

THE 'USES' OF SOCIOLOGY: PUBLIC ISSUES AND PRIVATE TROUBLES

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AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

- BACKGROUND TO THE DEBATE ON 'IMPACT' AND 'VALUE' OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
- PROBLEMS WITH 'IMPACT' AND 'AUDIT'
- THE IDEA OF PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY
- 'USES' OF SOCIOLOGY
- CONCERNS ABOUT IMPACT
- KEY TASKS FOR A FLOURISHING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

BACKGROUND TO THE USES & VALUE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

- ASA 2004 Presidential Address: Michael Burawoy: *For Public Sociology*
- Punching our weight: the humanities & social science in public policy-making (British Academy) (2008)
- Holmwood (2010) Sociology's misfortune: disciplines, interdisciplinarity and the impact of audit culture (BJS)
- Brewer, J (2013) *The public value of the social sciences* (Bloomsbury)
- Bastow, S et al. (2014) *The impact of the social sciences* (Sage)

CONCERNS ABOUT IMPACT

‘The demand that we use the impact agenda to demonstrate the public value of our ...research is not appropriate. The ...agenda is not about making the research process more democratic but is a re-drawing and tightening of the hierarchy of credibility. The elite’s definition of public interest now over-ride the interests of the public, and so economic growth, global competitiveness....and behavioural change among the disadvantaged are the goals of public policy’

Holmwood, J. 2014 BSA Presidential Address

CONCERNS ABOUT IMPACT

‘Impact is a deeply flawed way of approaching the public value of the social sciences...it pushes researchers towards applied projects because of the relatively simplicity in demonstrating benefits....**It is a poor criterion of quality that the research is highly impactful merely because it finds favour with powerful groups – or is ignored by them...**Good quality research can have little obvious impact and poor quality research high impact’ (Brewer, 2013)

USES OF SOCIOLOGY

- TENSIONS BETWEEN IDEAS ABOUT THE DIFFERENT 'USES' OF SOCIOLOGY PART OF THE HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE
- TENSIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT 'PUBLICS'/AUDIENCES IN HOW SOCIOLOGY IS USED

THE IDEA OF 'PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY'

- **PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY:** brings sociology into a conversation with different public audiences
 - **TRADITIONAL** – elite, mass media, 'thin', instigates but does not participate
 - **ORGANIC**– close connection with active, local & often counter publics, 'thick', participates

'The project of public sociology is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public.....'

VARIETIES OF SOCIOLOGY

- **Policy sociology:** sociology defined in the service of a client
- **Professional sociology:** supplies true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orientating questions, and conceptual frameworks
- **Critical sociology:** examines the foundations – explicit and implicit – of the research programmes of sociology

WHY THE DEBATE?

- Widening class, gender and ethnic inequalities (Piketty, 2014; Savage, 2014)
- Attacks on university funding, centralised management structures (Holmwood, 2010)
- Public sociology as a reaction to marketization & privatization (Burawoy, 2005)
- Respondents/Citizens as co-producers

Sociology as the 'useful' science

- Sociology and 'moral commitment' – alienation, bureaucracy, anomie (Marx, Weber & Durkheim)
- Influence of social statistics, Fabianism and social reform (Rex, 1974)
- Technical apparatus of sociology developed in 1950s & 1960s – mass observation, interviewing & social survey – created new 'uses' and audiences for social sciences (Savage, 2010)
- 'The image of a social science for **use** has been a compelling moving force in the development of [sociology] both intellectually and institutionally' (Abrams, 1981)

Sociology as the 'useful' science

'Of the sociologists I interviewed, 3/5ths saw the proper use of their work in terms of some combination of **Clarification** and **Advocacy**. The common pattern was one that united elements of 'I publish and if the work is any good its relevance is obvious – people will take it up', with 'If I think my work has policy implications I try pretty hard to get the message across to the relevant people' (Abrams, 1981)

Sociology as the 'useful' science

Four types of sociology:

- 'Socio-technical' – intelligence-gathering for government
- 'Clarification' – creating a knowledge base
- Advocacy – sociology as political persuasion
- Education – enlightening audiences beyond government

(Abrams, 1981)

Varieties of sociology

- **1950s – early 1970s:** Policy/Professional sociology
- **1970s – 1980s:** Critical/public sociology (organic)
- **1990s-early 2000s:** Professional/Policy sociology
- **2008 – onwards:** Professional/Public sociology (traditional and organic)

1950s – early 1970s: Policy/Professional sociology

Key figures:

Michael Young – Institute of Community Studies (1953) ‘To make social science intelligible to the interested layman’ *Family & Kinship in East London* (1957)

Peter Townsend – *The Last Refuge* (1962); ‘re-discovery of poverty’ (Abel-Smith & Townsend, 1965)

Ray Pahl - *Urbs in Rure* (1965); *Patterns of Urban Life* (1970) ‘It is the business of sociologists to conduct a critical debate with the public’ (cited Crow & Takeda, 2011)

1950s – early 1970s: Policy/Professional sociology

- **Public Sociology** – ‘New Society’ (1962 – 1988)
Focus on urban issues/urban deprivation
- **Area-based interventions** (action research) as focus for sociology and social policy:
 - Urban Aid Programme (1968)
 - Educational Priority Areas (1968)
 - Community Development Programme (1969)
 - ‘Six Town Studies’ focus on inner cities (1972)
 - ‘Transmitted deprivation research programme’ (1972)
 - Quality of Life Studies (1973)

1970s – 1980s: Critical/public sociology (organic)

- **Economic & political crisis**; opposition of Conservative government to social science; Rothschild Report (1981).
- **Critical Criminology** (National Deviancy Conference) (Taylor & Taylor, 1971); **Critical Social Policy** (CSP 1981); **Critical Gerontology** (Townsend, 1981; Phillipson, (1982)
- **Influence of feminist perspectives** (*Beyond the Fragments*, Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, 1979).
- **Links with community/labour movements** (Beynon, 1977 *Hello, are you working?*; Beynon (ed), 1985 *Digging deeper: issues in the miner's strike*

1990s-early 2000s: Professional/Policy sociology

- Specialization within sociology – demography, family, class, social theory, race and ethnicity, gender, criminology
- Rise of New Labour
 - 1997 Social Exclusion Unit (ODPM), area focus, re-integration, 50 reports
 - 1997 Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (LSE)
 - 1998 Sure Start
 - 2006 Sure Start for ending inequalities and older people
 - Role of 'think tanks'

2008 – onwards: Professional/Public sociology (traditional)

- Declining influence of Marx, Durkheim & Weber; diversity of theoretical influences (Tonkiss, 2010)
- Re-interpretation of the ‘social’ in context of globalization
- Influence of impact/REF (Brewer, 2013)
- Importance of ‘think-tanks’ as vehicle for sociology
- Role of ‘sociological journalism’ e.g. Jones, *Chavs*, 2011
- Debates around inequality (Dorling, 2014; Piketty, 2014)
- *Discover Sociology* (BSA)

CONCERNS ABOUT IMPACT

- Concerns about shortening time frame from 'idea to use' could displace research that is genuinely innovative (BSA)
- Discomfort with 'advocacy' (Abrams, 1981)
- Narrowing of sociological imagination through direction of research effort into themes and priorities e.g. 'What Works' centres; 'extending working life': **mainstream political agendas driving sociological agendas**
- Sociology distorted through managerialism and marketisation in higher education (Holmwood, 2014)

KEY TASKS FOR A FLOURISHING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

- **Clarifying the role of 'organic' public sociology**
- **Making public thought, language and concepts more 'sociological'**
- **Clarifying the task of 'co-production'**

KEY TASKS FOR A FLOURISHING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

- **Clarifying the role of organic public sociology:**

‘As sociologists we not only invent new categories but also give them normative and political valence. To fail to do so is to give carte blanche to the state and market to fill the vacuum with their own needs. We are in the business of fostering such publics as the poor, the delinquent, the incarcerated...single women, gays...not to control them but to expand their powers of determination....We should be more self conscious about our relation to the people we study and the effects we produce in the act of research’ (Burawoy, 2005)

KEY TASKS FOR A FLOURISHING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

- **Making public thought, language and concepts more sociological**

‘...society is generally understood more sensitively, more realistically and more sceptically. Simplistic reactions to social problems...are rendered generally incredible. We are not given an easier social world, but we are given a social world in which it is easier for people to be sympathetically and rationally responsive to one another’ (Abrams, 1981, *The uses of British Sociology*, 1831-1981)

KEY TASKS FOR A FLOURISHING PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

- **Clarifying the task of co-production**

‘Only when a broader section of society can have a say in research agendas, can have access to the apparatus of social research and can have some control over the means of information dissemination will the subjects of research really be accorded citizenship status. The technology is making this increasingly possible. The right to private ownership of an control over social information of this kind, however, conflicts with the citizen concept of the researched. **For a real democratisation of social research to occur, there will have to be changes not just in the status of the researched, but also in the right to be a researcher**’ (Marsh, 1981)

SELECTED SOURCES

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- Bulmer, J. (1981) Essays on the history of British sociological research. Cambridge University Press
- Dench, G. et al (1995) Young at Eighty: the prolific public life of Michael Young. Carcanet
- Holmwood, J. (2011) Viewpoint – The impact of ‘impact’ on UK social science’ Methodological Innovation Online 6 (1) 13-17
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