

# PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL SOCIOLOGISTS: IN SEARCH OF A NEW UTOPIA

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Among the many questions it raises, Michael Burawoy's article confronted me with the problem of the disciplinary regime and with public sociology as a disciplinary project. Given the present state of the social sciences, should we try to adhere to a logic of fundamental disciplinary distinctions and build borders between disciplines? Or does "publicness" on the contrary take us into a new shared space where science is not anxious about losing its expert status or its claim to expert knowledge? These questions concern our relations with other disciplines (such as economics, political science, anthropology, and history) and other fields (art, mass media), as well as those with "the public," our community, or civil society. Let me dwell on the latter set of relationships in some detail and examine them in the context of Burawoy's model of the four kinds of sociological labor.

To my mind, what makes his scheme vulnerable is that it portrays sociology only from the perspective of the discipline itself. Different sociologies are identified based on two key questions: "Knowledge for whom?" and "Knowledge for what?" The assumption is that only sociologists can and do produce knowledge. This limitation finds its justification in the need to establish and strengthen a disciplinary regime, as Burawoy convincingly demonstrates in his article. At the same time, it seems to me that, by its very public nature, the project of public sociology testifies to the futility of this intention. It washes away the foundations of the fortress of sociology; it goes beyond the boundaries established by the discipline and by science in general (in its canonical modern form): Public sociology is a media product, a variety of social activism, an art form, a lifestyle (Omel'chenko 2008). It thrusts the sociologist into "alien" spaces, where he is no longer the sole subject and actor, but enters into a relationship with others. In addition to the broad discussion among sociologists<sup>1</sup> on the public nature, activism, and professionalism of their discipline (Romanov and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2008; Zdravomyslova 2008; Alekseev 2008), the debate on public sociology should include non-sociologists. Otherwise "sociologists' dialogue with society" threatens to turn into a monolog by experts who are primarily preoccupied with the consistence, quality, and success of their own research project<sup>2</sup>.

I would go as far as to make a provocative suggestion on how to strengthen the "unprofessional" aspect of the discussion: Let us radicalize Burawoy's "American utopia, formulated as the antithesis to 'professional sociology'" by creating a "public sociology" without professional sociologists.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider the case of the public protests staged by students from Moscow State University's sociology department. If we ask "Knowledge for whom?" or "The results of the protests for whom?" we will realize that this entire endeavor (for all its publicity and for all the involvement of the public) was above all about the sociological community itself and about issues of sociological professionalism.

<sup>2</sup> It would be a pity if this discussion were limited to sociologists talking about the weakness of civil society in Russia and its inability to take an active part in the project of public sociology.

This idea was inspired by Michael Gondry's film *Be Kind Rewind* (2008). In this movie, two ordinary American guys from a video rental store produce remakes of well-known films, with themselves as the directors, actors, and crew. Unexpectedly, their films become highly successful in their town, prompting a majority of townspeople to take part in the production. Within a few weeks, they produce a movie about their own town, rewriting (or inventing) its history in the process. The very idea may seem absurd in an era of professional cinema and a highly developed film industry. But the movie brilliantly illustrates the idea of a total "public" cinema: the public itself writes the script, creates the costumes and set, makes the movie, and then watches it. As Gondry says about the idea behind his movie:

It comes from a utopia ... a belief I have that people can create their own entertainment. I always wanted to create this community that would come and tell their own story, shoot it – and watch them. The idea is to not have one entity who creates the work, the project, and another entity who consumes it; the idea is people create their own work, like somebody cultivating his garden. (Gondry 2008)

I became interested in thinking about a similar project for public sociology or, if we abandon the logic of disciplinary regimes, for public social research or public social knowledge<sup>3</sup>. This project, which may seem utopian at first sight, evokes a society where non-sociologists engage in "sociology," where they "remake" or "rewrite" sociological research in their own ways, create their own research projects, criticize each other and professional sociologists, study themselves, and then work on changing and improving their own lives. I must confess that I would find such a society very congenial.

The idea of getting people to become active and participate in a research project is not new. We may recall how anthropologists taught "natives" how to use cameras and produce their own footage. The main question, however, concerns the extent to which sociologists themselves participate in these activities. Can a community dispense entirely with professional researchers, with their guidance, teaching, and advice? Will sociologists be able to get off their high horse and accept members of the community as researchers?

I recall colleagues from the *Region* Center in Ulyanovsk mentioning how their informants were eager to become sociologists and record interviews. The research subjects were convinced that they would be able to obtain information that was out of reach for professional sociologists. This example makes me believe that my utopia may one day turn into reality if we as professional sociologists manage to "seduce" the public into social research by our sociological curiosity, reflexivity, critical mindset—our whole way of life. We must learn to share the secret that sociology as a lifestyle can yield great pleasure. If we succeed in this, then maybe the community will want to tell its own story, study itself, understand itself. Or maybe it won't. But that will be its own choice.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that I would not want this project to be interpreted as a threat to the existence and authority of professional sociology. In my mind, it would be a wonderful alternative that would not destroy but rather strengthen sociology and increase its professionalism, because we will acquire an interlocutor interested in the same things as us, prepared to criticize our conclusions, present its own interpretations, and willing not only to listen to us, but also to talk to us.

*Authorized translation from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch*

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