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The Contested Terrains of Public Sociology: Theoretical and Practical Lessons from the Movement to Defend Public Housing in Pre- and Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Abstract

In this article I argue professional and policy sociology are antagonistic, rather than compatible with the theory and practice of a critical, organic, public sociology in defense of human rights and social justice. Drawing upon my graduate school experience and relationship with New Orleans public housing movement, I show how practicing public sociology in various terrains required unmasking and opposing the apolitical pretenses of professional sociology and the agenda-setting of neoliberal government and corporate patrons of policy sociology. The current global economic crisis and assault on university budgets is strengthening the policy and professional sociology tendencies of the discipline. If public sociology is to have a future, its practitioners must immerse themselves as integral components of a working class, counterhegemonic challenge to global neoliberal capitalism, rather than play support roles for various foundation and NGO funded and directed single issue campaigns.

Keywords

Public sociology, New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, public housing

Over the last decade there has been increasing interest among sociologists in the United States in public sociology. Two recent American Sociological Association presidents used their position as a bully pulpit to promote and legitimate public sociology, while several prestigious journals dedicated editions to defining and debating its merits, and journals such as *Societies Without Borders* have emerged that provide an outlet for works in this tradition.¹ At the heart of what Gianpolo Baiocchi calls an 'organic, public sociology' are sociologists working in close collaboration with grass roots organizations such as labor unions, immigrant rights groups, and anti-gentrification neighborhood associations, in support of social justice and human rights

~103~

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(Baiocchi, 2005). Public sociology, particularly the organic variety, is consistent, therefore, with participant action research, whose key principle is that research inquiries must be 'done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them.' The mission of the public sociologist, or 'action researcher' is to 'take [their] cues - questions, puzzles and problems - from the perception' of the grass-roots groups with whom they are working (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 4). The goal of this democratically agreed upon research is to develop a plan of action to address a collectively identified unjust social arrangement. Fundamental to an effective action agenda is developing, or contributing to, a social movement that can transform consciousness and power relations.

Thus central to public sociology is its role in advancing and supporting emancipatory social movements that aim to ameliorate or radically transform unjust social structures and practices. But for public sociology to be of greater 'relevance to popular movements,' argues Michael Burawoy, a major theoretician and advocate of the tendency within the discipline, we need more 'concrete analysis of [its] successes and failure, limits and obstacles' (Burawoy, 2005, p. 385, emphasis added). Nonetheless, much of the literature on public sociology over the last decade has been at the theoretical level, with both proponents and detractors focused on defining and (de)-legitimizing this form of sociology. Relatively less attention has been given to case studies. This study aims to contribute to, and encourage, a 'practical turn' in public sociology through a theoretically-informed, autobiographical case study of practicing public sociology as a graduate student at Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, and during my early professional career, in the late 1990s and 2000s.

This concrete investigation of doing public sociology will be conducted at two levels of analysis. The first involves explaining the various terrains that I attempted to practice public sociology, including the levels of university-community relations, dissertating, publishing, academic conferences, and teaching. Informed by Mohammad Tamdgidi's emphasis on the centrality of the 'dialectics of personal troubles and public issues' in understanding the practice of public sociology, I am 'self-reflexive [about] my personal, private life' in this study (Tamdgidi, 2008, p. 140). I draw on my personal troubles and biographical trajectory to explain my initial entry into and continuing

~104~

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engagement with public sociology. The second level of analysis addresses, one, the distinction between traditional and organic public sociology, and, two, between public sociology and the policy, professional and critical components of the discipline. Policy sociology involves sociologists providing solutions to problems defined by a client, while the professional variety, directed to those in the discipline, encompasses the development of various research programs. My study questions Michael Burawoy's contention regarding the compatibility of the four forms of sociological labor. I find that in the various terrains analyzed in this study, the policy and professional faces of the discipline were not compatible, but rather in contradiction with the practice of public sociology. In contrast critical sociology, one that questions the dominant research foundations of professional sociology, is not only compatible, but a necessary and crucial addition to public sociology and its mission of empowering oppressed people and changing unjust social structures and practices.

Methodologically I employ an 'auto-ethnography,' or what some call a 'self-study,' research strategy. These 'insider case studies' are undertaken by what Schon calls a 'reflexive practitioner' who "learn to learn' about their practice and therefore become better practitioners' (Cited in Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 34). Yet, these studies not only, Herr and Anderson underscore, tell us 'how one practitioner went about learning his or her craft,' but also 'help generate important knowledge to be shared among practitioners' (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 34). Thus, the autoethnography method I employ helps achieve the central aim of this study: expanding the knowledge base among public sociologists so we can better support emancipatory social movements. I expand this knowledge base through one, identifying the variety of contexts that we can practice public sociology and the opportunities and constraints, successes and failures I encountered. Second, I highlight the threats policy and professional sociology pose to our attempts to ally with social movement, and explain the ways I managed these obstacles.

Personal Troubles and Public Sociology

Before entering Tulane University's graduate program in sociology in 1997 I had lived in New Orleans over a decade working with various labor, community and anti-intervention struggles. Working

~105~

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with predominantly low-income black communities - to fight rampant police brutality, to organize unions among low wage workers, and to beat back privatization efforts - educated this young, white activist about the realities of racialized U.S. capitalism and the various forms of resistance its victims have mounted. Thus, when I repaired to the university it was with the intention to reflect and study the movements I had been involved with, and the larger political - economic context in which they were embedded. Through a study of past and contemporary struggles - and continuing engagement with them - I hoped to contribute to a strengthening and rejuvenation of popular left challenges to the neoliberal agenda, particularly in the deeply racist way it was being played out in New Orleans. Indeed the desire to maintain a close connection between my theoretical concerns and their practical applications is what led me to pursue graduate school in New Orleans, rather than outside the city. Thus, in relationship to what Katz-Fishman and Scott have identified as the 'two paths to public sociology,' my initial entry point was that of 'social struggle and the desire to understand root systemic causes of the human degradation and destruction,' rather than through, primarily, the academy (Katz-Fishman and Scott, 2005, p. 372). The route I took also explains the variant of public sociology I was moving toward. Instead of 'traditional public sociology,' that engages publics through, primarily, writing a newspaper editorial on an issue of great public import, I was envisioning - without yet having a name for it - what has been termed, variously, 'organic,' 'counter-hegemonic,' or 'critical' public sociology. It is a version in which sociologists 'immerse themselves and their analysis in a social practice that embraces struggles and movements' (respectively, Burawoy, 2005, p. 7; Noy, 2007, p. 263; Baiocchi, 2005, p. 341; Katz-Fishman and Scott, 2005, p 373).

My desire to forge a critical, counter-hegemonic public sociology came into conflict with the conventional policy sociology being practiced in the department and university. In 1996 Tulane University signed an agreement with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) to oversee the operation of the local agency in lieu of a federal takeover. As part of this endeavor Tulane also received a multi-year grant - in addition to the \$2 million per year for loaning their top lawyer to oversee HANO - to conduct research on public housing and

~106~

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help 'to make public housing a transitory platform and promote economic self-sufficiency among residents' (Tulane 1996, p. 47; Arena 2007). The research project was led by the Sociology department, although faculty and students from across Tulane participated, as well as Xavier University, an historically African American institution. Consistent with policy sociology, the university and department were framing problems and proposing solutions consistent with the political agenda of their patron, HUD.² The latter's agenda was that of displacement, downsizing, and privatization, and how Tulane could help facilitate this politically volatile endeavor. Sociologists and other academics were certainly engaging a new 'public' (public housing residents), but as targets of a policy decided by their state sponsor, rather than as equal partners.

The clash between the policy sociology being practiced on one side, and my vision of a grass roots sociology, and personal experience with New Orleans African American public housing residents' long history of struggle on the other, created a personal crisis. Did I want to be associated with a department and colleagues that, from my critical analysis of political economy, were helping to facilitate and legitimate the neoliberal agenda as played out in public housing? What could and should I do? My first act was (a small) refusal - I declined a departmental offer to participate in the university-sponsored research of public housing residents. Second, as a part of public sociology's mission of searching out new 'publics,' I began informal conversations with fellow graduate students about the questionable ethics and politics of Tulane's work in public housing. We discussed issues central to public sociology - Who was setting the agenda? Whose interests were being served? To what ends were sociologists and sociological knowledge being used? (Burawoy, 2005, p. 380). In effect, we were questioning and unmasking the politics integral to a supposedly apolitical, value free professional and policy sociology.

Some students had misgivings about the project, but did not want to question the endeavor and possibly damage their funding and relations with powerful departmental interests directing the program. Others vigorously defended their involvement, arguing they were 'empowering' public housing residents and resented what they saw as my inappropriate injection of 'politics' into sociology. A few students did want to take action, and we formed a committee to promote a

~107~

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discussion about the department's relationship with public housing, and university-community relations more broadly. Consistent with public sociology, we consciously tried to engage various 'publics,' in and outside the university, as a part of this dialogue. The first event the graduate committee organized was a university-community relations forum, with a focus on the Tulane-HUD partnership. We invited not only members of the Sociology Department, but other departments involved in public housing, and made a special outreach to a tenant leader at the development where most of the research was taking place, and a longtime anti-police brutality activist as well. Several other events emerged out of this initial discussion on university-community relations, including a departmental-level 'brown bag' lunch-hour forum led by students and faculty involved in the HUD-funded research on public housing and, the following year, a 'race and the academy' lecture series. The latter event examined how race and racism enter into academia, from our research, to hiring practices, and culminated with a talk by activist-intellectual Adolph Reed on the impediments to a renewed movement for racial and economic justice. The excerpt below, written by a one of the graduate student organizers of the Reed talk, underscores how the lecture achieved one of the key components of public sociology, 'forging dialogical ties with ordinary publics in civil society, communities, and grassroots movements' to address problems faced, particularly , by oppressed and exploited communities (Tamdgigi, 2008, p. 135):

It was an incredibly stimulating forum! Over 70 people showed up - with a large percentage of the audience from the community (workers, politicians, intellectuals, activists). The questions from the community members following the talk were extremely revealing as to the needs of the black working class in the city and proposed solutions for addressing needs.³

This account of my first two years (1997-1999) in graduate school underscores that public sociology cannot be done, or conceived of, in isolation from neither personal troubles, nor the three other spheres of sociology. My initial foray into public sociology began with a questioning of policy sociology in the form of the Tulane-

~108~

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HUD partnership and the personal crisis this engendered. In an attempt to address my personal troubles a new 'public,' if you will, formed. These emerging sociologists questioned the relationship of themselves, the department, and discipline to the community. This new insurgent 'public,' within the discipline, engaged audiences both within and outside the academy to address university-community relations, racism, and the challenges for reigniting the labor movement. The discussions among various publics, particularly the intra-university and intra-disciplinary engagements, also led to critiques of and clashes with professional sociology. Combining, as Biaocchi encourages, both critical and public sociology, insurgent sociologists critiqued the theory of 'concentrated poverty' that informed the department's engagement with public housing. The insurgent sociologists pointed out that this theory conveniently allowed its exponents to frame the downsizing of public housing and scattering of residents - the state and corporate agenda - as a benevolent, anti-poverty and even anti-racist initiative. The discussion promoted by this exercise in critical, public sociology unmasked the pretences of objectivity and value neutrality claimed by professional and policy sociology, and the political cover this provides for 'collaborat[ion] with the oppressive forces of power and domination' (Katz-Fishman and Scott, 2005, p. 374).

The Terrains of Public Sociology

The discussions that myself and other graduate students initiated raised important issues, and engaged and created new publics, but they did not end the department's, nor Tulane's, collaboration with HUD. Indeed, Tulane administrators continued as HANO's 'executive monitor' 1996-2002, approving demolition of almost half the city's public housing stock during those years, while faculty and graduate students blissfully continued their HUD-funded research 'on' public housing communities. Part of why we were not able to end the collaboration was our inability to move beyond simply promoting critical dialogue, and locate the practice of public sociology, as Katz-Fishman and Scott advocate, 'organically within social struggles and movements' (Katz-Fishman and Scott, 2005, p. 373). Yet, as I will later discuss in more detail, a key obstacle we confronted was the co-optation of formerly radical defenders of public housing that eliminat-

~109~

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ed any struggle with which to unite. Practicing public sociology, as I will also elaborate on, sometimes necessitates creating a public, or movement, open to collaboration.

After these first two years in graduate school, I ended what may be called a 'war of movement' against the citadels of university power and moved to a 'war of position.' The latter terrain involved finding niches within the university to provide support and engagement with local, national and global social justice movements. To do this, I exploited the relatively easy access to funds from the graduate student association to invite a series of speakers that addressed issues relevant to local groups. These speakers included activist-academics Dan La Botz, James Petras, Michael Goldfield, and Bob Fitch, as well as Labor Notes writer Jane Slaughter, and Charleston, South Carolina longshore union leader Ken Riley, who spoke on the 'Charleston 5' Dockworkers' struggle. These talks, which occurred at Tulane, and on some occasions in community locales, provided a venue to bring together students, faculty, and community and labor activists to learn, discuss, strategize, collaborate and build solidarity - as well as argue, disagree, and denounce. The latter was on display at Ken Riley's talk when fired union activists from the organizing drive at nearby Avondale shipyards denounced the local union bureaucrats in attendance for their failure to defend them. My organic connection with a 'visible, active, local, thick, counterpublic,' in the form of a local labor solidarity group, involved in a variety of struggles from defending fired Avondale union activists to supporting the Charleston 5, to stopping US intervention in Colombia, helped me connect Tulane's resources to these local struggles.

While I drew back from efforts to end the Tulane-HUD collaboration, I was still deeply distressed by what was happening to New Orleans' low-income, black working class, public housing communities. During the late 1990s and early 2000 the federal and local authorities oversaw and celebrated the destruction of thousands of public housing units, and displacement of poor black families. The 'mixed-income,' privately-run, replacements included a drastically reduced number of apartments affordable for the former residents. For example the St. Thomas development, in its transition to the privately-run River Gardens, reduced the number of apartments for those making less than 30% of area median income - the income level of 90% of the

~110~

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former St. Thomas residents - from 1500 to less than 100. One of the most paradoxical, and sociologically intriguing, components of this case was the collaboration of former radical community activists and tenant leaders in the privatization and displacement (Arena, 2007).

Thus, at the level of research, I practiced public sociology by writing my dissertation on the destruction of the St. Thomas public housing community and the co-optation of long-time activists. Unlike some examples of public sociology research, such as Darren Noy's work with homeless activists in San Francisco, I did not work directly with a community group in carrying out the research (Noy, 2007). I could not since my logical partner in this effort - former grassroots defenders of St. Thomas and public housing - had collaborated in the privatization initiative. Nevertheless, I would still categorize my St. Thomas research as a key component of public sociology since the identification of the case as a significant one was done in collaboration with community activists. Local social justice activists, such as Mike Howells, argued an in-depth case study would not only bring attention to an important social injustice, but could provide important lessons for poor peoples movements. A dissertation length work could highlight the tactics and strategies urban elites employ to impose racist neoliberal reforms, such as public housing privatization, and point to how poor, oppressed, and exploited communities can mount an effective counter-hegemonic challenge. Furthermore, I was well positioned to conduct the study because of my years as a community activist, my past work in public housing as a social worker and union organizer, and continued rootedness, while in graduate school, with local movements. This biography facilitated my entry into the research site, ability to identify interviewees, and capacity, as Holstein and Gubrium argue in their study of qualitative sociology, to 'ask good questions and interpret the meanings of answers' (1995, p. 45).

This public sociology-informed dissertation research was my response to the policy sociology represented by the Tulane-HUD collaboration. The organizing by graduate students raised important ethical questions, but did not sever the department's relationship with the Clinton administration's public housing agenda. Nonetheless, I could, through a war of position, show that 'another sociology was possible.' My dissertation aimed, at one level, to show that it was possible to forge an ethical form of sociological research that addressed the politi-

~111~

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cal and material interests of poor African-American communities, rather than policy sociology's neoliberal corporate and state patrons. What conditions, you might ask, facilitated the relative autonomy of my practice of public sociology from its policy and professional antipodes? First, my relatively non-demanding employment as a resident assistant at the graduate dorm facilities (providing free rent and a stipend, after my assistantship ended), and my wife's work as a grade school teacher, allowed me to avoid seeking funding from the government, corporate, university, and foundation funders of policy sociology. Second, the 'location of [my] public sociology organically within social struggles and social movements for fundamental and systemic change' - Katz-Fishman and Scott's dictum for the effective practice of public sociology - was key to my independence from the passing research fashions, rankings, and competitiveness of professional sociology. New Orleans' poor-people's activists and movements were my point of reference; they provided both a 'moral compass' for selecting a research topic, and my central source of validation.

The attempt to *practice* public sociology-informed research, that is, one addressing poor people's interests, also confronted professional sociology in the form of her dominant methodologies and theories. As mentioned above, I employed a case study research strategy, with interviews as a major data gathering strategy, in the dissertation. Conducting a case study was appropriate considering the moral and political concerns my topic raised. As Charles Ragin argues, 'researchers who are oriented toward specific cases...do not find it difficult to maintain meaningful connection to social and political issues' (1985, p. xi). Yet, the department's Ph.D. requirements emphasized quantitative techniques. Although regression analysis, for example, is sometimes employed as one data gathering strategy within case study research, it was not relevant for my case. Therefore, in order to obtain the necessary skills to connect my research with community concerns I worked with fellow graduate students to change the degree requirement, and allow a qualitative methodology course be taken in lieu of a second one in statistics. My public sociology-informed research also clashed with the dominant sociological (growth machine thesis) and political science (regime theory) approaches to urban politics. Both of these theoretical schools, which went into ascendancy during neoliberal era, tend to marginalize and silence the struggles and

~112~

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concerns of low income urban communities, such as black public housing residents. The 'epistemic violence' embedded in these theories mirrors the systemic and direct violence used by neoliberal elites while implementing their urban redevelopment agendas, such as demolishing public housing.

These conceptual models presented, therefore, a theoretical obstacle to conducting a public sociology-informed research-project--one that connected my research with the needs and interests of public housing residents. Engaging in what Louis Althusser called 'class struggle in theory,' I addressed this roadblock by critiquing the class biases of the dominant theories of professional urban sociology. Drawing on the works of Adolph Reed and Ralph Miliband, among others, I parsed together a theoretical model that brought 'back in' the concerns, actions, weaknesses, and strengths of the urban black working class in the neoliberal age.⁴

Finding a Public for Public Sociology

By mid-2004 I had completed most of my data gathering and moved into, primarily, the writing stage of the dissertation process. A central finding that emerged from the research was the crucial role that non-profits played in the political transformation of formerly radical community activists and tenant leaders. The insertion of these activists into a corporate and government-funded non-profit complex was key to explaining their subsequent assent to privatization and displacement. The city's black political elite, and their white corporate allies, embraced and cultivated this political metamorphosis, providing, as it did, crucially needed legitimation and cover for the regressive policies of poor people removal and massive downsizing of public housing. Therefore, central to any grass roots challenge was both building an effective, vocal, broad-based opposition while at the same time undermining and exposing collaborators cultivated by non-profits, developers and public officials.

The insights and facts garnered from my St. Thomas research, including the betrayal residents faced from non-profits, developers and public officials, were important weapons for building a defense of the Iberville public housing development. Located, like the St. Thomas, on highly prized real estate, developers and public officials were openly discussing, by 2004, their 'redevelopment' plans for the almost

~113~

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900-unit complex. While I wanted to share my findings and work to defend Iberville, there were no grass roots organizations defending public housing. As mentioned, the St. Thomas tenant leaders and activist allies, formerly the city's most militant defenders of public housing, provided a popular cover to privatization, while the official, housing authority-sanctioned, tenant leaders at Iberville appeared prepared to follow the same path. Therefore, in my search for a relevant public, I turned to the local anti-war group, C3 (Community Concern Compassion). New Orleans activists formed the group in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks to oppose an invasion of Afghanistan, and later Iraq. From its start C3 always emphasized the connection between what they called the racist wars 'abroad' and 'at home,' with the attack on public housing being a leading example of the domestic front of the conflict. Yet in C3's first few years of existence, the domestic component of their work remained more at the rhetorical level.

In late 2004 I proposed that C3, a group that I was active in, begin to deepen and expand its work by forging a defense of Iberville. My outreach to C3 underscores that, at certain times, doing public sociology requires actively organizing a counterpublic to put our ideas into practice. Collectivities, ready to use our politically relevant research don't always exist. Following my intervention, C3 members agreed to take up the public housing initiative and, underscoring their commitment to battle the two fronts of the war, changed the organization's name to *C3/Hands Off Iberville*. The expansion of the group's work involved not only addressing new issues, but doing outreach to public housing residents that had not been involved in anti-war organizing. From January to July 2005 C3/Hands Off Iberville undertook a series of actions, including meeting weekly, regularly doing outreach and canvassing of the Iberville community, organizing demonstrations, holding public forums, calling press conferences, and speaking out at city council and housing authority hearings, among other grass roots actions. C3's work followed Noy's public sociology principle of 'accountability to the most marginalized,' by emphasizing outreach to public housing, supporting local, 'organic' leadership and establishing as a key principle the defense of all the units at Iberville as public housing (Noy, 2007, p. 266). Yet, being accountable to the most marginalized also required opposing public housing tenant leaders, and other community activists, who supported 'redevelopment,' privatiza-

~114~

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tion and downsizing of public housing. Deciding who speaks for the 'community' is not given, but often involves struggle and conflict that public sociologists cannot avoid. In July 2005 - a month before the natural and human-made disaster of Katrina devastated the city--the movement achieved a major victory when the housing authority agreed to not apply for a HOPE VI privatization grant from HUD for Iberville (Arena, 2007a).

Practicing Public Sociology in the Face of Disaster Capitalism

'I think we have a clean sheet to start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities.'

Real Estate Developer Joseph Canizaro, Sep. 2005

Neil Smith's insightful essay *There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster* identifies the various societal decisions that resulted in Hurricane Katrina causing so much death and destruction. Yet, for a few, this suffering also had a 'silver lining.' Developer Joseph Canizaro's sentiments cited above, reflected the views of many corporate and high level government officials. The mass displacement of New Orleanians, particularly of low income black communities, was not a disaster, but rather a historic opportunity to quickly and massively lift regulatory controls, slash public services, transfer government-controlled assets to private hands, and transform a formerly majority black city into a whiter and wealthier one. Central to carrying out this agenda was the destruction of the city's public housing communities.

My post-Katrina experience to oppose and resist the destruction of public housing represented an extension and deepening of the counter-hegemonic, organic public sociology I had forged over the previous decade. The foundation for this public sociology was rootedness in an existing, counter-hegemonic public in the form of C3/*Hands Off Iberville*. Thus, my practice of organic public sociology was not, as Noy advocates, 'in support of subaltern organizations and their organic leadership,' but rather as an integral *part of* an organization made up of public and non-public housing working class activists (Noy, 2007). The organic, public sociology I carried out in the years after Katrina was a two pronged effort. At one level my interventions aimed to expand and engage various publics to solidarize with the

~115~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

public housing movement, while at a second level my work involved exposing and confronting the way policy and professional sociology collaborated in the attack on public housing.

C3's first challenge was countering the government and mainstream media claims regarding the condition of public housing. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which in 2002 took control of the local housing authority, closed all the public housing developments in the aftermath of Katrina following the forced evacuation of some 20,000 residents. HUD argued the well built brick, cement, and plaster apartment buildings had been severely damaged and that it would be unsafe for displaced residents to return. Yet, in fact, public housing had come out of the storm in better shape than most of the private housing stock, with some developments not having been flooded at all! Thus, my first intervention, in the form of traditional public sociology involved writing articles exposing HUD's disinformation on public housing, and to let people know, both inside and outside of New Orleans, there was a movement defending public housing. But this writing was not done as a detached 'public intellectual,' but rather practiced in close collaboration with C3. I wrote, along with other C3 members, various articles explaining the history of local public housing struggles, post-civil right politics in New Orleans, and how the attack on public housing was connected to the larger neoliberal offensive. I published these articles in critical, activist-oriented web sites such as *Indymedia* and *ZNET*. Readers of these websites were a key audience or 'public' that we wanted to reach.

The writing helped C3 connect with allies both in the US and across the world. The European-based anti-globalization group ATTAC, for example, invited me to speak at its 'Other Davos' conference in Zurich, Switzerland in January 2006 after reading my articles connecting the attack on public housing to the global neoliberal offensive. The article was also posted on a sociology list serve, and led sociologist Mary Patillo to invite C3 activist Mike Howells to speak to her students at Northwestern.

Another key public we wanted to reach were the hundreds of families from four public housing developments--Lafitte, St. Bernard, B.W. Cooper and C.J. Peete - that HUD refused to reopen. HUD initially refused to allow Iberville residents to return to their homes. They were soon forced to backtrack. The movement C3 had devel-

~116~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

oped before the storm, residents taking direct action and reoccupying their homes once the city was reopened, and street protests in December 2005 demanding reopening, all contributed to forcing HUD secretary Alphonso Jackson to relent and reopen Iberville by the end of 2005. Yet, the four other developments, encompassing almost 4,500 little damaged apartments, remained closed. C3, which had been based at the Iberville, therefore made efforts to locate and bring back residents from the other developments. Through our internet postings a St Bernard resident, displaced in Houston, phoned C3 member Elizabeth Cook. From that initial contact we located over a dozen displaced residents that wanted to return. Thus, I was sent by C3 to Houston where I rented a van and brought ten displaced St Bernard residents for a press conference and rally on February 14, 2006 in front of their unnecessarily shuttered community. This action received wide coverage by local TV and newspapers, and helped challenge the image, propagated by HUD and much of the mass media, that poor, black, public housing residents did not want to return to New Orleans. Well known anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan also attended and spoke at the rally, further expanding our network of contacts and supporters. The February 14 event was followed a few weeks later with a larger action on April 4, 2006, the 38th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. Over a hundred St Bernard residents and supporters rallied and then forced their way past a phalanx of police to retake their homes.⁵

In our various efforts to defend the rights of public housing residents, C3 and other activists invoked international human rights laws and rhetoric. For example under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, it is the responsibility of national governments to facilitate the return of those displaced by human or man-made disasters. The U.S. federal government--which has sponsored resolutions in support of the principles and demanded other governments abide by them--was, nonetheless, clearly violating these international norms by its decision to close public housing. To manage this contradiction, local and national officials turned to professional sociology to frame the closing of public housing as a noble effort to 'deconcentrate poverty' and end the racial segregation that public housing fostered. Indeed prominent sociologists and other academics staked out this dubious position in a manifesto they drafted

~117~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

and signed in the aftermath of Katrina, entitled, 'Moving to opportunity in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.' The signatories pointed to a 'growing body of research' - professional sociology—to support 'mobility programs' that could break up 'concentrated poverty' and 'move [racial minorities] to opportunity.'⁶ Portraying displacement as a progressive measure is indicative of what David Imbroscio calls the 'liberal expansionist' paradigm, 'the dominant - perhaps hegemonic - approach among urbanists to solving problems of American cities' (Imbroscio, 2006, p. 225). Leading 'liberal expansionists' such as Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf, Todd Swanstrom, Jon Powell, Bruce Katz and Myron Orfield, as well as liberal advocacy groups like Policylink, identify the isolation of cities from their suburban communities as a major cause of concentrated poverty and other urban problems. Closing public housing, and moving the poor 'to opportunity' makes good sense, therefore, from the liberal expansionist perspective. Thus when New Orleans city councilperson Stacy Head invoked 'deconcentrating poverty' to justify keeping public housing closed, she could reasonably argue her position was based on sound social science:

I am a strong believer in *mixed-income* housing and *deconcentrating poverty*...I firmly believe that the decisions made with regard to public housing will greatly impact New Orleans recovery - from the immediate issues of health care delivery, education, and crime - to the long-term issues of revitalizing communities and empowering people to escape from poverty⁷

Therefore my practice of public sociology, in the form of protesting, writing, and speaking out at city council hearings, required confronting professional sociology. I worked to unmask the apolitical, neutral pretensions of professional sociology, and sociologists; to show how the intervention of leading sociologists and other social scientists, and their work, was helping legitimate poor people removal.⁸

Conferences and Teaching

Academic conferences and teaching were two other terrains in which I practiced public sociology. These venues became ways to

~118~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

engage new publics, connect them to New Orleans public housing movement, and to critique professional and policy sociology. I attended three academic conferences in post-Katrina New Orleans - the April 2006 and April 2009 meetings of the Southern Sociological Society (SSS), and the November 2009 gathering of the Association of Humanist Sociology (AHS). For the 2006 SSS meeting I organized, along with sociologist Steve Rosenthal, a session entitled, 'Critical Forum on Hurricane Katrina' that involved a discussion between public housing residents and SSS attendees. This form of doing public sociology - connecting local activists with sociologists at conferences--has become relatively common. The new addition to public sociology was organizing a 'Disaster Capitalism' activist tour for the 2009 SSS and 2009 AHS meetings. Again, this event, consistent with organic sociology, was organized in close cooperation with C3, the local grass root public housing organization. With the approval of conference organizers, I sent prospective SSS and AHS attendees emails with background on public housing, and inviting them to a 'disaster capitalism' bus tour. I explained the event would get them out of the French Quarter bubble, and allow them to see, firsthand, the continuing devastation, and hear the perspectives of local activists and residents. A modest \$20 fee was requested to cover the bus rental, with any proceeds being donated to C3. In both cases the public housing movement organized a protest in conjunction with the tour, and attendees were invited - but not required - to join. For the April 2009 SSS tour a press conference and demonstration was held in front of the Lafitte development to demand the Obama administration not demolish the remaining 100 recently repaired apartments. The AHS tour culminated with a demonstration at the home of Kurt Weigle who, as the executive director of a local governmental redevelopment authority, is a leader in the ongoing efforts to demolish Iberville.

The disaster capitalism tour strengthened the public sociology tendency within the discipline, and the public housing movement, in several ways. First, the event not only educated sociologists about the underside of post-Katrina New Orleans, but created an organic bond between a group of sociologists and New Orleans grass roots public housing movement. Second, the tour strengthened relationships among public sociologists. Attendees were able meet other like minded sociologists, with the tour and protests being a form of collective

~119~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

action. Underscoring the bonds the event fostered, I have maintained contact with several sociologists I met through the tour, and we have shared experiences on working with community groups. Third, the event advanced public sociology by providing an opportunity to discuss and critique the political nature and power of professional sociology. The bus tour of public housing dramatized how the concepts and theories of professional sociology can be harnessed to carry out and legitimate policies that deepen racial, class, and gender inequality, such as the demolition of little damaged, and badly needed, public housing apartments in post-Katrina New Orleans.

In the aftermath of Katrina many universities, particularly Tulane, placed greater emphasis on what appears, at least on the surface, to be a 'sister' of public sociology - 'service learning.' Universities encouraged students to work with non-profit organizations involved in various self-help initiatives, such as rebuilding homes, volunteering in schools, and helping with various cleanup efforts. This type of university-community collaboration is an example of what Baiocchi has characterized as the apolitical, technocratic version that universities have long tolerated and even nurtured. This is the vision of the university:

As a kindly patron standing above society, a producer and repository of specialized knowledge engaged in all manner of assistance to individuals and communities facing social problems. This is a vision that does not call into question scholarly expertise, but more importantly, has little to say about social change, and neutral enough to be palatable to mainstream liberals and conservatives. This civic orientation is compatible with much of what can go by public sociology.

(Baiocchi, 2006, p. 343)

In fact, like professional and policy sociology, the apolitical pretenses of service learning voluntarism obscures the deeply partisan nature of this version of university-community partnerships. The nurturing and celebration of service learning, and other forms of volunteerism, in post-Katrina New Orleans helped to legitimate the neoliberal offensive against public services. Local and national authorities lauding and embracing Habitat for Humanity volunteers building a handful of

~120~

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homes, for example, allowed authorities to posture as friends of affordable housing and avoid government's responsibility to address the housing crisis. Indeed, these photo-ops helped obscure the role of the Bush (federal) and Nagin (city) administrations in the UN-condemned Demolition of thousands of viable public housing apartments that has greatly contributed to the dearth of affordable housing in post-Katrina New Orleans. Likewise, Tulane students painting hallways at the Lusher charter school helped mask the central role university administrators played commandeering the school from the low-income African American students the facility served pre-Katrina.⁹ Instead of student volunteers joining the public housing and other social movements fighting to pressure the state, they joined the equally political self-help initiatives that provided political cover for neoliberal state retrenchment.

In contrast to neoliberal service learning I promoted a 'movement voluntarism' form of service learning informed by organic public sociology. Using my contacts with local social movement organizations, I required students in my course on social movements in post-Katrina New Orleans to volunteer with a local housing, criminal justice, immigrant rights, or labor group working for an economically and racially just reconstruction of the city.

The Future of Public Sociology: Threats and Opportunities

Professor Michael Burawoy has done more than any sociologist to promote public sociology. He has used his position as president of the American Sociological Association, his stature as a leading sociologist at an elite university, and his access to sociological journals, as platforms, bully pulpits, to define, legitimate, advocate, and spread public sociology. While these positions of power increased his ability to spread the public sociology gospel, they also constrained the version he preached. It is not a surprise that as an ASA president facing attacks from the right for inappropriately interjecting politics into 'value-free' social science, he emphasized the compatibility of the four sociologies--policy, professional, critical, and public. To avoid the four sociological varieties taking pathological forms, and for the discipline to flourish, this Marxian sociologist argued all four needed to work together as part of a Durkheimian, organic, functionalist totality.

In contrast to Burawoy's theory of a functionalist whole, the

~121~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

findings of this study underscore the constraints and obstacles that policy and professional sociology place on the theory and practice of public sociology. Rather than functional compatibility, my case study found support for Katz-Fishman and Scott's conclusion that 'professional' and 'public' sociology, in their polar opposite expressions, are antagonistic processes of theory and practice' (Katz-Fishman, 2005, p. 372). Indeed, professional and policy sociology are placing increasing constraints on the practice of a counter-hegemonic, organic public sociology. University retrenchment, which has deepened dramatically with the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis and its 'resolution' through government bailouts of the banks, is central to explaining this changing balance of power among the four 'sociologies.' Administrators increasingly encourage us to show our usefulness to well-heeled corporate, government and foundation funders, rather than with needy 'counter publics.' These threats to public sociology, though, also present an opportunity. The increasing deprivations of neoliberal global capitalism--with higher education being a prime target--create an opportunity for public sociologists to immerse themselves in the emerging counter-hegemonic challenges. The future of public sociology, and the society we defend, is contingent on their success.

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~122~

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~123~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

Endnotes

1. The journals *Social Problems* (February 2004), *Social Forces* (June 2004), *Critical Sociology* (Summer 2005), *The American Sociologist* (Fall/Winter 2005), and the *British Journal of Sociology* (September 2005) dedicated issues to the discussion and debates surrounding public sociology.

2. To be sure Tulane's collaboration with HUD in its public housing "reform" effort was not an outlier, but part of an expanded relationship with Universities as the agency geared-up for a massive demolition and privatization initiative. The Clinton administration institutionalized this relationship in 1994 with the creation of HUD's "Office of University Partnerships" (see HUD 2009).

3. Email from Melissa Toffolon to the Tulane Sociology Department, March 12, 1999.

4. For Althusser's elaboration on "class struggle in theory," see Althusser 1970. Reed 1999; Miliband 1989.

5. For more on post-Katrina organizing see Arena 2007a. For a video of the April 4th protest, see Fluxrostrum 2006.

6. For a searing critique of this initiative and letter, see Reed and Steinberg 2006.

7. Head 2007. This intervention came in response to Congresswoman Maxine Waters' housing sub-committee holding hearings in New Orleans in February 2007, and questioning plans to demolish public housing.

8. At times grassroots organizations have had to confront not only elected officials like Head, but "progressive" liberal expansionist academics and NGOs for also invoking the "deconcentrating poverty" to legitimate public housing demolition. Minnesota public housing activists, for example, vehemently objected to liberal expansionist academics Myron Orfield, Jon Powell, and Phil Tegler including the theory in the initial draft of the 2007 housing shadow report submitted to the CERD, arguing it provided a progressive veneer to the "3-D approach to public housing--Demolish Disrupt, and Disperse." C3 had to also confront "progressive" NGOs, such as the National Low Income Housing Coalition and Policylink, for their collaboration in public housing demolition (Interview with Eric Tars, 1 June 2010, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty; Interview with Peter Brown, 15 June 2010; Arena 2007; Imbroscio 2006; Housing Scholars 2007).

9. For critiques of voluntarism, see Howells and Arena 2009. For Tulane University's pre- and post-Katrina role in dismantling public education, see Arena 2011.

~124~

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J. Arena/Societies Without Borders 5:2 (2010) 103-125

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~125~

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