sociological ethos of making the world a better place. As part of this discussion Burawoy has suggested that students are sociology’s ‘first and captive’ public and that teachers of sociology are all potentially public sociologists (2005a: 263, 266).

This paper explores some implications of these suggestions, paying particular attention to the potentially negative effects of critical sociology on students as a public, and questions critical sociology’s contribution to making a better world. It outlines the possibility of an alternative, affirmative sociology as a form of public sociology that might better serve the sociological ethos and engage students and other publics in that ethos.

Critical sociology and its discontents

Critical sociology can be taken to refer to that tradition within sociology where the nature of society, its characteristic conditions, its tendencies and its values, are identified and found wanting. This definition of critical sociology straddles Burawoy’s definitions of both critical and public sociology (2005a) as it is concerned with normative representations of society and is implicitly addressed to extra-academic audiences, as well as academic audiences, given than its focus is on the general direction of society. Critical sociology is a fundamental part of the teaching
repertoire of sociologists. This tradition includes Weber and his description of modern life as disenchanted, Marx and the phenomenon of alienation and Adorno’s critique of mass culture. More recently it would include Bauman’s work on the ‘liquid’ nature of contemporary life (2000; 2003; 2005) as well as those works Burawoy cites as examples of ‘traditional public sociology’ such as The Lonely Crowd (Reisman: 1950) and Habits of the Heart (Bellah et al: 1985) to which may be added Bowling Alone (2000) and Nickel and Dimed (Ehrenrich 2002).

Though produced in different locations and at different times, the common feature of critical sociology generally is that social life is successively characterized in predominantly problematic terms, reflecting the dominance and persistence of a nostalgic paradigm in sociology (Turner 1987). The four dimensions of a nostalgic paradigm identified by Turner are the sense of historical decline and loss of some golden age, the absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty, the sense of loss of individual freedom and autonomy with the disappearance of genuine social relationships and the idea of a loss of simplicity, personal authenticity and spontaneity. Many of these metaphors and metaphysics – particularly that of decline – are as strongly evident in the works of contemporary sociologists, such as Bauman, as they were in the work of Weber.

The rationale for characterizations of contemporary life in problematic terms can be traced back to sociology’s origins as a modernist project and the belief and hope that the application of reason and science could contribute to making the world a better place. Giddens, for example, contends ‘sociology and its theories are nothing if they cannot help in influencing for the better the human condition’ (Jones 2003: 183).
Some objective account of reality is understood to be necessary in order to be able to change or improve it. Postmodern approaches are therefore deficient, according to Giddens, because of the denial of the possibility of knowing what (the collective) reality looks like. The implicit assumption is that characterising and identifying contemporary life as deficient or in problematic terms, is a necessary or essential pre-condition for social change or social improvement. Before considering this assumption in more detail, it is worth considering the effects of what may be collectively referred to as critical sociology’s ‘disenchantment’ stories.

Rather than simply analysing a pre-existing social reality, critical sociological accounts, it can be argued, also help to constitute a sense of this reality (Felski 1995: 36). Sociology’s disenchantment stories of loss, alienation, atomization, decline, fragmentation, liquidity and so on, not only seek to identify the ‘unique’ characteristics of contemporary life, but also have a persuasive function, aiming to resonate with contemporary people’s experience and thus produce, or participate in the production, of contemporary people’s ontological experience of the world. The accuracy or usefulness of critical sociological accounts is partly determined by the extent of identification with society as disenchanted or problematic. The question may then be asked, what kind of ontological experience of the world do disenchantment stories engender in sociology students in particular, and in the public more generally? Turner suggests the ontology of nostalgia, that has been argued pervades critical sociology, is ‘a fundamental condition of human estrangement’ (1987: 150). From this perspective, critical sociology can be seen to be participating in the production of students, and students as citizens, ‘estranged’ from the present and from a disenchanted and dysfunctional world, at the same time as pinning its hopes on the
future as the potential site of improvement in accordance with the modernist project and the idea of progress.

For some this may be interpreted as mark of success. Turner suggests, for example, that nostalgia and its ontology of estrangement ‘may lay the foundations for a radical critique’ (1987: 154) and Bauman endorses Richard Rorty’s claim that a valuable aim of educators is to instil ‘doubts in the students about the students’ own self-images, about the society in which they belong’ and to make society ‘feel guilty’ (2005: 13–14). However, problematizing the present, looking back to the past with nostalgia, or to an improved future, perhaps does not pay sufficient attention to the ways that ‘the benighted “now” in which [students and publics] actually live [becomes] circumscribed and rendered largely irrelevant’ (Rose 2004: 19). This seems a less than promising basis to engage people in the enterprise of making a better world or engaging them in debate about making a better world.

There are some signs, albeit muted ones, of concern about sociology’s critical tendencies and of the critical tradition in general. Burawoy, for example, asks in passing ‘Are we too critical to capture the attention of our publics?’ (2005a: 265) and in his 2003 Presidential TASA address Stephen Crook questions whether sociology’s ‘diet of unrelieved gloom’ is appealing to students (2003: 14). In a wide ranging general discussion of ‘disenchantment’, political theorist Jane Bennett writes of her fears that ‘acceptance of the disenchantment story when combined when a sharp sense of the injustice of things . . . too often produces an enervating cynicism’ (2001: 13). Political activist Rebecca Solnit also notes that radicals sometimes ‘conceive of the truth as pure bad news, appoint themselves the delivers of it, and keep telling it over
and over’ (2004: 15) and argues that ‘to face problems can be an act of hope, but only if you remember that they’re not all there is’ (2004: 9). Bruno Latour has also argued that critique has run out of steam (2004). More publicly, in a recent review of Slavoj Zizek’s latest book, published in the *Australian* earlier this year, philosopher A. C. Grayling (2008) takes cultural critics to task, including sociologists among them, for ‘enjoying the unaccountable, responsibility-free luxury of being able to criticise everything and everyone, to sneer and accuse, to blame and complain, to analyse, anatomise, judge and condemn, without fear of being asked to do better themselves. Or even to suggest alternatives or solutions’. This seems to be a criticism that sociology ought to take seriously.

As well as participating in the production of an ontological experience of ‘estrangement’ from the world amongst its students, on the one hand, then, critical sociology is also, on the other, at risk of alienating a general public. In the contemporary idiom, critical sociology risks being perceived as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. This is a particularly important issue for the discipline in relation to sociology’s students, given that according to analysts, young people already have plenty of access to what’s wrong with the world and are likely to switch off, rather than hear more (Lumby 1999: 146). And also given that in the media-saturated world of a 24/7 news cycle that thrives on crisis, young people may be already predisposed towards cynicism and despair. To paraphrase Bennett, an unrelieved diet of critical sociology’s stories of fragmentation, decline and loss risks undermining the very sense of attachment or sensitivity to the social world such stories seek to revive (2001: 92).
These considerations raise doubts about the effectiveness of the procedure of identifying social life and the world in problematic terms as the first and necessary step towards making a better world, and raise doubts about the effectiveness of critical sociology’s contribution, as public practice, to that effort. There is a self-defeating element in this procedure because, to paraphrase Bennett again, in the cultural narrative of disenchantment, what’s to love about an alienated existence in an unjust, anti-humane world, hurtling towards extinction as its resources are plundered for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many? The need for sociology to reinvent, re-imagine and reconfigure itself as on the side of hope and life, and to position itself as a participant in solutions – rather than a detached observer and chronicler of problems – in dialogue with various publics has perhaps never been more pressing.

Sociology’s long tradition of critically appraising the world in terms of its problems, dysfunction and injustices, needs to be supplemented by the cultivation of a tradition that learns to look for ways that a better world is already among us as a means of cultivating hope. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers, identifies hope with thinking as an adventure and with possibilities. She writes that:

What I mean by ‘adventure’ is adventure as a creative enterprise, in spite of the many reasons we have to despair. We have all the reasons we wish to despair – to think is to succeed in not following those reasons, one way or another. Thus I would say that hope is the difference between probability and possibility. If we follow probability there is no hope, just a calculated anticipation authorised by the world as it is. But to ‘think’ is to create possibility against probability’ (2000: 245).
Critical sociology is conventionally largely engaged in outlining probabilities and
Stengers observations suggest a need for an alternative ‘thinking’ sociology oriented
to creating and bringing possibilities to attention. Such an alternative sociology could
be described as an affirmative sociology.

Features of an affirmative sociology
An affirmative sociology, as a supplement or balance to traditional critical sociology’s
assumptions and procedures, is a subject for further elaboration and debate. However,
as a starting point, four key, overlapping and interconnected features are discussed as
well as the ways an affirmative sociology could serve the sociological ethos and better
engage ‘publics’ in dialogue with the sociological ethos.

Firstly, the research agenda of an affirmative sociology would focus on sites critical
sociology conventionally overlooks or ignores because it does not go looking for them,
namely functional and affirmative aspects of social life, such as sites of citizen
activity that are already engaged in making a better world, in order to bring them to
students’ (and the broader public’s) attention. The rapidly expanding global ‘citizens
sector’ would refer to the proliferation of non-government and not-for-profit
organisations, as well as individuals, actively engaged in making a better world would
be one such site. According to one commentator, the citizen sector if America’s
leading growth industry (Bornstein 2007: 5). India, for example, has well over a
million citizen organisations and in France during the 1990s an average of 70,000 new
citizen groups was established each year, quadruple the number in the 1960s
(Bornstein 2007: 4). Despite the increasing power of corporations and of state and
market collusion there seems to be a world wide movement of people who want to put
their skills and ability to work for social change, rather than working for corporations’ profit. And this impulse seems to be growing among the current generation of students.

The first task of an affirmative sociology would be then to locate and determine what constitutes functional and affirmative aspects of social life, to identify what is ‘working’ in terms of making a better world and to collate already existing examples of this kind of sociology. An affirmative sociology would then be performing the valuable social task of helping students and publics to remember that problems are ‘not all there is’ (Solnit 2004: 9) and alerting them to already existing possibilities.

A model for this affirmative, positive direction can be found in the discipline of psychology and the emerging positive psychology movement (see, for example Petersen 2006; Seligman 2002; Snyder 2007; Snyder & Lopez 2006). What this example demonstrates is that the goal of the discipline of psychology, of helping people to become more functional, has not been compromised by turning its attention to identifying the attributes and characteristics of more functional people. There is no reason to suggest that a sociology that similarly turns it attention to already existing positive and functional sites and activities directed to making the world a better place, would compromise the discipline. On the contrary, it could strengthen the discipline overall by demonstrating the viability of the sociological ethos.

It has been argued that critical sociology, informed by a paradigm of nostalgia, potentially produces an ontology of ‘estrangement’. As a consequence of focussing on functional, hopeful possibilities already present in the world, a second characteristic
of an affirmative sociology would be that it could produce a radically different and novel ontology: an ontology of attachment to, engagement with or even en-joyment of the world. Contra to critical sociology’s procedure of identifying problems on the basis that dissatisfaction can provide the motivation and impetus for change, the rationale for an ontology of attachment is that joy is a more powerful source of ethics than pity, resentment or victimization. As Bennett notes, according to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra:

Learning better to feel joy, we best unlearn how to do harm to others and to contrive harm (Nietzsche, 1976, pt II, 3, cited in Bennett, 2001: 13).

From this perspective, joy or positive attachment to the world does not necessarily lead to narcissism, self-absorption or passivity, but may be conducive to care and concern for others. Bennett claims, for example, that ‘you have to love life before you can care about anything’ (2002: 4). Making the world a better place, is partly a moral or ethical enterprise, part of which involves, individually and collectively, ‘unlearning how to do harm and to contrive harm.’ An ontology of attachment, engagement and joy is therefore as likely to provide the impetus for social change and for making a better world, than nostalgia and estrangement.

By focussing on and drawing attention to positive aspects of social life already present in the world, a third characteristic of an affirmative sociology would be that it is oriented to the present, rather than to a nostalgic past or a utopian future. Being oriented to the present would engender a sense of possibility of the present world as hospitable and habitable for humanity, and a sense of the present as a home ‘rather than something we pass through in a mad scramble to realise the future’ (May & Thrift, 2000: 37). An affirmative sociology would involve ‘revaluing the present as
the real site of action in the world’ (Rose, 2004: 19) and because of this would have the potential to engage students and other publics not just with the (social) world but also engage them in the sociological task.

Fourthly and particularly connected to the previous point, a mystical sociology would re-imagine making the world a better place as a process, rather than in terms of a modernist project. If critical sociology’s stories claim to ‘master’ and know the world as it is, an affirmative sociology, imagined as process, would accept and reflect the unfinished, contingent, evolving nature of its task, making room for as yet unknowable possibilities, as well as already existing ones, at the same time as affirming engagement in the process to be as important as a rational calculation of outcomes. It could go some way to reversing the effects of the progressive ideology of a modernist project where ‘the present becomes a place in which we are estranged from the actual conditions of our lives, where agency is alienated [and] responsibility cast elsewhere’ (Rose 2004: 18).

**Affirmative sociology as public sociology**

With these four principles in place, teachers of affirmative sociology would become public sociologists because, by introducing students to the content, teachers would directly contribute to the making of a better world and would be actively contributing to engaging students in that task. At the very least, affirmative sociology’s ‘pedagogy of possibility’ would encourage attachment to and engagement with the (social) world, rather than disillusionment and estrangement from it, and teachers would become public sociologists by actively contributing to students becoming engaged. Moreover within the context of higher education becoming increasingly
captive to market discourse and market values, as Burawoy notes (2005a), sociology could reclaim and reassert itself as a ‘public’ discipline, one that is concerned with the public good of making a better world.

According to one commentator Generation Y has rejected the ‘too cool to care ethos of Xers’ and are ‘a principled and idealistic lot who are committed to making the world a better place’ (Huntley 2006: 117). By this account, sociology is the discipline perhaps best placed to appeal to this commitment. If it were better able to communicate its own ethos to publics, and its students as publics, first and foremost, sociology might enjoy a renaissance of energy, interest and relevance. Developing and teaching an affirmative sociology might be one possible way to begin.

(2935 words)

Bibliography


