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## Principles for Organic Public Sociology: Reflections on Publicly Engaged Research in the San Francisco Homeless Policy Field

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### Abstract

Interest in “public sociology” in the United States is a positive sign for researchers who seek to span the borders between academia and social change. However, it is important not to assume that just because sociological research is publicly oriented it will automatically advance human rights, justice, and ecological sustainability. Sociologists must critically consider principles for conducting public sociology if their work is to have a liberatory outcome. This is particularly crucial when academic researchers attempt to directly work with marginalized social groups. In this article, I draw upon my experiences conducting a project of public sociology on local homeless policy to identify four basic principles for “counter-hegemonic organic public sociology.”

### Principios para una sociología pública orgánica. Reflexiones sobre una investigación comprometida en el campo de la política de los “sin techo” en San Francisco

El interés por la “sociología pública” entre los sociólogos americanos es un síntoma positivo para los investigadores cuyo trabajo tiende a cruzar las fronteras entre lo académico, la acción comunitaria y el activismo. Sin embargo, es importante tener en cuenta que no porque la investigación sociológica se oriente hacia lo público, va a hacer avanzar las causas de los derechos humanos, la justicia y la sostenibilidad ecológica. Los sociólogos deben tener en cuenta ciertos principios si quieren que su trabajo tenga una función liberadora. Esto es particularmente importante cuando los investigadores académicos tratan de trabajar con grupos socialmente marginados. En este artículo me apoyo en mi experiencia al realizar un proyecto de sociología sobre la política local de los “sin techo” para identificar cuatro principios básicos para “una sociología pública orgánica anti-hegemónica.”

### Les principes de la sociologie publique organique: les pensées sur la recherche engagée dans le domaine de politique de sans-abris de San Francisco

L'intérêt à “la sociologie publique” aux Etats-Unis est un signe positif pour les chercheurs dont le travail cherche à enjamber les frontières entre le milieu universitaire, la communauté,

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et l'activisme. Cependant, il est important de ne pas supposer que cela avancera automatiquement les droits de l'homme, la justice, et la durabilité écologique juste parce que la recherche sociologique est publiquement orientée. Les sociologues doivent en critique considérer des principes pour conduire la sociologie publique si leur travail aura la fonction de se libérer. C'est particulièrement important quand des chercheurs universitaires essaient de travailler directement avec les groupes sociaux marginalisés. En cet article, j'utilise mes expériences en ayant conduit un projet de la sociologie publique sur la politique de sans-abris régionale pour identifier quatre principes de base pour la sociologie publique qui est à la fois "contre-hégémonique et organique."

### Keywords

public sociology, homelessness, political field, counter-hegemony, participatory action research

"The last fuckin' thing poor people need is another goddamn leader. They got more leaders and more lawyers and more academics talking on their behalf and talking about them and nobody is listening to a goddamn fuckin' thing they have to say."

– San Francisco Homeless Organizer, quoted in Roschelle and Wright 2003

"There is, however, another type of public sociology – *organic public sociology* in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counterpublic. The bulk of public sociology is indeed of an organic kind – sociologists working with a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations. Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education."

– Michael Buroway in *For Public Sociology*

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, recall the face of the poorest and the weakest of men, whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you are contemplating is going to be of use to him. Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

– M. K. Gandhi, from one of his last notes in 1948

The recent interest among sociologists in the United States in public sociology<sup>1</sup> is an encouraging sign for researchers whose work seeks to span the boundaries between academia, community organizing, and activism. There

<sup>1</sup> Miller and Perrucci 2004, p. ix.

is, of course, an ongoing debate as to whether sociology or academic social science in general should have the explicit purpose of promoting justice, human rights, and human well-being.<sup>2</sup> However, to the degree that sociologists accept these normative goals, public sociology is essential to their work. At its best, public sociology works in coalition with civil society actors to better understand, strategize, and motivate positive social transformation, human rights, and ecological sustainability. At its best, public sociology obliges researchers to consider the ethical dimensions of their work beyond what is required by human subjects applications, and it obliges academics to move beyond the production of theories and critical commentaries that are inaccessible to or insulated from wider publics. At its best, public sociology engages sociologists as responsible and active members of society.

However, for public sociology to succeed – in promoting justice, human rights, ecological sustainability, and human well-being – we must critically consider and formulate it both as a political and an ethical endeavor. While we might be able to envision the positive societal contributions of public sociology, we should not be heedlessly caught in a celebratory euphoria which proclaims that any public sociology will absolutely and inevitably lead to justice and human rights. We should not assume that simply because sociologists are stepping into the fray of a public arena dominated by economists and political scientists, that the result is inherently liberatory.

In this article, I draw on my experiences conducting a public sociology project on homeless policy in San Francisco California to reflect how public sociology can aid marginalized groups in their struggles for justice, to suggest some normative principles for engaging in “organic” public sociology, and to highlight concerns about the power dynamics between public sociologists and their publics.

### **Publicly Engaged Homelessness Research in the United States**

A recent report produced by a nationwide coalition of local grassroots homeless organizations, entitled “*Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness, and Policy Failures*,” claims that over the last 25 years academic researchers and poverty researchers have

<sup>2)</sup> Deflem 2004, p. B17.

in conjunction with government agencies actually obscured the broad systemic causes of homelessness in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Of course, many of the homelessness researchers who work in concert with government agencies are not sociologists by training, and their work might better be described as “policy sociology”<sup>4</sup> than as public sociology.

Academic homelessness experts often do research about homeless people without listening to or being allies of homeless people or of community organizations representing homeless people. Many homelessness researchers have instead relied on data collected by government information management systems<sup>5</sup> which treat homeless people as objects rather than as embodied humans. In this way, researchers have become part of a classic Foucaultian apparatus of power in which statistical data is used to help the state to govern, shape, and reproduce the population.<sup>6</sup> These researchers produce knowledge about homeless people that is used to control homeless people, rather than knowledge which gives voice to homeless people or which promotes the recognition of the rights of homeless people. The result of this research is a further marginalization of homeless people from their power of self-determination.

Rather than questioning why the United States has the highest poverty rate of any industrialized nation and why the United States (the wealthiest nation on the planet) allows between 2 and 3.5 million people, including 1.35 million children, to experience homelessness each year; academic research on homelessness has too frequently focused on homeless people as “problems.”<sup>7</sup> Homelessness research has too frequently led to policy prescriptions which push the structural factors of homelessness and the human rights of homeless people further into the background – displacing these concerns into invisibility, into what Bourdieu called, “the doxa.”<sup>8</sup>

### A Counter-Hegemonic Public Sociology of Homelessness

Prior to joining the ranks of academia, I had spent a few years as an organizer and activist, including working as an organizer with homeless people.

<sup>3</sup> WRAP 2006, pp. 8–29.

<sup>4</sup> Buroway 2005a, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Culhane and Metraux 1997, pp. 341–360.

<sup>6</sup> Rabinow 1984, pp. 16–17.

<sup>7</sup> WRAP 2006, pp. 24–26.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu 1977, pp. 159–171.

These experiences taught me basic principles of community organizing. I also saw the regressive effects that some social science studies of homelessness had on homeless policy. Taking into account these considerations, in 2002 I started a project of public sociology aimed at understanding the creation of homeless policy in San Francisco, California. In this research, I used sociological tools – including field theory, institutional theory, organizational theory, network analysis, and frame analysis – to extensively map out and analyze the “San Francisco Homeless Policy Field.” I assumed that if social fields actually exist, then sociologists should be able to empirically map these fields and use the maps to work in real time with field actors to influence outcomes in the field. From its inception, I developed this research in collaboration with local community organizations.

To map out the San Francisco Homeless Policy Field, I interviewed representatives of 59 key San Francisco organizations involved in homeless policy battles, including government agencies, social service providers, media organizations, social movement organizations, political offices, business organizations, neighborhood associations, housing developers, think tanks, poor people’s organizations, and urban squatter groups. I asked organizational representatives about their interactions with each other, as well as extensive topical questions about homelessness in San Francisco, its causes, its effects on the city, and the city’s policies. I used responses to the network questions to draw network maps of the policy arena; and I coded the responses into hundreds of statements involving issues related to homelessness and homeless policy creation in San Francisco. I then overlaid the coded statements about homelessness onto the network maps of the policy arena. To these mappings, I added measures of political influence, material resources, and cultural dispositions, which I obtained from interviews and other archival sources.

Combining these data, I used UCINET<sup>9</sup> network software to generate a series of visual mappings displaying specific locations and distributions of conflicting conceptions of homelessness, alongside the distribution of resources and political influence in the field. Overall, these maps provided a complex, but coherent picture of the political, cultural, and organizational dynamics of homeless policy creation in San Francisco.

<sup>9</sup>) Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman 2002.

*Putting the Research to Work in the Field*

In December 2003, a group of social service providers and community organizations funded the local publication and distribution of a policy report I wrote based on my research entitled, *Homelessness in San Francisco: Understanding a Common Vision that Will Build a Homeless Policy that Works*. Following its publication, I spent several months presenting the research to social service providers, social movement organizations, government agencies, think tanks, and other community organizations; writing news articles; and facilitating strategy sessions with local community organizations.

In the field I drew inspiration largely from the rich tradition of participatory action research,<sup>10</sup> and the work I did fits well into what Buroway calls “organic public sociology.”<sup>11</sup> Buroway distinguishes between organic public sociology – which he says engages with an *often* counterpublic – and traditional public sociology, which does not engage in thick mutual interactions, involves an invisible public, and is *usually* more passive. Of course, if we employ the Gramscian description of the term organic, it becomes clear that just because a project of public sociology is organic, it does not *necessarily* mean it is also counter-hegemonic.<sup>12</sup> It is quite possible to be organically connected to the hegemonic class – as much of academia is. Counter-hegemonic organic intellectual production requires connection and political alliance with subaltern classes.

In this article, I reflect on the ways that I attempted a project of public sociology which organically engaged a broad range of publics while I simultaneously attempted to maintain a more narrow commitment to the counter-hegemonic project of building the power and organizational capacity of homeless people.

**Principles for Organic Public Sociology**

Michael Buroway reminds us that sociology is partisan. Sociology represents the standpoint of civil society, while economics takes the standpoint of the market and political science takes the standpoint of the state. As the

<sup>10</sup> Reason and Bradbury 2001, pp. 1–14.

<sup>11</sup> Buroway 2005a, pp. 7–8.

<sup>12</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 3.

master political narrative of our times, neoliberal capitalism and state unilateralism are swallowing up civil society, and it is the task of sociology to represent “the interests of humanity – interests in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny.”<sup>13</sup> Buroway is careful, however, to problematize civil society in terms of its complexity, hierarchies, violences, and injustices. In addition, he discusses the way that civil society “as the collaborative arm of all capitalist states” can bolster support for dominant state and economic actors. Buroway, therefore, recommends that “given the Janus faced character of civil society – simultaneously an instrument of domination and a launching pad for enhanced self-determination – we need to develop normative and institutional criteria for progressive intervention.”<sup>14</sup> In my own efforts in the San Francisco homeless policy field, I followed four basic principles that I will now summarize.

#### 1. *Accountability to the Most Marginalized*

The first principle of my research was that I was accountable to homeless people. If my work was to try to shift the balance of power in that field towards justice, then it was to homeless people that I owed allegiance. Moreover, accountability meant that I must find ways to concretely join with them in their organized struggles. While traditional sociology in general might frame itself as attempting to shift the balance of power towards justice, ideologies of neutrality, scientism, objectivity, and professionalism often cloud this commitment. The abstract, theoretical, and self-referential nature of much sociology also limits its ability to act on this commitment. Finally, the structural position and class habitus of most sociologists in the United States distances them from the most marginalized peoples and sets them off as having different material interests from the marginalized. One way I applied the principle of accountability was that I collaborated with homeless people, homeless organizers, and homeless advocates in designing and presenting my research.

A crucial aspect of counter-hegemonic public sociology is finding ways to enter into projects in support of subaltern organizations and their organic leadership. While spontaneous disruption and everyday resistances are important ways that marginalized peoples contest injustice, it is through the development of organizational forms and strategic social movements

<sup>13</sup>) Buroway 2005a, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup>) Buroway 2005b, p. 324.

that they are able to transform inequalities, to claim their human rights, and to empower themselves. The yardstick of human rights provides the useful starting point for addressing complex questions. Academic researchers might ask themselves whether their work fundamentally promotes human rights. This does not mean only supporting organizations that have a human rights rhetoric – but rather academics need to consider whether the organizations actually promote a decent and dignified life for people who currently are denied their basic rights.

In my research in San Francisco, I also sought to apply the principle of accountability through the framing of my research. I sought to turn the academic gaze of homelessness research, which usually focuses downwards upon homeless people, upwards towards the policy makers who affect homeless people's lives. The object of analytical dissection was not the deviant behavior of the homeless mother, nor techniques for managing homeless youth, nor the unique subcultures of homeless drug users, not even the rate of homelessness. The object of my analytical dissection were those policy makers and influential community organizations that have the economic and political power to dominate the daily lives of homeless people.

One of the most significant findings of my research was the relative lack of concern about homeless families and homeless immigrants within the San Francisco policy field. Motivated by these findings, the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness asked me to follow up on my initial report by working with their members to produce research that would help insert concerns of homeless families and immigrants into policy debates about homelessness. In collaboration with their organizers, I facilitated a participatory action research project with homeless immigrants and families. The Coalition on Homelessness published this research in a report titled, *Hidden Voices: The Realities of Homeless Families and Homeless Immigrants*. The very homeless people and organizers who produced this research then used it as a basis for organizing and advocacy.

In order to try to deepen my sense of accountability to homeless people, I opted to live in a building with a group of other homeless people. While I knew that my situation could never compare to theirs, I felt that the ethnographic understanding I gained from this experience was important. During this time, I shared with homeless people my original mappings of the San Francisco homeless policy field, and also engaged with them in discussions about housing, treatment programs, and civil rights.

## 2. *Deeply Listening to the Needs of Publics*

My second principle was to listen to the needs of the publics with whom I was working. Deeply listening to the needs of my publics meant that my primary research goal was not to fill a gap in the academic literature, but to collaboratively assist people on the ground. While my first principle of accountability might be considered a political alliance, this second principle of deeply listening to needs might be considered as guided by an ethic of human empathy. None in San Francisco want people to be homeless, but different social sectors had very different and conflicting ideas about the causes and solutions to homelessness; and many had personal goals, such as profit and political power, that outweighed their concern for homeless people. In both the framing and especially the presentation of this research, I met with people in a variety of community organizations, with government officials, and with business leaders. Of course, engaging with so many publics in a highly contested field meant that I was in conversation with people across economic and political divides, but my ultimate accountability was to homeless people.

Relevance is different from accountability. One way I tried to make my research relevant to everyone with whom I spoke was by identifying common concerns that people held across political fault lines, and then by seeking to both highlight and address these concerns in my research presentation. An example of this was a criticism that echoed throughout every part of the community that San Francisco's homeless policy lacked cohesion. In response to this common concern, I sought in my research to use a sociological perspective to analyze and suggest possible resolutions to this policy incohesiveness. The very subtitle of the report I produced underscored this effort, as it read, *Understanding a Common Vision That Will Build a Homeless Policy That Works*.

When I began working with the San Francisco Homeless Coalition on the participatory action research project with homeless families and immigrants as a follow up to my initial field study, I became an explicit partisan within the field. I continued to engage in conversations and presentations with business and political representatives, but was also open about the new research I was involved in and the organization with which I was working. As an open partisan in the field, I could strategically deploy my cultural capital as an academic in order to carry particular ideas about homelessness to audiences that would not so easily listen to those ideas if they came from homeless people or homeless organizations.

The principle of accountability to the marginalized eventually made it impossible for me to remain in the field as a neutral observer. Nonetheless, deep and open minded listening to all the parties in the field was essential. Even as a partisan, trying to sincerely understand conflicting ideas in a political field and to accurately convey those ideas to people engaged in political struggle can help them to better understand their political context. Homeless social movement organizers with whom I worked have told me that my research, carried out collaboratively with homeless people, improved their understanding of the complexities of the social world in which they operated, of their possibilities for alliances, and their assessments of larger contexts. In counter-hegemonic organic public sociology, deep listening should eventually lead towards collaborative action.

### 3. *Employing Vernacular Perspectives*

Sociology, if it is to become an organic public sociology, rather than an imposition of traditional sociology onto organic publics, must learn to incorporate into its own perspective vernacular accounts and understandings. This is what collaboration and dialogue means – a process of mutual education. It is something that is quite different than the usual sociological method of theory development and conceptualization. The most important illustration of this principle in my research is that the idea of mapping the political field came not from sociological literature, but from my previous work as a community organizer. A long tradition of power mapping exists among community and social movements organizations. The power map helps organizers and community leaders to understand the political context in which they are struggling and serves as a basis for strategically organizing their campaigns. The simplest power map is a list of who has the power to implement the policies you want, who are your allies, and who are your opponents.

### 4. *Awareness of Reproduction of Structures of Domination*

While the deployment of privilege was sometimes necessary to conduct my work as a public sociologist, it also highlights a central dilemma of counter-hegemonic organic public sociology. My primary accountability was to homeless people, and I recognized that my educational capital and status as a researcher threatened to reproduce the very systems of class, cultural, and intellectual privilege that often marginalize homeless and poor people. Thus, the final principle that guided my work as an organic

public sociologist was being aware that my work might reproduce structures of domination.

The more marginalized or subaltern is the public with whom we engage as public sociologists, the more important it is not to be entrapped by structures of domination. Collaborating with homeless people made it a daily dilemma. As an academic, my personal disposition – what Bourdieu calls “habitus”<sup>15</sup> – embodies a position of domination in relation to the homeless people to whom I sought to be accountable. Strategically amplifying my academic status and habitus in order to gain more leverage in my public work made this domination even more potent. The very fact of research reinforces the power of the academy as the location of knowledge production. Even to the degree that I carried the interests of homeless people into policy debates, I reproduced their exclusion by acting as their representative.

This dilemma is very similar to ones highlighted by Bourdieu in his analysis of representation within the political field.<sup>16</sup> Participatory action research methods in some ways just shifted and morphed the dilemma. As an academic working with homeless people, I needed to be constantly aware of this. Perhaps, just as white activists engaged in justice struggles in America often undertake anti-racist trainings and workshops to conscientiousize themselves to the subtle ways they reproduce white privilege, sociologists can develop trainings to systematically raise awareness of the systems of domination they reproduce.

This dilemma of reproducing structures of injustice again points to the importance of rooting our work as organic public sociologists within the political struggles of subaltern organizations. Collaborating with subaltern organizations helps to keep us accountable to their base. The homeless people and organizers with whom I sought to collaborate in San Francisco were not dupes or unaware of the power dynamics I brought into the fold. Quite the contrary. They tested me time and again to see where my allegiances really lay. Homeless people and organizers with whom I collaborated directly questioned me about my motives, and watched me closely to see whether I had come only to collect data about them. In the participatory action research project I conducted with homeless families and immigrants, the participant researchers expected that I did not simply arrive to

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu 1977, pp. 72–95.

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu 1991, pp. 199–202.

manage their process, but that I was willing to let them take the lead and to do the work with all the others.

### **Towards a Counter-Hegemonic Organic Public Sociology**

Radical and progressive elements of civil society are not just waiting for public sociologists to arrive, to theorize, to analyze them. If sociology is to aid in counter-hegemonic struggles, then sociologists must get into the trenches of those struggles not as vanguard intellectuals, but as allies and assistants. In this article, I have suggested a model of counter-hegemonic organic public sociology in which the researcher roots their work in collaboration with subaltern organizations.

The vision of sociology that I have laid out in this article is a radical one. We might ask whether it would lead to the discrediting of the discipline of sociology, as some critics claim that Buroway's version of public sociology will.<sup>17</sup> Very possibly, yes, but for those sociologists who are deeply committed to the possibility of a better world, it is important to ask what is more important, the discipline of sociology or the struggle against oppression? Civil society actors and subaltern organizations ought to be able to use our research and our skills; and they ought to be able to participate in setting our intellectual agendas and research questions. Moreover, when sociological work remains irrelevant or inaccessible, they ought to be able to hold researchers accountable.

A counter-hegemonic research agenda would be based in praxis; it would involve case studies that not only inform theory, but also assist popular struggle; it would maintain a normative commitment to human rights, justice, and ecological sustainability; and it would seek to flesh out ever more articulately and concretely the political and transformative possibilities of public sociology.

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<sup>17</sup> Tittle 2004, pp. 1641–1642.  
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