

the minds of policy actors, the more we might hope that our expertise will be in demand by the policy world – perhaps by serving in an administration, working as a policy advisor, or participating on a high-profile commission. When this happens, I hope sociology as a discipline will encourage, applaud, and reward these moves, even if considerable – and deserved – ambivalence remains about whether comparative historical sociology can or should change the world.

Strategies for saving the world

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"Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Marx, *11th thesis on Feuerbach*, 1845.

"If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life." Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

Thesis 11 and Thoreau's distaste for do-gooders represent polar markers for a discussion of intentional efforts to positively transform the social world. Thoreau's intellectual descendants are less numerous, but they may more thoroughly share their forbearer's conviction, while the confidence of those hoping to use Marxist theory to change the world has been shaken by the onslaught of history. The endurance of Thoreau's perspective in modern social science is nicely exemplified by James Scott's *Seeing Like a State*, with its famous subtitle – "How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed."¹

The debate can also be turned on its head, making the question not whether comparative historical sociology might destroy or save the world, but rather whether trying to save the world might destroy comparative historical sociology. This might be considered a more immediate concern. Comparative historical sociology's likelihood of having a significant impact on the transformation of global society (at least in the short run) is small, whereas one can easily imagine a world in which sociology (especially comparative historical sociology) is reduced to a position that echoes its status in the dark days of the mid-twentieth century Soviet Union.

My own position is that efforts to save the world, properly understood and strategized, are not a threat to comparative historical sociology and, in some contexts, might even contribute to creating a more sociology-friendly environment. It would be quixotic in any case to try to extract the "save the world gene" from the intellectual DNA of most sociologists (including those who share James Scott's antipathy to the efforts of others to save the world). Trying to suppress this propensity or pretend it doesn't (or shouldn't) exist is probably more dangerous to sociology than trying to figure out how to make the best of it. There are many ways to use sociology to try to save the world. Some are much more misguided than others. If we can't stop sociologists from trying to save the world, we should think about what kinds of strategies are more promising.

I will begin by borrowing some ideas from Michael Burawoy. Burawoy creates four inter-related ideal types of sociology: public, policy, professional and critical. He doesn't denigrate any of the four, but public sociology is clearly his preferred vehicle for sociology's "saving the world."² The key is establishing a dialogic relation with "publics," which is to say constituencies outside of academe.³ The

connection may be simply that publics read and engage in conversations about the issues and theories raised by “public sociologists” (what Burawoy calls “traditional public sociology”). More interesting is “organic public sociology” “in which sociologists work in close connection with a “visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public” creating [2005:9] “a dialogic relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table” (Burawoy 2005: 9). Typical publics might be “a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations.” Burawoy’s conception of “organic public sociology” elevates sociologists to co-equal status with collective political actors trying to “save the world.” At the same time, Burawoy argues that the interaction of publics and sociologists creates possibilities for “mutual education” that enable organic public sociology to enhance sociology as an intellectual endeavor, regardless of its efficacy in saving the world.

The plot thickens further when we add “policy” sociology, which is “sociology in the service of a goal defined by a client.” Here Burawoy sees sociologists as having more of a subordinate than a co-equal role: “Policy sociology’s *raison d’être* is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached” (Burawoy 2005: 9). Sociology becomes a handmaiden to “saving the world” rather than a co-equal partner and risks becoming an instrument of groups that are not saving the world at all.

Despite his limited enthusiasm for policy sociology, Burawoy remains steadfast in defending the value of sociology’s engagement with publics outside of academe, asserting that “few would argue for a hermetically sealed discipline, or defend pursuing knowledge simply for knowledge’s sake,” and in arguing that “[t]o defend engaging extra-academic

audiences, whether serving clients or talking to publics, is not to deny the dangers and risks that go with it, but to say that it is necessary despite or even because of those dangers and risks.” In short, Burawoy constructs a conceptual frame in which the essence of a sociological project of saving the world is building connections with constituencies beyond sociology and collaborating with them in the construction of an intellectual and political agenda.⁴

While he does not disparage the value of the more inwardly looking professional and critical sociology, directly engaging “counter-publics” with whom collaborative relationships are possible is clearly Burawoy’s preferred mode of saving the world. I am happy to sign on to this program, but I would like to see a wider definition of the “publics” with whom “organic” as opposed to “traditional” public sociology relationships are possible.

In particular, I think that many groups who would appear in Burawoy’s framework to be available only as “clients” for “policy” sociology are in fact “publics,” people who are engaged in conversations with each other and with whom sociologists can collaborate in the construction of new frameworks and understandings. Expanding our vision of the potential interlocutors for “organic public sociology” is important in a variety of substantive realms, but none more than one of the central topics of comparative historical sociology: the role of the state and the consequences of the evolution of this role for social transformation.

Burawoy implies that policy makers or political leaders will define the goals of sociological analysis in advance, thereby short-circuiting the interaction as “a dialogue, a process of mutual education.” States may indeed employ sociologists and pre-define intellectual agendas, but the inhabitants of the state are a

variegated group. Some may be “counter-publics” within the state in search of ideas and information that will legitimate alternative projects.

I would argue that key subsets of people working within state apparatuses see themselves as beleaguered minorities in search of allies, not just for political support but as collaborators in the mutual construction of new understandings and interpretations. For example, for those working inside the state unconvinced that restructuring policy to give more power to markets is a good way to save the world, the kinds of counter-narratives that comparative historical sociology has developed are attractive. Figuring out ways to translate these narratives into practical initiatives is a potential collaborative project.

In my own research on the computer industry in Brazil (Evans, 1995), I found exactly this sort of “counter-public” both within the state apparatus and connected to it. My dialogues with them shaped my understanding of the process of technological change that was going on in Brazil at the time and the ideas that were part of these dialogues were in turn employed in debates within this “public” and between them and their adversaries. Obviously, the structural forces shaping the evolution of the global computer industry were more powerful than the narratives of this minority of local policy makers, but the Brazilian computer industry still ended up looking different because of their efforts than it would have otherwise.

None of this is to deny that the impact of ideas on larger processes must always be assumed to be extremely modest at best and hard to assess even then, even if ideas are embedded in a process of organic public sociology. This doesn’t mean abandoning hope that ideas will have an impact or giving up engaging whatever publics take an interest in them. For every

comparative historical sociologist who decides that trying to create dialogic relations with even sympathetic publics is too uncertain or unrewarding, there will be plenty of other happy intellectual warriors eager to engage, often in pursuit of very different agendas. The story of the construction of neoliberal ideas and the role of these ideas as handmaidens in the transformation of the late 20th century is such an obvious example that it has become a cliché. Hayek and Friedman labored for years building

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ties with their own set of publics in what seemed like very unfruitful intellectual vineyards before the confluence of structural change enabled them to play a role in “saving the world” from Keynesianism and the welfare state (Evans and Sewell 2013).⁵

Some would argue that the apparent role of neoliberal theorizing was chimerical and that the shift to more market-dominated logics was over-determined by the resurgent political power of capital and its political allies, but this road has serious pitfalls. It leads to a position in which ideas play no role – not even that of the flapping butterfly in chaos theory – in the actual processes of change. We may be

skeptical regarding the importance of the role of ideas in transformative change, but when it comes to issues like the role of the state, it seems very unlikely that ideas are irrelevant.

James Scott, no friend of “schemes to improve the human condition” and their embodiment in the structures of the state, makes a strong case for the role of ideas. He pins the blame for the construction of these misguided schemes and their subsequent failure on the attractiveness of simplifying “high modernist” ways of seeing the world and the predilection of state bureaucrats to adopt and oppose them. Scott would disavow aspirations to “save the world,” but, while he has been content to restrict himself to traditional public sociology, he has been amazingly effective as a traditional public sociologist. *Seeing Like a State* has amassed a readership of many thousands. If it is hard to assess the role of the ideas that it puts forward in dislodging the hegemony of “high modernism,” it is equally hard to believe that Scott’s incisively formulated critique has not played some role.

I have tried to build an argument with two facets, using the substantive issue of the role of the state as a concrete fulcrum. One facet supports Burawoy’s argument that organic public sociology is the most promising mode for sociologists trying to save the world, but argues that we should be more catholic in our consideration of the groups that are potential “publics.” The example of debates on the role of the state illustrates why a broad definition of potential publics is particularly important for some of the issues most central to comparative historical sociology.

The second facet of the argument circles back to the more basic question of whether any strategy that relies on ideas as instruments for saving the world is credible, suggesting that the burden of proof falls on those that would dismiss this possibility. But, this circling back

should not be allowed to distract from the fundamental point that ideas without publics lack effectiveness, just as publics without a coherent set of ideas to work with are likely to flounder in their efforts to save the world.

Let me close with an example of a broad-gauged project aimed at building publics both inside and outside of academe that takes Burawoy’s ideas a step further. Burawoy suggests that sociology can participate in the creation as well the transformation of publics. He also suggests that our students are “our first and captive public,” drawing attention to the fact that creating active dialogues among sociologists themselves should be an important complement to collaboration with publics outside of academe.

The Scholars Strategy Network (SSN) is the brainchild of a comparative historical sociologist (Theda Skocpol) and offers a concrete architecture for the pursuit of public sociology.⁶ It begins from a reconstruction of “traditional public sociology.” The reconstruction has two faces. First, all members produce “briefs” – that is, short (2 pages), clearly written, jargon free expositions summarizing a key aspect of their research – that are available on the website. Collectively, the briefs, which will soon approach a thousand in number, represent an innovative way of doing “traditional public sociology,” but they are also embedded in a concrete organizational structure that creates the possibility of organic public sociology.

The SSN’s 650 members⁷ are organized into more than two-dozen local chapters or “regional networks.” SSN chapters not only give members in a particular locale a chance to collaborate with each other but also generate opportunities for scholars to engage directly with a variety of local publics around issues on which research interests and expertise intersect with the concerns and agendas of local groups.

These publics range from local groups organizing undocumented, informal workers to congressional staffers looking for research that is relevant to policy debates.

Will the SSN be able to mitigate the exclusion of sociology and other social sciences from participation in policy debates and increase the ability of local publics to marshal social science ideas on their behalf? Comparative historical sociologists will appreciate the impossibility of making this judgment on the basis of the SSN's short, five-year life span. But, the SSN certainly illustrates the continued creative evolution of efforts to better deploy sociological knowledge in the service of saving the world.

Endnotes

1. I am not going to worry here about defending disciplinary boundaries or excluding non-sociologists. Scott's work, for example, is completely relevant to comparative historical sociologists, regardless of the fact that his degree and his academic appointment are in Political Science.
2. Burawoy has written dozens of articles on public sociology. To simplify the discussion, I am drawing only on the published version of his original ASA Presidential address "For Public Sociology" (Burawoy 2005).
3. "Public sociology brings sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation" (Burawoy, 2005:7).
4. To be fair, Burawoy (2005:10) is insistent on the necessity of strong norms and practices internal to the discipline: "There can be neither policy nor public sociology without a *professional sociology* that supplies true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks. Professional sociology is not the enemy of policy and public sociology but the *sine qua non* of their existence—providing both legitimacy and expertise for policy and public sociology."
5. For a fascinating and original "revisionist" version of how a counter-intuitive set of publics in support of neoliberalism was constructed, see Johanna Bockman's *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (2011).
6. See: <http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org>. Once again, disciplinary and sub-disciplinary affiliations are beside the point – SSN membership includes a gamut of

social scientists.

7. The exact number of members and chapters is a moving target with more members joining each month and new chapters being formed.

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How comparative historical sociology can change the world (for the better)

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I take the topic of this symposium to mean, How can Comparative Historical research (CH) change the world for the *better*, and I will understand "better" to mean "freer of social domination and injustice." So I will take my remit to address how CH research can help move the world toward more just and humane social arrangements.

Of course CH can contribute a great deal to the pursuit of social justice. There are three questions involved here – what is the relation between historical research and social change, second, should it pursue such ends, and third, how might it effectuate them? As to the first, it has a great deal to contribute, but not