

The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Inaugural Issue*

Article 2

12-2005

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Recommended Citation

Rinalducci, Ned (2005) "Sociological Accessibility and the Institutionalizing of Professional "Public Sociology"," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol1/iss1/2>

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**Sociological Accessibility and the Institutionalizing
of Professional “Public Sociology”**

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Sociological Accessibility and the Institutionalizing of Professional “Public Sociology”

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Welcome to the first issue of the *Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. The launching of this journal by the Georgia Sociological Association can be seen as another step in the direction of institutionalizing the concept of a “public sociology.” This approach to sociology, popularized by Michael Burawoy (2005a) and outlined in his 2004 Presidential address to the American Sociological Association has led to much discussion, debate, elaboration, and a fair amount of controversy within the world of sociology. Since these events, the American Sociological Association has appointed a task force on institutionalizing public sociologies in order to further incorporate this approach into the discipline. This task force loosely defines Public Sociology as referring “to those who take sociology out of the classroom and laboratory to directly impact social change and decision making in the public sphere” (Public Sociology, 2006). However, even the task force readily admits that there is a diversity of definitions of public sociology, a perception that is becoming more evident as the approach grows in popularity and general acceptance.

Gans (2002:10) defined a public sociologist as “a public intellectual who applies sociological ideas and findings to social (defined broadly) issues about which sociology (also defined broadly) has something to say.” He refers to public sociologists as “specialist public intellectuals” who are able to comment on public agenda issues that can

be informed by sociological insights and expertise. Public sociology can demonstrate how the discipline adds distinctive insights and findings to issues of public concern and in doing so, increase sociology's relevance by forcing it to analyze current events and issues, simultaneously enhancing sociology's visibility (Gans, 2002). Burowoy (2005b:71) agrees with the basics of this characterization as he too defines public sociology as a force that takes sociology to "publics beyond the university, engaging them in a dialogue about public issues that have been studied by sociologists." Burowoy (2004), however, takes his approach further. He believes that public sociology should aim to enrich social debate by infusing them with sociological theory and research. He sums up his explanation pointing out that "public sociology engages publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern. It has to be relevant to such publics without being faddish, that is subservient to publics" (Burowoy, 2004:1607). This venturing into "moral" and "political" territory, while for some a seemingly natural connection for sociologists, have turned many others against it. Burowoy believes that sociology has become tamed by institutional forces and can benefit "from an invigorating and open interaction with the world it studies" (Burowoy, 2005b:2). While this approach has been embraced by many, it has simultaneously been resisted by those elements within sociology that see it moving sociology away from their interpretation of the discipline as a social science. This journal, while advocating a public sociology approach, also welcomes such debate.

Public sociology is both a concept and an approach that can be broken down in many ways. This journal endeavors to be a forum where such analyses can be disseminated. Burowoy (e.g. 2004, 2005a, 2005b), himself distinguishes between what

he refers to as traditional public sociology and organic public sociology. Traditional public sociology conveys “sociology to a wide lay audience through sociological interventions that set a new agenda for the discussion of public issues” (2005b:71), it is described as elite public sociology. Organic public sociology, on the other hand, is more directly connected to publics themselves; it is a form of “grassroots” public sociology often representing issues with which local publics are already struggling. The publics of organic public sociology are less cosmopolitan than the publics of traditional public sociology. The divisions that define the mission of this publication, however, are housed in the larger model Burawoy (2004) uses to divide the entire discipline of sociology. He divides sociology into four areas including critical, policy, professional and public. What must be understood for this model to work is that all four types are inter-related and dependent, to varying degrees, on one another. While critical sociology, referred to as the conscience of the discipline, pushes “forward the frontiers of knowledge and at the same time questions its foundations” (2004:1609) and policy sociology “focuses on solutions to specific problems defined by clients [in which] expertise is [often] sold for a fee” (2004:1608), this journal is focused on the relationship between professional and public sociology, which are invariably tied to the other categories.

Professional sociology, defined by the academic model, is based on “research conducted within research programs that define assumptions, theories, concepts, questions, and puzzles” (Burawoy, 2005a:12). Thus, professional sociology serves as the traditional core of the disciplinary field. This is what most sociologists engage in within the confines of our academic institutions. Professional sociology is involved in instrumental knowledge for an academic audience as opposed to public sociology, which

is reflexive knowledge for an extra academic audience (Burowoy, 2005b). This apparent division serves as the impetus for the creation of this journal. While all four areas in Burowoy's typology are tied to one another, public sociology and its survival as an approach is most dependent on professional sociology. "Public...sociologies could not exist without professional sociology, which provides legitimacy, expertise, distinctive problem definitions, relevant bodies of knowledge, and techniques for analyzing data (Burowoy, 2004:1609). It is professional sociology that allows public sociology to survive academic, intellectual, and even popular scrutiny. In other words, public sociology is, and must be, supported by professional sociology. Sociology has, for too long, been absent from public debate. The discipline that should have the most to say about social problems and issues has too often been relegated to the public and academic sidelines. Public sociology can be seen as an answer to this shortcoming.

Sociologists need to be able to present their research and their expertise in ways that are readily accessible to the public at large. Publishing in either well-respected or obscure academic journals for other sociologists keeps sociology's "public face" hidden. Public sociology, in turn, "increases the stakes of our knowledge and...makes the vigilant pursuit of coherent research programs more important" (Borowoy, 2004:1609). This is not to say that the only relevant public sociology is the sort that speaks to mass lay audiences. The variety of publics must be understood, and for this approach to develop, must be broadly defined.

This journal strives, primarily, to be a medium for the development of public and professional sociologies, but it also must serve as a place to voice alternative views of public and professional sociology, including dissenting ones. There is real resistance to

the approach and the dissent should be heard and thoughtfully considered. Is public sociology the key to sociology's relevance and accessibility or is it the "fast-food of social science," as critic Deflem (2007) accuses?

The venturing into moral and political territory, for some violates the traditions of an objective social science. Smith (2006) advocates such an anti-science position with his Web site *Public Sociology Alive*. He states:

This website is part of a large political effort in public sociology to create a better society. It seeks to build a community of sociologists who reject positivism and bourgeois science to promote political activism with other sociologists, students and all the rest of the public. Inspired by major public sociologists, such as Michael Burawoy, Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, this website promotes justice and the use of sociology to make peace and create justice for all of humanity. This site should therefore also help to get rid of the old idea of sociology as a science. Sociology as political activism to advance socialism is what public sociologists promote! (Public Sociology Alive, 2006)

While many see the dichotomy between "sociology as social science" and "sociology as anti-social science activism" as a false one, it continues to spur debate. Deflem (Save Sociology, 2006) charges that "public sociology is politics, not a forum for political discussions in which a plurality of viewpoints can participate, but a particular politics that represents but one specific and singular voice. Contrary to its self-declared objectives, public sociology allows no discussion, no debate." This journal is an answer to such allegations. A place where there can be discussion, debate, growth, and increased understanding of the relationship between public and professional sociologies.

Sociologies moral fiber can be regenerated without reducing it to socialistic political positions. Professional sociology must be the savior of public sociology, just as many hope that public sociology can add visibility and relevance to the larger discipline

itself. Public sociology can speak to politics without being blatantly political. Simply observing the chapters in Blau and Iyall-Smiths (2006) *Public Sociologies Reader* or perusing the public sociologies sections within the journal *Social Forces*, one can see the relevance of a professionally grounded public sociological discussion on issues including human rights, globalization, natural disasters, sustainability, social justice, etc. It is hoped that this web-based journal, provided free to the “public” by the Georgia Sociological Association, will help to promote such discussions in an accessible way, and in doing so, work towards the institutionalization of a professionally grounded “public sociology.”

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