Sociology in the World:

PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS, PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

Those who have the good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of the world is at stake.

Pierre Bourdieu

To know and not to act is not to know.

Wang Yang-ming, Chinese philosopher (1472—1529)

Those who have the privilege to know have the duty to act.

Albert Einstein

The Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it.

Karl Marx

My hope and wish is that one day, formal education will pay attention to what I call education of the heart. Just as we take for granted the need to acquire proficiency in the basic academic subjects, I am hopeful that a time will come when we can take it for granted that children [and others] will learn, as part of the curriculum, the indispensability of inner values: love, compassion, justice, and forgiveness."

-His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

INTRODUCTION

There are at least two ways to think of sociology. In one, sociology is a profession, a career, a way systematically to plumb the depths of social organization, social history, social psychology, social class, women’s studies, medical sociology, criminology, and all the other topics traditionally taken up by sociologists. Compelling theories, rigorous methodologies, and substantive findings and insights open countless doors and windows into the wonders of how society is organized, what are its dynamics and contradictions, and how does it change. This is fundamentally an intellectual approach to society with all the gratifications and excitements that allows.
Another way to think of sociology is to define it as the discipline that investigates why people suffer more than they need to and what can be done to reduce that suffering. There are all but obvious radical undercurrents to seeing sociology as having this purpose.

Think of especially prominent public intellectuals like Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, C. Wright Mills, Howard Zinn. Roy writes of capitalism, the role of the United States is sustaining its injustices and cruelties, the social class and cultural contradictions that define Indian society, and more. Chomsky, the most frequently cited academic in the world, writes voluminously about how class and culture operate in the United States. He singlehandedly drew the world’s attention to years of Indonesian brutalities in East Timor in such a way as to support what became a successful movement to free East Timor from Indonesia altogether. Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* is already a classic primer on the politics and economics underlying climate change. Her earlier work, *Shock Doctrine*, revealed intricate ways in which power is exercised over unsuspecting publics. C. Wright Mills drastically changed the way American sociologists and intellectuals more generally understood elites to work in this society. Until Mills, social class in American sociology looked at status and mobility rather than at power and the class basis of its dynamics. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* sells more copies every year than the year before. Zinn did not invent social history, but he opened the way for younger historians and other academics to shift attention from regimes, wars, and elites to the structures of inequality and the social realities of American Indians, African Americans, workers, and women. This book became a model for how to do social history.

What do these public intellectuals have in common? They use their intellectual training and apparatuses to reveal to the public—not only their professional colleagues—the facts and dynamics of domination, exploitation, and possible social transformation. More succinctly, they take structured violence as the focus of their inquiries, guided by questions about how structured violence and physical violence as well can be understood, exposed, reduced, and eventually overcome. More to the point, for purposes of this course, they all anchor their work in rather sophisticated sociological analysis, relying extremely heavily on the nature and dynamics of social class, race theory, and feminist theory.

Public intellectuals in American sociology and some of their European forebears include Stanley Aronowitz, Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, Judith Blau, Michael Burawoy, Nancy Chodorow, Patricia Hill Collins, Gordon Fellman, Herbert Gans, Naomi Gerstel, Todd Gitlin, Helen Merrell Lynd, Robert Lynd, Karl Marx, Orlando Patterson, David Riesman, Juliet Schor, Theda Skocpol, Judith Stacey, Max Weber, Cornel West, William Julius Wilson, and Alan Wolfe.

From thirteen years ago, here is Herbert Gans’s succinct introduction to public sociology from “Footnotes,” a newsletter of the American Sociological Association.
More of Us Should Become Public Sociologists

Public intellectuals (i.e., the scholars, critics, and others who speak to the general public on topical matters in which the public may or should be interested) play a crucial role in modern society. They are not only a bridge between intellectuals, academics, and the rest of society, but they also offer society at least a sampling of intellectual commentary on issues of the day.

Public intellectuals are usually recruited from among scholars who have already gained a reputation from well-received and widely read publications. They must, however, also be willing and able to communicate with the general (read educated) public, have ideas and opinions that they want to share, and do so in clear, jargon-free English. Although anyone can nominate oneself to be a public intellectual, they are appointed by editors, producers and similar decision-makers in the news and other mass media, at the major lecture bureaus and the like. Audiences are the ultimate gatekeeper, however, for public intellectuals must be willing to speak to topics that interest them, and with frames and values that are comprehensible and acceptable to them.

Public intellectuals are appointed at several levels. Many public intellectuals probably serve mainly as quote suppliers, offering observations, pithy comments or soundbites to journalists who need an expert voice to add credibility to their own writing. At the next level are people who regularly publish op ed pieces in national newspapers. Some may then be invited to appear on public television or public radio, and to write articles for such “class” media as The New Yorker or The Atlantic Monthly. A few are even appointed as cable news regulars or newspaper columnists and find their books appearing on the New York Times best seller list. No one ever receives tenure as a public intellectual, however, because very few are able to be relevant and credible on every new issue that emerges.

Sociologists have not often been appointed as public intellectuals. Lists of the leading public intellectuals are as suspect as those of the best films or racehorses, but a recent list of 550 public intellectuals, alive and dead, included about 30 sociologists. (The list, Public Intellectuals, was compiled by Richard Posner and published in 2001 by Harvard University Press.) Considering the small number of sociologists in the world, that proportion is reasonably respectable, and the list included such influential sociologists as Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, William Julius Wilson, and, of course, Max Weber.

Another Posner list, of the 100 top public intellectuals (as measured by amount of news media exposure) was troubling, however, for it included only one sociologist, Alan Wolfe, and he came in at No. 97. In effect, the keepers of the “public intellectual gates” ignore or reject us, and we should do the needed research to find out why.

Hypotheses are easy. Most public intellectuals are literary folk or historians, who are trained to range far and wide across the disciplines. Public intellectuals probably have to address political and economic issues more than any other, and sociologists lose out on that score too. They also lose out (and this is more serious), either because their ideas are not sufficiently distinctive from those of journalists and literary generalists or because the ideas are too relativistic or constructionist. Unfortunately, such ideas still seem to scare too many journalists and audience members. Sociologists as a whole are also more liberal than other academics, but the news media tend unfairly to prefer center and conservative voices. In any case, we are not often asked to perform as public intellectuals, are thus not very visible, and are therefore not asked.

Public Sociologists and What They Can Do
I see nothing on the horizon to suggest that our invisibility will soon end, but I think there is also a better, if less prestigious role for us, which I call public sociologist. A public sociologist is a public intellectual who applies sociological ideas and findings to social (defined broadly) issues about which sociology (also defined broadly) has something to say. Public intellectuals comment on whatever issues show up on the public agenda; public sociologists do so only on issues to which they can apply their sociological insights and findings. They are specialist public intellectuals (to borrow a Posner phrase).

Actually, we are all public sociologists manqué when we teach undergraduates, for college prepares them to become members of the educated general public. The public sociology I have in mind comes in four varieties, of which the first and most important is speaking out and writing whenever an issue shows up on the public agenda to which we can contribute.

We know a lot about social problems, and about the sociology of personal issues people worry about, for example, sickness and aging. Sometimes, public sociologists add background or context to stories that appear in the news media, or try to explain phenomena that news stories can only describe. Public sociologists can be particularly useful in debunking the conventional wisdom and popular myths (e.g., that teenage pregnancy is a major cause of poverty). They can reframe social phenomena in helpful ways (e.g., to point out that the family is changing, not declining). Public sociologists can indicate that two or three school shootings are not a trend, and that the explanations for the shootings are better sought in school power structures and student hierarchies than in “violence” in “the media.”

Although public sociology of this kind already exists, it must still be institutionalized as a legitimate way of doing sociology. People who want to be public sociologists probably have to begin small (e.g., as quote suppliers, at first perhaps only for the local newspaper). However, even this humble task offers an opportunity to show that sociology has something to say. At times, being useful to journalists may even overcome their bias against the discipline—and sociology’s bias against journalists—particularly when they ask interesting questions we should be thinking about.

Supplying quotes is not enough, however; public sociologists must also write or have something to say every time events justify a sociological analysis or commentary. Public sociologists should not try to be journalists, but they can write or speak clearly, concisely, with examples, but without scholarly qualification. Scientists’ taboos against addressing the general public must be overcome, and a thick skin is needed when a half hour’s talking to a journalist is boiled down to a single sentence or a ten-second soundbite in the story. Being misquoted is even harder to take, but a politely firm letter to the offender sometimes results in an apology or explanation.

The next two forms of public sociology involve popularization. One is the popular (non-textbook) treatment of a topic or a set of events of widespread interest—like recent changes in American adolescent life. Unfortunately, sociologists do not often write popular sociological treatments of important topics or events. They leave such books mainly to freelance writers, who may not find sociology relevant.

The other form of popularization is a survey of the ideas and findings of a major field in the discipline, say criminology or social psychology. (Undergraduate teaching and textbook writing are examples of this second kind of popularization, but both are addressed to captive audiences.) Right now, there is no market for this kind of popularization because sociology lacks the characteristic appeal of the natural sciences and medicine, both of which can depend on a stable of expert popularizers.
The fourth kind of public sociology is a research report written for the lay public, either as an original study or as a popular rewrite of a scholarly monograph. Ethnographers have been writing the former at least since Helen and Robert Lynd’s *Middletown* (Harcourt Brace, 1929); Robert T. Michael et al., *Sex in America* (Little Brown, 1994), is a good example of the latter.

**Why Public Sociology?**
Public sociology of all kinds is badly needed. It can demonstrate that sociology adds distinctive insights and findings; increase the discipline’s relevance by forcing it to analyse current events and issues; and enhance sociology’s visibility. More important, public sociology is a way of telling the general public what we do and how we are spending public money. If we do it well, public sociology may help to attract more and better students, increase research funds, and earn us public support when sociology is under attack from hostile ideological and political organizations. Perhaps someday, public sociologists will even be properly represented among the 100 most visible public intellectuals.

Herbert Gans, [http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/julyaugust02/fn10.html](http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/julyaugust02/fn10.html)
*Herbert Gans is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and a past president of ASA. He received the ASA’s Award for Public Understanding of Sociology in 1999.*

**LEARNING GOALS**

- To distinguish among career, teaching, and activist aspects of sociology
- To determine students’ own understanding of reasons for sociological inquiry and differentiate, where appropriate, between intellectual and policy implications
- To differentiate among intellectual, political, and emotional dimensions of sociological inquiry
- To consider broadly the role of academic inquiry in society as well as in academic professions
- To learn how to question the motives and work of public intellectuals
- To analyze the relationship between the university, the work of public intellectuals, and the effects if any of that work on society beyond the university world

**BOOKS**

Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*
Stanley Aronowitz, *Taking It Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals*
Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*
Dan Clawson, et al, eds., *Public Sociology*
Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*
Robert Lynd, *Knowledge for What?*

**ARTICLES**

Michael Burawoy, “Facing an Unequal World”:
Michael Burawoy, For Public Sociology
file:///Users/gordonfellman/Downloads/Burawoy_For_Public_Sociology.pdf
Michael Burawoy, “The Public Sociology Wars”:
file:///Users/gordonfellman/Downloads/Burawoy,%20Public%20Sociology%20Wars.pdf


Mills from C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination:
file:///Users/gordonfellman/Downloads/Mills_The_Promise%20(1).pdf

READING ASSIGNMENTS

Week one, 1/15: introduction to the course

Week two, 1/19, 23:
Michael Burawoy, “Facing an Unequal World”:
http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Global%20Sociology/Facing%20an%20Unequal%20World_CS.pdf
Michael Burawoy, For Public Sociology
file:///Users/gordonfellman/Downloads/Burawoy_For_Public_Sociology.pdf
Michael Burawoy, “The Public Sociology Wars”:
file:///Users/gordonfellman/Downloads/Burawoy,%20Public%20Sociology%20Wars.pdf

Week three, 1/26, 29:

Response paper due 2/1: What have you learned already about public sociology? What reservations/limits do you see on what you have read about it so far?

Week four, 2/1, 5:
Stanley Aronowitz, Taking It Big: C. Wright Mills and the Making of Political Intellectuals, chs. 1-3.

Week five, 2/9, 12:
Aronowitz, chs. 4-8 plus Afterword: Mills Today; excerpt from C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination:
file:///Users/gordonfellman/Downloads/Mills_The_Promise%20(1).pdf

Vacation 2/15-19

Week six, 2/23, 26
Dan Clawson, et al, eds., *Public Sociology*, Introductory (articles by Robert Zussman and Joya Misra, and Michael Burawoy); Institutionalizing Public Sociology (articles by Alain Touraine, Sharon Hays, Judith Stacey, and Patricia Hill Collins)

**Week seven, 3/1, 4:**
Clawson, Politics and the Profession (William Julius Wilson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, Arthur Stinchcombe, Douglas Massey, and Frances Fox Piven); False Distinctions: Conceptual Reservations (Immanuel Wallerstein, Orlando Patterson, Andrew Abbott); Interdisciplinarity (Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Barbara Ehrenreich); and Rejoinder (Michael Burawoy)

Response paper due 3/8: Mills and the Clawson articles offer still more insights into concepts of and content of public sociology. What appeals to you about this so far? What reservations have you about it?

**Week eight, 3/8, 11:**
Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, Part One

**Week nine, 3/15, 18**
Klein, Part Two

**Week ten, 3/22 only**
Klein, Part Three

Response paper due 3/29. Name all the problems you have seen so far addressed by public sociologists. What differences do you guess their work has made in the “real world”?

**Week eleven, 3/29, 4/1:**
Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*

**Week twelve, 4/5, 8:**

**Week thirteen, 4/12, 15:**
Alexander, chs. 4-6.
Howard Zinn, *Some Truths Are Not Self-Evident: Essays in the Nation on Civil Rights, Vietnam, and “The War on Terror”* and Zinn film, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*

**Week fourteen, 4/19 only**

*Week fifteen, 5/2: last day of class.*

Miscellaneous communications and occasional additional articles and other items recommended (but usually not required) to be read will be sent by way of our course LATTE page.

**WRITTEN WORK**

1) Response papers are to focus and explore what we are learning. They are to be written with a partner. 3-4 pages seems about right, but you can ask permission to make them longer if you are moved to do so. These are to be discussions, analyses, insights, criticisms, questions, assessments, not book reports.
2) In pairs, write two articles and/or op-ed pieces for the Justice or The Hoot or any other print publication as a sociological analysis of some public issue with an eye toward a policy recommendation as a conclusion. Or write such a piece for an online site, such as the Huffington Post. Or for a print or on-line newspaper or magazine.
3) There will be a take-home final covering the central ideas of the readings and class discussions. The goal will be to integrate the course in ways that make sense to you. You can write this alone or with a partner.

**Grading criteria:**

1) Class attendance 10%
2) Participation 10%
3) Response papers 30%
4) “Field” assignment of two articles and/or op ed pieces 20%
4) Final integrating paper 30%

You are of course expected to be honest in all your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity.
If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see the instructor immediately.

Four-Credit Course (with three hours of class-time per week)

Success in this 4 credit hour course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.).