

COMMENT

Comment on “Sociology as a Vocation” (CS 45[4]:379–393)

Civil Society Must Be Defended: A Reply to Michael Burawoy’s “Sociology as a Vocation” from the Standpoint of Ethnography

Michael Burawoy’s recent article, “Sociology as a Vocation,” makes a provocative argument by directly linking the vitality of civil society to the discipline of sociology:

Irreducible to economy and polity, civil society is the institutional birthplace and support for diverse values. It is the standpoint from which sociology evaluates the world, just as the market is the standpoint of economics and the state the standpoint of political science. Sociology arises with civil society and dissolves when civil society recedes. (p. 380)

If sociology—more specifically, “public sociology” for Burawoy—is to be the defender of civil society, then what are the weapons and what are the costs if such a defense fails? I attempt to answer this question on Burawoy’s terms by exploring “Sociology as a Vocation” from the standpoint of ethnography as a weapon for civil society’s defense. Burawoy categorizes two types of public sociologists/ethnographers. First, there are those who pursue the “traditional” approach by disseminating information through trade press books, newspapers, periodicals, social media, and so forth. Second, there are those who take the “organic” approach by focusing on face-to-face interaction with a multiplicity of publics such as community organizations, hospitals, schools, trade unions, social movements, and the like.

Ethnography, as public sociology, comes with a number of caveats. First, ethnography as public sociology must be accessible to the multiple competing and conflicting publics that make up civil society. Second, ethnography must be written in a way that eschews jargon, while simultaneously not compromising its status as social science. Third, the

universities where most ethnographers work are now, more than ever, subject to marketization, the commodification of knowledge, and the disappearance of state funding. In addition, changing requirements for tenure and promotion, such as journal articles and other professional writings strictly targeted to academics, take precedence. Collectively, social forces have changed the ways that ethnographers work, as well as how they must now think about the role and relevance of ethnography, as public sociology, for the defense of civil society (see Fine and Hancock, forthcoming, for an elaboration of the changing conditions upon which ethnographers now work). A fourth and final factor to consider is the mass media. Once an ethnography has been produced, what happens to it when it circulates and is consumed in society? As Burawoy cautions:

To sustain a presence in the public sphere, sociology has to compete with corporate interests and powerful media hostile to its message as well as with other disciplines, notably economics, political science, and psychology, that are far more consonant with the reigning common sense. (p. 390)

Ethnography can be distorted by replacing the original work with someone else’s summary, taken out of context, or conveyed through a partial or piecemeal perspective. This confluence of factors makes ethnography a dangerous venture, because in making sociology accessible, one can easily fall into the traps of either sanitizing and romanticizing people or, conversely, pandering to public stereotypes and portraying the dominated as pathological. As a result, whether intentional or unintentional, ethnography can be put into the service of perpetuating the very inequality and domination social science seeks to unmask. Therefore, it is not just the production of ethnography, it is also the circulation and consumption of the work that appear to be completely beyond the ethnographer’s control.

By taking up “Sociology as a Vocation,” ethnography can find its place and become

a weapon for public sociology. By undertaking an organic approach to ethnography, we must seek to create a dialogue between the people we study and ourselves. Here we work collectively trying to understand social life, even if the people we study are vastly different from us. By working organically we seek to write ethnography in ways that will be recognizable and resonate with the very people about whom the ethnography was written. In doing so, we must work together, so the people studied become invested in the ways their worlds are represented and therefore will defend themselves when called into question or distorted by others. We must work together to collectively become vigilant in the ways that mass media circulate and represent ethnographic work, as well as to our own practices of representation, narrative style, relating to our subjects, and defining our point of view within the field while undertaking our ethnographic work.

"Sociology as a Vocation" is not simply an appeal for public sociology; it is the driving

disposition required to defend civil society, and ethnography is a weapon to wield in its defense. "Sociology as a Vocation" reminds us that in the production of knowledge the ethnographer must remember that he is just as much a part of the world as the people the ethnographer studies, and the people the ethnographer studies must remember they are as much a part of civil society as the ethnographer. As Burawoy reminds us, we must make a commitment to public sociology to defend civil society, but there is no guarantee to securing that defense. We must also remember that without that commitment to defend civil society for us all, the people the ethnographer studies and the ethnographer himself may end up cultivating their own social obsolescence.

Reference

Fine, Gary Alan, and Black Hawk Hancock. "The Ethnographer at Work." *Qualitative Research*, forthcoming.

ERRATUM

Hancock, Blackhawk. 2016. "Comment: Civil Society Must Be Defended: A Reply to Michael Burawoy's 'Sociology as a Vocation' from the Standpoint of Ethnography." *Contemporary Sociology* 45(5):675–76. (Original DOI: 10.1177/0094306116664525)

In this article, the author's name and contact information were not listed. It should have appeared as follows:

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This has been corrected in the most recent online version.