

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY: INTERNATIONAL MODELS AND RUSSIAN VIEWS

Editorial note

The following virtual round-table discussion grew out of a seminar that took place in Saint Petersburg in September 2007. Michael Burawoy, who has spearheaded the debate on public sociology in the United States and globally in recent years, presented his ideas to a Russian audience. The seminar took place in the midst of what has become known as the “student revolt” at Moscow State University’s sociology department, and several of the student leaders took part in the debate. For the written version of the discussion, I suggested that Burawoy concentrate on different national types of sociology and offer his interpretation of the current state of Russian sociology in the context of public sociologies around the world.

For *Public Sociology*, Burawoy’s 2004 presidential address at the American Sociological Association’s annual convention, has been translated and has already generated some discussion in Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2008). However, I felt it would be more productive to ask Burawoy, who has studied the Russian transformation and co-written several papers with Russian colleagues, to address a Russian audience directly and discuss the case of Russian sociology in international context. We then asked a cross-section of Russian sociologists to comment on Burawoy’s paper. Some of them participated in the original 2007 round table, others did not. Most are based in Russia, including several important regional centers, but two of our participants work at German institutions. In terms of their affiliations, both universities and research-only state institutions are represented, and so are the new independent research centers, as well as OD, the group of undergraduate students that coordinated the “revolt” of 2007–8. Discussants were given the choice of answering some or all of our questions (published here following the original paper), or commenting on Burawoy’s paper without regard to them. Their comments display a wide variety of views on public sociology and on the utility of the concept for Russia. For background on some of the organizations and individuals mentioned in the responses, see my introduction, the Documents section, and Alexander Bikbov’s paper, all in this issue of *Laboratorium*.

The editors hope the discussion will not end here. In a future issue, we plan to extend the debate, on the one hand, to colleagues from a range of foreign countries and, on the other hand, to invite comments from colleagues in other disciplines. By doing so, we hope to provide international and interdisciplinary perspectives on the difficulties experienced by Russian sociology in general, and public sociology in particular.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Michael Burawoy distinguishes between professional, critical, policy, and public sociology, based on the main tasks and publics of sociological knowledge. Is this typology helpful in understanding the current state of Russian sociology? How are these four types correlated in Russia?

2. What encourages and what hinders the development of sociology and, more broadly, the social sciences in Russia? Are these factors peculiarly Russian?

3. Based on your view of the main professional tasks of sociologists in present-day Russian society, how do you see the tasks and limits of public sociology in Russia today? How do these tasks correlate with the “public” versions of neighboring disciplines such as political science, economics, anthropology, or history?
4. Some scholars explain the lack of public sociology in Russia by pointing to the inadequate institutionalization and professionalization of social science. Do you agree?
5. Could you name any Russian sociologists or organizations who vividly personify each of the types of sociology that Michael Burawoy identifies, or perhaps several types at once? What kind of sociology does your own work represent, and if it belongs to several types, how do you combine these types in your work?
6. Are there any lessons to be learned for public sociology from the closure of the old VTsIOM (the Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion) in 2003, the student revolt at Moscow State University’s sociology department in 2007–8, or the closure of the European University at Saint Petersburg in February–March 2008?
7. Do you believe that the current state of Russian sociology differs radically from configurations in other countries—not just global centers such as the United States or France, but also countries of the Global South or other post-Soviet states? Can sociology remain national at a time when both academia and society are becoming increasingly globalized, and many Russian sociologists participate in comparative research projects and/or publish their work abroad?

REFERENCES

- Iarskaia-Smirnova, E., and P. Romanov, eds. 2008. *Sotsial'naiia politika v sovremennoi Rossii: reformy i povsednevnost'*. Moscow: TsPGI; Variant.