

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Nickel, Patricia Mooney.** 2012. *Public Sociology and Civil Society: Governance, Politics and Power*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. 171 pp. \$102.00 Hardcover (9781594519765)

**F**ormer American Sociological Association president Michael Burawoy's 2005 *American Sociological Review* analysis of the division of sociological labor of different types of sociology from professional, policy, critical leading to "public sociology" has stimulated an international debate that has spread through special issues and commentaries to international sociology in Great Britain, Portugal, Poland, Japan, Brazil and elsewhere including in the *Canadian Journal of Sociology*. But Burawoy did not coin the term public sociology for it was developed at length first in critical theorist Ben Agger's book *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts* (2000), a text that has largely been ignored during the public sociology wars that erupted as Burawoy promoted his public sociology campaign. Dr. Patricia Mooney Nickel's book *Public Sociology and Civil Society* (2012) builds on Agger's insights and her own readings of Foucault to intervene in the public sociology debates, ironically helping explain why Burawoy has been influential and Agger forgotten.

Nickel begins by introducing the public sociology debate in the context of larger scholarly discourses on civil society and governance. She then neatly summarizes what she calls the "Campaign for Public Sociology." At the core of her book, however, is her theoretically sophisticated critique of what she claims is Burawoy's "Ontological Fiction." Like many commentators on Burawoy's public sociology efforts, she is right to emphasize the fundamentally political nature of his interventions. Clearly the distinction between these four types of sociology is what Agger would call a "literary act" that serves a professional-political function in the discipline. Central to Burawoy's division of labour is the assumption that professional and policy sociologists are instrumental and critical and public sociologists are reflexive, a distinction that breaks down upon close examination. Nickel uses the original distinction between instrumental and reflexive knowledge developed by the Frankfurt School theorists Horkheimer and Adorno and Foucault's theories about governmentality to make

the case that despite Burawoy's Marxist history and leftist rhetoric, public sociology is largely an effort at legitimizing a sociological profession and discourse that institutionalizes itself in research universities by serving the interests of neo-liberal governance. Nickel draws on Agger's deconstruction of ASR type "scientific sociology," Timothy Luke's critical analysis of research universities and Dorothy Smith "institutional ethnography" to offer us a penetrating analysis of civil society, NGOs and the neo-liberal state. A number of Nickel's pieces have been published in the journal *Administrative Theory and Practice*, a scholarly outlet open to this kind of critical discourse analysis of what she calls the "rites of rule." The book pulls together this theoretical agenda and a number of case studies and connects it all to her critique of sociology, Burawoy and the public sociology campaign.

Nickel is a sophisticated social theorist and she scores some points. It is helpful to reflect on the roots of the critique of instrumental reason that Burawoy pulls together from the Weberian and critical theory tradition, something Nickel explicates with care. There is a danger that Burawoy's ideal types can suggest that critical sociology is not fully professional sociology and that public sociology is more reflexive than it often is in practice. And there is certainly a romantic and untheorized element to Burawoy's invoking of the concept of civil society. And it could be argued that the power of policy sociology in the American context comes at the expense of compromises with the state, as policy sociologists sell their research to clients funded by a government deeply implicated in a corporate order. But the most important point Nickel makes is that Burawoy's analysis of the divisions between professional, policy, critical and policy sociologies has no stable ontological status, but is a political project. Burawoy has a strong reputation as a bridge between the radical sociology of the 1960s and the sociological establishment in the American Sociological Association; it is impossible to understand the American debate without understanding the history of the political radical book writing culture of the Berkeley Sociology Department where Burawoy teaches. Burawoy's "For Public Sociology" manifesto is a political as well as analytic document that attempts to broker a peace treaty between the political radicals (at both the elite research institutions and non-elite teaching universities and colleges) with the establishment proponents of pure research and "science" oriented sociology who control the top sociology journals and thus the sociology labour market in the United States. Nickel is successful in exposing some of

the intellectual problems with this practical compromise that is not really about theory building or research but is designed to allow sociologists to work together and not fight among themselves excessively as was certainly the case in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, and here in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s.

But the core problem with *Public Sociology and Civil Society* is that unlike Burawoy's "For Public Sociology," Nickel's theoretical vision leaves us with a totally unrealistic political project that would leave sociology even more isolated in the modern research university than it is today. And despite Nickel's radical rhetoric her critique of neo-liberalism would have no practical political implications for those of us concerned with acting in the world, as Burawoy certainly is. Building on Agger's original analysis of public sociology, Nickel's deconstruction of Burawoy's flawed but productive and good faith effort to create space within sociology for critical and public sociology while preserving the discipline's professional core leaves us with much critique and no place to go. Agger and Nickel draw extensively on Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory, but say nothing about the fundamentally conservative political positions these two "critical theorists" both ended up taking when they returned to Germany during the Cold War. Radical "critical theory" rhetoric often hides and thus helps make possible dramatic moves to the political right as was certainly also the case with the *Telos* editor Paul Piccone whom Nickel draws upon and discusses. Not that there is anything wrong with being conservative, it is just that Nickel is so focused on texts that she says little about politics in the world outside of the academy. Burawoy has been attacked from the left for not being radical enough, and from the professional core of the discipline for excessively politicizing social science. From my perspective, sociology as a discipline and intellectual project should go in the opposite direction as both Nickel and Burawoy suggest, opening up our discussions to more not less conservative and liberal thinking, positioning ourselves as both theorists-researchers as well as scholarly honest brokers in the court of public opinion and politics. In that sense, both Burawoy and Nickel are excessively ideological, for they both stake out their political commitments without much concern with dialogue with political opponents. Yet for all the problems in Burawoy's theory, the debate he started has been enormously generative and productive, creating new research, energizing the discipline and allowing us to debate and refine our vision of the discipline outside of the excessive dominance of the American mainstream consensus. When the influence and con-

tribution of this debate is put up against Agger's version of public sociology, it becomes obvious why Agger's *Public Sociology: From Social Facts to Literary Acts* (2000) was forgotten; it leads to a dead-end nowhere in a hyper-theoretical academic ghetto, as does Nickel's book.

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