

there is an important problem. We are ~~to~~ involved in this chapter, with Jean-Louis Laville. His name must be added and all the "I" within the text must be turned in "we"

17. Associationalism: the past, present of public sociology

Bruno Frère

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I would like to take stock of the highly controversial public sociology and its organic turn proposed by Burawoy. For some, it is a salutary renewal of the sociological approach, which they believe to be engulfed in an outdated positivist representation of the social world. For others, it is a veritable destruction of the scientific basis of the approach. Either way, much ink has been spilled about public sociology over the last 20 years. For my part, I would like to adopt a nuanced position. There is no doubt that public sociology today brings a breath of fresh air to sociology. Like pragmatic sociology under the aegis of authors such as Boltanski, or Appadurai in the field of cultural studies, public sociology seeks to restore to actors their reflexive capacities and their ability to intervene in the public sphere. Just like the critical sociologist, they are capable of calling into question institutions and the established order in a “specific and situated” way, even if their social conditions are humble and precarious (Borghi, 2015, pp. 105, 111). This is why researchers and actors can work together within the collectives they form to define common political positions to be put forward in the public sphere.

That said, public sociology is, in my opinion, only part of a much older proposal in the history of sociology: the associationalist proposal. Indeed, as will be seen in this chapter, the leitmotif of public sociology—which aims to bring sociologists and laypeople into association with one another in order to make common claims—has long been supported by various currents of thought and various methodologies. After outlining public sociology’s main ambitions, I discuss participatory investigations, socio-analysis and intervention collectives, which I believe embody similar approaches in France, Canada, and Latin America.

I then go into some depth about this synthetic perspective, which I call “associationalist,” by delving into the 19th century, and by looking more specifically at Proudhon, a precursor of French sociology. By studying his conception of common sense and of workers’ and laypeople’s knowledge, we will see that sociological approaches such as his—which were marginalized early on by Comte’s positivism and then Durkheim’s distanced objectivism—largely prefigured all of the “public” perspectives of the “organic” type mentioned above. Finally, I stress the point—a point that is iconoclastic when viewed through the epistemology of the social sciences dominant in the 20th century, but salutary at the beginning of the 21st—common to all of these proposals: the vocation of sociological science is not to abandon political stances. Rather, its ambition is to support and help to shape critical representations and instituting practices that exist among civil society actors, by associating itself more readily with dominated collectives—such as the working class in the 19th century—than with dominant ones.

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY: A COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT CRITICAL OF INSTITUTIONS

Michael Burawoy is generally considered to be the last great theorist of public sociology. He is generally known for the organic twist that he gave to it, explicitly rooting it in a Marxist perspective. Indeed, if we believe that what Burawoy calls public sociology refers to the work of authors who publish in newspapers and appear in the media on current affairs—or to offer reflections that popularize their work in order to make it accessible to the general public—then a great many intellectuals can be described as “public.” A typical example is Bourdieu, or Sartre in philosophy. But Burawoy believes that today this relationship to the public should be radicalized by assisting social and political movements. Although he calls for an intellectual turn that would revive what he sees as the golden age of public sociology, he is also careful to demarcate his own project within this movement. While 20th century sociology was ultimately a “traditional” form of public sociology, Burawoy argues for a more organic public sociology. Whereas the former, classical sociology was addressed to an invisible, amorphous, passive audience, the latter is aimed at a clearly defined public, or even counter-public, that is active and visible in relation to a specific cause, that can set an explicit political agenda together with the sociologist, and that shares common values (Burawoy et al., 2004, p. 104; Baert, 2015, p. 123)

To put it as Burawoy himself does, the public organic sociologist:

works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public. 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. The recognition of a public sociology must extend to the organic kind which often remains invisible, private, and is often considered to be apart from our professional lives. The project of such public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as a part of our sociological life. (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 7–8)

If it has become urgent to develop an organic public sociology that moves beyond the classical sociologies that Burawoy describes as professional, political or critical, then this is for geo-political reasons. Indeed, the world has changed profoundly in 50 years:

In 1968 the world seemed ripe for change for the better. The civil rights movements, the women’s movement, student movements around the world, antiwar marches and sit-ins captured the imagination of a new generation of sociologists who saw conventional sociology as lagging behind the most progressive movements; whereas today the world is lagging behind sociology, unapologetic about its wayward drift. Sociologists shift their critical eye ever more away from sociology toward the world it describes, a shift reflected in the insurgent interest in public sociology. In short, over the last 35 years there has been a scissors movement. The political context and the sociological conscience have moved in opposite directions, so that the world we inhabit is increasingly in conflict with the ethos and principles that animate sociologists—an ethos opposed to inequality, to the erosion of civil liberties, to the destruction of public life, and to discrimination and exclusion. (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1604)

If today sociology must become public and, now more than ever, assume its political responsibilities, then this is precisely because the civil society to which it has always been linked, as a science, is currently under threat. This threat must be seen in the context of the discipline’s history. Indeed, for Burawoy, it is clear that if:

political science's distinctive object of study is the state and its value the protection of political order, and if economics has as its distinctive object the economy and its value is the expansion of the market, then sociology's distinctive object is civil society and its value is the resilience and autonomy of the social. (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1615)

Sociology "is born with civil society and dies with civil society," he adds:

The classical sociology of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and Pareto arose with the expansion of trade unions, political parties, mass education, voluntary associations at the end of the nineteenth century, just as U.S. sociology was born amidst reform and religious organizations. Sociology disappears with the eclipse of civil society as in fascism, Stalinism or Pinochet's Chile, just as it quickly bubbles to the surface with the unfurling of perestroika in the Soviet Union or the civic and labor associations of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement. (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1616; also Burawoy, 2005, p. 24)

What can and should sociology do in the face of these regressions of recent decades? The question is all the more urgent today, as in several democratic states the coronavirus crisis has, on the one hand, given rise to a new upsurge of pre-existing authoritarian tendencies and, on the other, confirmed the irrepressible power of unregulated global capitalism, illustrated in particular by the dictate of the pharmaceutical firms, which no global democratic institution can control. To answer this question, Burawoy encourages us to recall the historical role of sociology:

Just as sociology arose with civil society in the 19th century to oppose market anarchy and political tyranny, so once again the mission of sociology lies in opposing the rise of utilitarian and economic thought. Against neoliberal orthodoxy, sociology poses as an inconvenient truth, along with its neighboring disciplines such as anthropology and geography, and along with dissident economists and political scientists. Sociology's survival becomes coterminous with the survival of civil society that is the last defense against the war waged by the agents of the market economy against human existence. Sociology's future as a discipline will depend on making its inconvenient truths everyday reality, which it can only do by entering the public sphere. (Burawoy, 2014, p. 153)

And in this public sphere, if sociology has to work with civil society then this is precisely because:

in a world tending toward market tyranny and state unilateralism, civil society is at once threatened with extinction and at the same time a major possible hold-out against deepening inequalities and multiplying threats to all manner of human rights. The interest of sociology in the very existence, let alone expansion, of civil society (even with all its warts) becomes the interest of humanity—locally, nationally and globally. (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1616)¹

So we can understand why Burawoy is enthusiastic about associationalism, noting that association is in a way what civil society almost spontaneously generates. "It is a political venue unto itself" (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1606), a public place where members, including sociologists, can debate the stances they might publicly adopt, as Durkheim already underlined (Burawoy, 2005, p. 8). What is striking about Burawoy's organic public sociology:

is not so much that it promotes critical engagement with the non-academic world—something which after all has been argued before [by classical public sociology]—but that it advocates a dialogical model, whereby sociologists and their publics are, theoretically at least, equal partners and equally responsible for producing knowledge. Burawoy's utopian vision for sociology conceives an intellectual and social partnership between the sociological researchers and the communities they

serve, whereby both parties are willing to learn from each other and collaborate, while striving for a common political goal. (Baert and Shipman, 2015, p. 189)

In this approach, “scientific” and “lay” forms of knowledge are placed on an equal footing.

It is no longer a matter—as was the case with Sartre and Bourdieu—of claiming to provide actors, engulfed in their bad faith or the *illusio* of the social game, with the truth of domination (Burawoy and Von Holdt, 2012, p. 45). In the public sociology, the critique of domination in fact amounts purely and simply to a *illusio* in which both parties—the researchers and those with whom they work—share an epistemological point of view, on an equal footing (Baert, 2013, pp. 189–190). Public sociology is therefore a very refreshing programme, putting into question a certain intellectualist tradition in sociology, it appears above all to synthesize various sociological approaches that are not new. As knowledge, and especially critical knowledge, must today be co-produced, it was already largely present in participatory approaches (Fassin, 2015, p. 600).

Fern Labram

2023-03-09 08:22:34

illusio

HYBRID KNOWLEDGE TO CHANGE THE WORLD ORDER: PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory research is a trend initiated in the United States by social psychologists such as Mayo and Lewin (Lewin, 1948). It became particularly popular in Latin America very early on through Freire’s pedagogy of freedom (Freire, 1970) and Fals Borda’s critique of development policies (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991). Meanwhile in Canada, Porter had already defined a form of participatory democracy that came quite close to Burawoy’s definition of organic public sociology (Helmes-Hayes, 2009). In France, this terminology of participatory research would be taken up and defined by the Fondation Sciences Citoyennes, created in 2002, as “a process of democratising knowledge, both in terms of the way it is produced and in the use that can be made of it” (Storup, 2012, p. 26).

The fact that forms of participatory research are experiencing an unprecedented rise is symptomatic of the profound transformations that are currently affecting the relationship between science and society. However, there are significant differences between these forms. Not all of them, admittedly, are likely to fulfil the critical dimension of organic public sociology, which involves the actors and associated researchers adopting a common emancipatory stance towards institutions. Thus, some participatory research simply aims to optimize the management of organizations by producing directly exploitable knowledge, to improve the productivity of certain professional practices, or to make science more effective by involving citizens in data collection (Juan, 2019). Godrie, for example, diagnoses and critiques an “integrationist model” in health and social services. Here medical knowledge remains central and is only marginally enriched by the contributions of patients, who sociologists help to formalize their stance. “Under the guise of democratisation”, this model “avoids any real renegotiation of the relationship between modes of knowledge” (Godrie, 2019, p. 14). The call for researchers’ participation is designed to relegitimize technicized approaches in order to make them more acceptable in an unchanged system of political power. This is also what is happening with the mobilization of “traditional ecological knowledge,” part of the sustainable develop-

ment trend in Canada for natural resource co-management projects with indigenous people. Their knowledge is appropriated, “compartmentalised” and “distilled” by researchers who have penetrated collectives, certainly, but have done so in order to improve the performance of their own economic management (Ranger and Gagnon-Bouchard, 2019). It is more a matter of assimilation than of mutual transformation, and the conditions for cognitive justice in the sense that Burawoy would understand it are not met. In these latter cases, it is clear that we have moved quite far from the ambitions of public organic sociology, which explicitly aims to strengthen the critical stance of civil society organizations against the established political and economic order.

Conversely, other participatory research is carried out with a view to knowing with the other, not about the other. It aims to strengthen people’s power to act to change their living conditions. Thus:

citizen participation is not limited to a consultation on a specific theme or to data collection, but is seen in terms of co-construction of the project from beginning to end, i.e. from the definition of the problem and the development of common objectives to the interpretation and dissemination of the results and the implementation of the project. (Storup, 2012, p. 21)

The organic dimension of public sociology is fully present here, except that the people involved will more readily refer to the idea of participatory research.

Thus, Carrel describes a “post-poverty epistemology”—which refers to a type of research that cross-fertilizes knowledge—when she presents the Equisanté research, carried out in Montreal with people experiencing poverty, researchers, volunteer health professionals, and ATD Fourth World (ATD Quart-Monde²) activists. She emphasizes the importance of spaces specifically for people experiencing poverty, but also the importance of support by qualified permanent ATD volunteers and sociologists in helping them to put their claims into public words. For people who have experienced extreme poverty, talking about this is not easy. This is why they value this sociological support, describing it as a “bridge” without which, they say, “we would have been analysed,” reduced to mere abnormal objects, abandoned to the state’s usually purely managerial perspective and destined to be reinserted into this world order which, however, never ceases to exclude (Carrel, 2020, p. 269).

This stance, which from the outset is critical of a society that generates exclusion (which Marx had already identified as being necessary for the permanent reduction in the value of labour on the market), has an impact on the scientific level. For participatory research is in fact based on a project of transforming the discipline of sociology:

the approach of classical sociology is to remain rigorous, objective, but the price to pay is enormous, because it means depriving oneself of all the knowledge that the poorest people have of their reality ... Let us try to make this requirement more flexible so that we can access all the reality that has escaped research up until now.

As Carrel says, “the cognitive and the political are intimately linked” (Carrel, 2020, p. 275). When it takes into account the words of vulnerable populations in order to frame their main values and claims, the sociological approach gives rise to interactions between experiential and scientific knowledge, as the ATD Fourth World association maintains. Post-poverty epistemology produces knowledge enriched by combining the competencies of the most precarious with sociological knowledge, in an equal partnership. Which has led some sociologists

to say that Burawoy did not really invent anything, at least for Canada (Goldberg and Van den Berg, 2009).

On this subject, as on others, the mistrust of scientific authorities is not insignificant. More generally, the very notion of participatory research is subject to denigration by advocates of a “purer” science, who suspect “engaged researchers” of ideological drift (Jaeger, 2017) or of a culpable abandonment of the requirement for political neutrality; of which Burawoy has also been accused (Holmwood, 2007). But the lines are moving, as shown by the gradual evolution of the largest research institution in France, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). Its ethics committee published an opinion in 2015 that accepted the use of “citizen science” only for data collection. However, following a call in the press in 2016, notably by ATD Fourth World and a laboratory of sociologists from the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, an agreement was signed in 2019. It establishes a permanent associative space for research based on the cross-fertilization of knowledge with people experiencing poverty (Frère and Laville, 2022). This more open stance confirms that of a 2017 decree where it is stated that social work is based on “academic knowledge in the social and human sciences, on the practical and theoretical knowledge of social work professionals and on the knowledge resulting from the experience of people benefiting from social support, who are involved in the construction of responses to their needs.”³ The CNRS took a long time to convince, and its procrastination highlights the divisions within the academic world: the question of whether there should be an affirmation of a single, positivist, scientific body of knowledge, or knowledge pluralism, is still widely debated today.

But this desire to promote exchanges between sociological and lay knowledges has the wind in its sails, fanned by various academic disciplines that have been ensuring such exchanges take place for some time. For example, the field of agro-ecology has been trying for some 40 years to distance itself from the productivist and extractivist framework imposed by our thermo-industrial modernity for over a century (Latour, 2017). In France, the Ultra Tree participatory research project is proof of this. It brings together researchers in social anthropology, economics and agronomy with actors involved in establishing peri-urban market garden plots. In order to deal with the problem of these farms’ viability, the system is built on the sharing of experiences, as well as a mixture of personal statements and active listening that aims to define the main features of a non-productivist mode of production. “The production of concrete ways of supporting market gardeners is the centrepiece of the approach” (Hermesse et al., 2019, p. 206). It forces the research participants to systematize their learning with a view to integrating it into their practice, and it allows “the actors on the ground to concretely measure the usefulness of their participation in the research” (Hermesse et al., 2019, p. 206).

Associations of farmers and researchers speak of reappropriating the practical knowledge of the former, which does not embrace the use of inputs harmful to certain plants or animals. And “against the technicians who dictate” practices, they argue, “we are taking back areas of freedom that we feel capable of defending.” They are learning to “make use of natural processes again, to understand them better, to get them going again and to integrate them into agriculture”. They are testing new working hypotheses, which means “not going it alone and sharing in groups” (Hermesse et al., 2019). This does not mean going back to the agriculture of yesterday, but rather initiating processes in which trials are punctuated by moments of collective evaluation thanks to the cross-fertilization of agronomic knowledge and the experimental knowledge of farmers. The fields become open-air laboratories that are set up to find a sustainable model that farmers can live on while caring for the planet and marketing healthy food.

Yet these participatory research mechanisms continue to come under recurrent attack from professional organizations in the hands of those who defend productivism, raising the spectres of backsliding, malice or distortion of competition. In this hostile context, the “farmers” know that they need to further strengthen their dialogue with researchers from public institutions such as the CNRS who are willing to think together about such issues. As we can see, far from the confusion of roles for which Burawoy’s public sociology is often criticized (Goldberg and Van den Berg, 2009), it is complementarities between “scientific” and “lay” knowledge that are emerging.

SOCIO-ANALYSIS AND SOCIOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

Burawoy is naturally aware that the organic method he advocates is not without antecedents or contemporary equivalents. In dialogue with Michel Wieviorka, who preceded him as president of the International Sociological Association (ISA), he readily draws parallels between public sociology and the sociological intervention Wieviorka practises:

Sociological intervention, says Wieviorka, involves the co-production of knowledge, often with a few militants in a social movement. The very act of partaking in sociological research can shift a movement’s self-understanding. The activists come to believe in the new knowledge when they appropriate it as their own, and apply it to the world around them. (Burawoy, 2014, p. 152)

This definition of the sociology of intervention, which Wieviorka inherits from his teacher Alain Touraine, is not without antecedents. Following the example of Latin America, in the social sciences of post-1968 France “various theoretical currents discussed the contributions and practical know-how of E. Mayo and K. Lewin’s North American social psychology” (Cousin and Rui, 2011, p. 525). Among these currents, we often remember the socio-analysis or institutional analysis of Guattari, Loureau, Lapassade and other teachers from the still famous Centre Universitaire Expérimental de Vincennes.⁴ The leitmotiv of institutional analysis is clearly the involvement of the researcher. They are encouraged to engage in a reflexivity capable of clarifying their personal choices. As soon as they become involved in a group, they do so in all good conscience, because what is at stake is the collective arrangement of statements of a common discourse that each person must be able to accept. The profound reorganization of research work—placing researchers and members of the collectives with which they were involved on an equal footing—led to the creation of numerous professional groups providing intellectual and cultural services. In France in the 1980s, we thus saw the emergence of “intervention collectives” whose members sought to work towards versatility, access to information and decision-making by all (Corpet et al., 1986).

The members of these collectives went into the public sphere with the aim of making knowledge usually reserved for specialists available to as many people as possible. These collectives, which included sociologists, developed considerably in the area of ecology, to the point where some became consultancy firms or training organizations that continue to provide advice on experiments in new energy technologies or organic farming.

It is important to trace their trajectory because at the time the researchers participating in them were caught up in the same attempt at associative organization, mixing together researchers and actors, as that advocated by Burawoy. None of them had a miracle recipe. When they were confronted with difficulties (for example, is it fair to implement equal pay when different

jobs involve very different responsibilities and working hours?), they proceeded through trial and error and makeshift solutions. Exchanges with the actors generated what we might call “experiential transversalities” (Marchat, 2019): sources of knowledge, based on the sharing of experiences, that remain beyond the reach of academic researchers. Living the experience is decisive. Becker (1963) would not have written the sociology bestseller *Outsiders* if he had not been a jazz musician.

The Marxist orientation of these intervention collectives—an orientation that has a strong presence in institutional analysis—is gradually fading away, as it is in Touraine or Wiewiorka’s sociology of intervention. And it is necessary to “distance ourselves from intervention practices that see change and liberation as having to happen through the destruction of an institutional order that is perceived from the outset as dominant and repressive” (Cousin and Rui, 2011, p. 525). Sociological intervention must first of all make it possible to reveal, think about and regulate conflict in collectives, with the aim of producing a common public stance. So it is not surprising to see these sociological intervention collectives refer to the practices developed by Paulo Freire, or for a more francophone reference, Saul Alinsky (1989 [1946]).

For intervention collectives it is no longer only a question of criticizing institutions (they are inevitable), but rather of working to critique existing institutions on the one hand, while thinking about how to institutionalize a series of associative practices on the other.

Let us take the example of one of these intervention groups, the Centre for Research and Information on Democracy and Autonomy (Centre de recherche et d’information sur la démocratie et l’autonomie—Crida). This Centre was inspired by socio-analysis’s critique of institutional control, but it did not set itself the sole aim of revealing what the institution was repressing: from 1981 to 2016, the goal of its openly intervention-oriented research was more that of making democratic emergences visible. Thus, from 1990 to 1997, at the request of officials worried about the increasing number of audits and controls to which their associations were being subjected, the members of Crida became involved in a group combining actors and researchers dedicated to the in-depth study of associations’ functioning. Like organic public sociologists, they “aim[ed] to enrich public debate about moral and political issues by infusing them with sociological theory and research” (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1603). Although they delved into the technicalities of the tests to which public authorities were subjecting these associations, Crida’s critiques and innovative solutions often ended up being neutralized as a result of managerial and budgetary recommendations. But Crida also realized that, by bringing to light the specific institutional history of each association—its founding values, its original purpose—and making its members freshly aware of this, it was possible to strengthen their resolve against the managerialization of their activities by external actors such as public funding bodies. For example, many collectives—historically built, for example, on the basis of feminist or environmentalist associative projects, or to fight for the rights of minorities or the most precarious (such as ATD Fourth World)—have been able to influence public policies and drive for political and legislative recognition of a series of specific forms of discrimination. Without the work carried out over the past 40 years by this type of group, it is likely that the world would be an even worse place today.

In this kind of intervention we can see a convergence with socio-analysis on the centrality of the concept of institution. But there is an important difference here, too, which may also point to a difference between this kind of intervention and Burawoy’s organic public sociology. Indeed, socio-analysis considers the institution as a quasi-synonym of reproduction of the order of domination established by the state and capitalism. The collective (which includes

sociologists), meanwhile, is seen as a quasi-synonym of the critique of all forms of public and economic institution.

In this somewhat one-sided vision, any new form that is instituted becomes equivalent to other instituted forms exercising domination; signalling, according to Lourau (1971), the failure of the revolutionary project. The problems identified by socio-analysis are therefore more pertinent than its solutions. Unlike socio-analysis, which claims to uncover the hidden grain of the institution, Crida's sociological intervention does not always (or only) object to institutionalization. The task is to participate in the democratic debate about how we represent social actions politically. There is no panopticon, but rather a presence of researchers who are anxious to step up and offer their interpretations, without believing that they have a privileged perspective on the social. Crida's production of numerous monographs, which are then handed back to the actors, and its sharing of results, are aimed precisely at encouraging collective reflection on the ambivalence of institutionalization, which can result in anything ranging from the expansion of the public domain to administrative standardization. Its researchers then help to constitute spaces for public debate in conjunction with the actors concerned. The alliance between the two is worthwhile because of the mutual enlightenment that they can bring to each other. This is a practice of deliberative democracy.

History is not all domination. Egalitarian initiatives have already given rise to institutions. The advent of political rights gave rise to civil and social rights, and then cultural rights with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declaration in 2001. And this chain of rights has only been achieved thanks to institutional pressure exerted by the political coordination of collectives made up of researchers and actors.

Social scientists can engage in associations along with civil society actors in order to take up a critical stance on the dominant political and economic orders, while striving to build something else. This is what Proudhon's pre-sociology already attempted to do, as we will now explore. In this type of association, we see an "equalization of 'rights to speak'" (Callon et al., 2009, p. 34). The opportunities given to each person, researchers and actors alike, "to argue on his or her own account and to question the justifications of others, transforms for a time the usual hierarchies and their underlying conceptions. This mutual discovery obviously affects each actor, whose identity is modified in turn" (ibid.). The reconfiguration of identities is the result of a reciprocal learning process that is all the more fruitful when one undertakes to "overcome the gap separating laypersons and specialists" (ibid.).

As we can see, there are many points in common between institutional analysis, the sociology of intervention, and participatory research. If we wish to look for a genetic origin of this family resemblance—a resemblance shared by all of these attempts from which organic public sociology inherits—then we can hypothesize that they are all actually part of an older, more fundamental matrix. This is an epistemology that has, so to speak, dug its way under the official hagiography of 19th and 20th century sociology (identified, for example, by Giddens and Sutton, 2013). This matrix has always led researchers, academics and other intellectuals to engage in civil society alongside ordinary actors for the purpose of political transformation.

I propose to describe this matrix as associationalist, in contrast to a more distanced, objectivist sociology.

ASSOCIATIONALISM AND COMMON SENSE

This “objective” and “distanced” form of sociology was first sketched out in a rough way in Comte’s positivism and then formalized definitively by Durkheim. With *The Rules of Sociological Method*, which Durkheim wrote in 1895, the status of sociological knowledge was fixed at a distance from lay knowledge. The time had come, he said, for sociology to:

take on the esoteric character which befits all science. Thus it will gain in dignity and authority what it will perhaps lose in popularity. For, so long as it remains embroiled in partisan struggles and is content to elaborate, with indeed more logic than commonly employed, common ideas, and in consequence presumes no special competence, it has no right to speak authoritatively enough to quell passions and dispel prejudices. (Durkheim, 1988 [1895], p. 114)

The scientific knowledge whose precedence Durkheim asserted over profane knowledge would go on to dominate sociological modernity throughout the 20th century. Bourdieu’s *The Craft of Sociology*, for example, fairly faithfully reproduces Durkheim’s position on this. Bourdieu conceives of the sociologist’s task as that of the intellectual who refuses to “consecrate the self-evidence of common sense” (Bourdieu et al., 1991 [1973], p. 54). Even in his later writings, he would affirm that sociology must be done at a distance. And to be at a distance is to guard against the “rationalizations produced from this standpoint, which is no longer that of action, without being that of science” (Bourdieu, 2005 [1977], p. 18).

This tradition of objectivity and distance, which marked the golden age of 20th century sociology, largely helped to push associationalism into the background. The latter sociological proposal had to deal with rather unfavourable historical conditions. Indeed, in general, the invisibilization of popular associationalism can be explained by the transition from the “first” 19th century, the era of democratic revolutions, to the “second” 19th century, the era of capital and empires, to use Hobsbawm’s (1978) chronology. At the end of the Second Republic in France (1848–1852), Napoleon III was proclaimed emperor. Democratic hope was once again eclipsed, and with this a nascent civil society was further suppressed, to pick up Burawoy’s analysis. But what was thus simultaneously invisibilized, to an even greater extent, was the fact that a number of intellectuals were at the forefront of the hitherto burgeoning phenomenon of association. The role played here by Proudhon, the instigator of a participatory sociological approach *avant la lettre*, is particularly illustrative.

Dardot and Laval should be credited for having recently brilliantly reminded us that Proudhon’s *ateliérisme* or associationalism was first and foremost a perspective that aimed to account for the self-institution of society. This self-institution, from the scientific point of view—and contrary to Comte—could not be subjected to an “objective” or “detached” analysis of “the pre-established nature of the social fact.” From a political point of view—and contrary to Marx—it rejected the ideal of a revolution achieved by taking the reins of the state, and emphasized that this revolution was at work in the daily practice of self-managed workers’ associations, not owned by those who were still called capitalists at the time (Dardot and Laval, 2014).⁵

Unlike Marx, who only learned what a worker looked like through the accounts that Engels brought back from his family’s factories, Proudhon never stopped surveying the associative initiatives of the time, such as those of the famous silk weavers, the Canuts of Lyon. In the course of his investigations, Proudhon tried to clarify and structure what Durkheim and

Bourdieu would call common sense, rather than reject it. What is important, he wrote, is to associate with civil society in order to:

observe how the people attach themselves to certain ideas rather than others, generalise them, develop them in their own way, and turn them into institutions and customs that they traditionally follow, until they fall into the hands of legislators and justiciars, who in turn make them into articles of law and rules for the courts. (Proudhon, 1977 [1865], pp. 70–711)

From the practices of workers' collectives, an idea emerges, and the people are about to take hold of it: it is association, whose principle is mutuality. "By the importance that it receives today and by the way in which the working classes demand that it be applied, it tends to become a PRECEPT, to take on a decidedly obligatory character, in a word, to acquire the force of law" (*ibid.*). The Canuts recognized themselves as equals at work, decided collectively on the management of their organizations, and paid themselves fairly (Frère, 2018). And Proudhon called on all of French society to follow the example of these new norms.

Dardot and Laval stress the crucial role in Proudhon's thinking of law, which is an instituting concept in the same way as it is for the sociologists of intervention mentioned above. It is through this means that it becomes possible to bring into existence associations, which these working-class practices of cooperation and mutual aid then informally maintain. Worker and consumer cooperatives must be described and protected by law. Proudhon made this request to the French parliament in the middle of the 19th century, well before the famous 1901 law that legally recognized workers' associations. Until then, the strict prohibition of the Le Chapelier law—passed in 1791 to ensure the absence of any "influential" intermediary bodies between the state and the free conscience of individual citizens—prevailed.

The associative effervescence that prevailed before and at the beginning of the Second Republic made a lasting impression on Proudhon. It was, he claimed, the realization in practice of what certain speculative minds had already glimpsed in the French Revolution of 1789 (Proudhon, 1977 [1865], pp. 70–71, pp. 80–81). In Proudhon's view, the associationalist idea would come to the mind of any intellectual who observed the practices of spontaneous solidarity in civil society. But for Proudhon, it would not come to the intellectual through some detachment, like a norm that, thanks to distance, one can locate in the principle of working-class practical reason; a norm that this practical reason is incapable of reflexively and distinctly formulating itself. Rather, Proudhon's theorization of associationalism came to him from the workers' own testimonies, which they themselves formulated reflexively in his company. In this respect, Proudhon cannot be considered a modern author; something that Marx (1983 [1846]) reproached him for very early on. He remained outside the great divisions imposed during the second 19th century between science and non-science, and even more so between objective facts and political values: the divisions that characterize what Latour (2004, p. 33) has called the constitution of the moderns.

Proudhon is quite comfortable not to remain at any "neutral" scientific distance, assuming that it is together that scholars and lay people reach a higher level of knowledge. The associationalist idea comes from the common sense that researchers and researched share:

By common sense, we mean 'judgement' insofar as it applies to things that are intuitively and immediately obvious, whose perception requires neither deduction nor investigation. It is more than instinct [or habitus, as Bourdieu would say], which is unaware of its determinations, whereas common sense knows what it wants and why it wants it. Nor is it faith or habit, which neither judge nor know them-

selves: whereas common sense knows and judges itself, as it knows and judges everything around it. Common sense is equal in all men; it is through it that the highest degree of self-evidence and the most perfect certainty comes to 'ideas' ... Common sense is both reason and experience synthetically united: it is judgment, but without either dialectic or calculation. (Proudhon, 1983 [1846], vol. II, pp. 211–212)

The mutualist principle lies in the common sense of the associates as a collectively rationalized experience. It is immediately obvious to the civil society actors of the time, who make judgments about it: judgments that it is too simple to consider wrong merely because they are produced by lay people. Proudhon does not seek to “have the last word” on the working class world or an “intelligent” attitude towards it (Boltanski, 2012 [1990], p. 35). In their practical situations, workers have neither the need nor the time to go back to the first principles that give meaning to their actions, or to the political orientations that permeate them. Proudhon therefore set out, together with these workers, to trace in writing both their political demands and the characteristics of their associations that they wished to see legally protected. In Burawoy’s terms, during the course of their investigations, the sociologist’s (Proudhon’s) exchange with the associated workers becomes a dialogical space capable of producing knowledge. But unlike Burawoy, Proudhon suggests that this co-constructed knowledge is itself able to nourish various processes of institutionalization.

In the blurred midst of his scientific and political work (both parliamentarian and polemicist; his criticisms of the bourgeois government got him imprisoned in 1849), Proudhon tirelessly investigated workshops such as those of the Canuts. Strictly speaking, he allied himself with the latter and led the political struggle to establish a role within public services (railways, the post office, and so on) for their model of associative functioning.⁶ Proudhon observed that the Canuts exchanged and shared tools among associations (*ateliers*), and had relatively equal incomes. On a large scale, therefore, “farmers, civil servants, industrialists, etc. should guarantee each other service for service, credit for credit, pledge for pledge, security for security (etc.), for which purpose economic law should be adapted to the reforms of commercial, civil, administrative and public law” (Proudhon, 1983 [1846], vol. II, p. 180).

Dardot and Laval have noted that, in addition to formalizing the critique of capitalists and government that makes him probably the first organic public sociologist, Proudhon was mindful of living long enough with the associated workers to be able to produce a report on their everyday life at work; a report that also constituted a societal project to be instituted:

By the “mutualistic constitution of the nation,” Proudhon means both a guarantee of justly distributed incomes to everyone through a system of mutual insurance, and justice exchanged on the basis of equal costs and penalties between persons considered equal. This approach is designed to nullify profits that are accrued merely as a result of owning property. The social constitution is nothing other than the juridical self-organization of society. Beginning with the recognition of the particular rights of different sectors, the constitution proceeds toward a formalized common law for all co-producers across the whole of society. Groups of producers, consumers, co-owners, associations, and public services are each bound together by this one autonomous law that, in its entirety, is the social constitution. It is not an arbitrary or voluntarist “social re-construction” imposed from above by an external government. The social constitution is the recognition of the more or less organized and explicit legal forms that govern collective life, both inside particular groups and between them, according to the principle of mutualism. (Dardot and Lavale, 2014, p. 256)

In association with each other, scholars and laypeople, actors and researchers, can produce and lay down in writing knowledge about this new egalitarian legal order that they are practising

on a daily basis, like Proudhon tried to do with the Canuts. This is what will ultimately lead to social transformation. And sociological investigation, in Proudhon's sense, will not be for nothing.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have seen that Burawoy's organic public sociology constitutes a most stimulating programme at a time when our societies are facing a double threat. Firstly, the reinforcement of capitalist hegemony, as illustrated for example by the incredible growth of pharmaceutical multinationals during the coronavirus crisis. Secondly, an authoritarian upsurge, as illustrated by the march of Trump supporters on Capitol Hill in January 2021 in the United States, by the monopolistic powers installed in Russia and Turkey, and by the rise of the far right throughout Europe. Like Bourdieu, Burawoy believes that, by penetrating deeply into civil society, sociology could act as a martial art that enables civil society to defend itself from these perils. This is not a new idea. In France at the turn of the 20th century, for example, Durkheim and Mauss were very loyal fellow travellers of the then nascent workers' movements, which were gradually organized into popular associations. At that point it was a matter of resisting the ravages caused both by industrial capitalism, on the one hand, and by public policies unconcerned about the fate of the proletarian classes, on the other, at a time when the state was still far from having become "social" (Castel, 2002). But these two intellectuals were public sociologists in the classical sense of the term. They willingly considered their knowledge as knowledge that could only be formulated at a higher level, by detaching itself from the social.

If public sociology has become organic with Burawoy, then in a sense it has done so in order to leave this pedestal which, by virtue of a somewhat narrow modernist definition of the scientific approach, has ended up depriving civil society—and more particularly the humble and precarious within it—of the capacity to construct a critical discourse. Worse, this objectivist, transcendent detachment has ended up making invisible new social practices that could inspire public policies, and by doing so move us far beyond the critique of existing policies. In this chapter, I have attempted to show that this organic desire to delve deeper into the flesh of the social world is not so much a novelty, as the contemporary resurgence of a sociological project that originated in the 19th century with Proudhon. This proposal has periodically resurfaced in the form of participatory research or sociological interventions in the second half of the 20th century. I have called this project associationalism.

By referring to the work of Proudhon, the mid-19th century figurehead of the associationalist movement, I have been able to show that this great pioneer of the sociological approach did not see his work of intellectual formalization as standing at a distance from common sense. Rather, he saw it as a process of co-constructing knowledge with the workers with whom he was associated; a process that was enabled precisely by a collectively shared common sense. His epistemology defines knowledge much more broadly than did that of Comte or Marx in the same era. It explains the author's genuine proximity to the social movements of the time. Thus, when he wrote to the workers who asked his opinion on the *Manifeste des Soixante*⁷ so that he could inject into it political proposals more powerful than their own, Proudhon (1964 [1952], p. 312) warned: "I have no hesitation in answering your question [but] my thinking can hardly be anything other than the interpretation of yours."

His associationalist epistemology is thus part of a dialogical perspective that wholly prefigures the post-poverty epistemology espoused by contemporary action research currents; provided, that is, that they do not simply seek to equip the managerial state (as we have seen, this can happen in the context of healthcare or measures to address unemployment), but rather to keep alive the possibility of its critique. Proudhon, who on many occasions came into conflict with public policies charged with combatting poverty, which he accused of being *miserabilist*,⁸ undoubtedly also prefigured socio-analysis in this respect. The proponents of socio-analysis (Guattari, Lourau, and Lapassade in France) entrusted researchers with the task of helping the users of various public services (the sick, the unemployed, and so on) to put critiques of the institutional policies that concern them into words. But in contrast to socio-analysis, and probably to Burawoy as well, Proudhon went further. In accordance with what some proponents of sociological intervention would suggest—as Touraine and Wiewiorka have theorized, and as Crida illustrates in this chapter—he held up the instituting power of associative engagement. And it is probably partly thanks to his work that today in France popular associations, workers’ cooperatives and mutual healthcare organizations still have legal statuses that allow them to resist the onslaught of capitalism and state bureaucracy. This is true even though, as Polanyi (2001 [1944]) diagnosed very early on, these sectors’ tendency to move towards commercial and administrative isomorphism has been at work for a long time.

When it recognizes the instituting power of association, organic public sociology offers a promising perspective to sociology, as indeed its equivalents have already shown in the field of agro-ecology. We may hope that the new energy Burawoy has breathed into it will keep alive the political concerns of researchers and civil society actors in a multitude of environmental and solidarity-based initiatives. We need only think of the recent phenomenon of the Temporary Autonomous Zones (Zones d’autonomie à défendre), full of young farmers, craftspeople and various intellectuals (Bulle, 2020). Having associated together to construct a more emancipatory, less productivist and less administered society, they are already working in their own way to revive the democratic utopia of past revolutions.

NOTES

1. “If we can transcend our parochialism and recognize our distinctive relation to diverse publics within and across borders, sociologists could yet create the fulcrum around which a critical social science might evolve, one responsive to public issues while at the same time committed to professional excellence” (Burawoy, 2004, p. 1616).
2. <https://atd-quartmonde.be>.
3. Decree n°-2017-877 of 6 May 2017.
4. Founded in the aftermath of May 1968 with the aim of offering a participatory, self-managed and libertarian-inspired education, this university (which became Paris VIII after it moved), would welcome teachers no less than François Chatelet, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Alain Badiou, Michel Serres, Robert Castel, Giorgio Agamben, among others.
5. For the relationship to Comte, see Dardot and Laval (2014, pp. 408–409). For the relationship to Marx, see Dardot and Laval (2014, pp. 371–380).
6. At the state level, “the purpose of the completed mutuality will be to divide itself into as many workshop associations with specific and antagonistic tasks organised in a federative democracy” (Proudhon, 1977 [1865], p. 172f.).
7. This 1864 manifesto, intended for the press of the time, presented a program of social demands to support workers’ candidacies in an election.

8. For example, Proudhon attacked the “national workshops” of the Luxembourg commission charged with making proposals for social reform. He accused the government of the Second Republic of charitable condescension towards the workers recruited in these workshops, who were entrusted with all sorts of public works under strong state supervision, topped by a total disregard for the endogenous evolution of associations in civil society itself. Indeed, these workshops were built from scratch by members of the commission for unemployed workers, who were always assumed to be idle, wasteful and incapable of self-organization (see Frère, 2009).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alinsky, Saul (1989 [1946]). *Reveille for Radicals*. New York: Vintage.
- Baert, P. (2013). “La phénoménologie pour un nouveau rapport pragmatiste au monde social,” in B. Frère and S. Laoureux, eds, *La phénoménologie à l'épreuve des sciences humaines*. Bruxelles: Pie Peter Lang editeur, pp. 130–131.
- Baert, P. (2015). *The Existentialist Moment: The Rise of Sartre as a Public Intellectual*. London: Polity Press.
- Baert, P. and Shipman, A. (2015). “L'avènement de l'intellectuel enraciné Nouvelles formes de critique et d'engagement publics,” in B. Frère, ed., *Le tournant de la théorie critique*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, pp. 93–113.
- Becker, H.S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Boltanski, L. (2012 [1990]). *Love and Justice as Competences*. London: Polity Press.
- Borghini, (2015). “À la recherche des modernités possibles Espace d'interprétation et critique dans la société en réseaux,” in B. Frère, ed., *Le tournant de la théorie critique*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, pp. 93–114
- Bourdieu, P. (2005 [1977]). *Outline a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., Chamboredon, J. and Passeron, J. (1991 [1973]). *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*. Berlin, Germany and Boston, MA, USA: De Gruyter.
- Bulle, S. (2020). *Irréductibles. Enquête sur des milieux de vie de Bure à N.-D.-des-Landes*. Grenoble: UGA Editions.
- Burawoy, M. et al. (2004). “Public sociologies: a symposium from Boston college,” *Social Problems*, 51(1), pp. 103–130.
- Burawoy, M. (2004). “Public sociologies: contradictions, dilemmas, and possibilities,” *Social Forces*, 82(4), pp.1603–1618
- Burawoy, M. (2005). “2004 Presidential Address: For public sociology,” *American Sociological Review*, 70(1), pp. 4–28.
- Burawoy, M. (2014). “Introduction: sociology as a combat sport,” *Current Sociology Monograph*, 62(2), pp. 140–155
- Burawoy, M. and Von Holdt, K. (2012). *Conversation with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Callon, M., Lascoumes, P. and Barthe, Y. (2009). *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*. London: MIT Press.
- Carrel, Marion (2020). “Vers une épistémologie postpauvreté? Le croisement des savoirs avec les personnes en situation de pauvreté,” in Maïté Juan, Jean-Louis Laville and Joan Subirats, eds, *Du social business à l'économie solidaire. Critique de l'innovation sociale*. Toulouse: Érès, pp. 261–282.
- Castel, R. (2002). *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*. London: Routledge.
- Corpet, O., Hersent, M. and Laville J.-L. (1986). “Le savoir sans privilège,” *Revue internationale d'action communautaire*, 15(5), pp. 113–121.
- Cousin, O. and Rui, S. (2011). “La méthode de l'intervention sociologique,” *Revue française de science politique*, 3(61), pp. 513–532
- Dardot, P. and Laval, C. (2014). *Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXIe Siècle*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Durkheim, E. (1988 [1895]), *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*. Paris: Flammarion.

- Fals Borda, O. and Rahman, M. (1991). *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly With Participatory Action-Research*. London: Apex Press.
- Fassin, D. (2015). "The afterlife of ethnography," *American Ethnologist*, 42(4), pp. 592–608.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Frère, B. (2009). *Le Nouvel Esprit Solidaire*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Frère, B. (2018). "Back to materialism: reflections on Marx's representation of labour, praxis, cooperative and libertarian socialism in the 19th century," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 31(1), pp. 69–94.
- Frère, B. and Laville, J.-L. (2022). *La fabrique de l'émancipation. Repenser la critique du capitalisme à partir des expériences démocratiques, écologiques et solidaires*. Collection La couleur des idées. Paris: Le Seuil.
- Giddens, A. and Sutton P.W. (2013). *Sociology*. London: Polity Press.
- Godrie, B. (2019). "Du modèle intégrationniste des savoirs à l'écologie des savoirs en santé mentale," *Pratiques coopératives et participatives en santé*, RT1-RT19 Association française de sociologie. Paris: Université Paris Nanterre.
- Goldberg, A. and Van den Berg, A. (2009). "What do public sociologists do? A critique of Burawoy," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 34(3), pp. 765–802.
- Helmes-Hayes, R. (2009). "Engaged, practical intellectualism: John Porter and 'new liberal' public sociology," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 34(3), pp. 831–868.
- Hermesse, J., Corentin Dayez, Noémie Maughan, François Wiaux, Geoffroy Anciaux, et al. (2019). "Ultra Tree, un exemple de recherche action participative en soutien à l'installation de projets de maraîchage (péri) urbain," *Revue Pour*, 234–235, pp. 201–207.
- Holmwood, J. (2007). "Sociology as public discourse and professional practice: a critique of Michael Burawoy," *Sociological Theory*, 25(1), pp. 46–66.
- Hobsbawm, E.J. (1978). *L'Ère des révolutions, 1789–1848*. Paris: Fayard.
- Jaeger, M. (2017). "L'implication des HUC (habitants-usagers-citoyens) dans la recherche," *Vie sociale*, 20(4), pp. 11–29.
- Juan, M. (2019). Les recherches participatives, enjeux et actualités, Etat de l'art pour le Prix de la recherche participative (Fondation de France – GIS Démocratie et participation). <https://www.participation-et-democratie.fr/un-panorama-des-recherches-participatives-0>.
- Latour, B. (2004). *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2017). *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Lourau, R. (1971). *L'analyse institutionnelle*. Paris: Minuit.
- Marchat, Jean-François (2019). "Sociologues au CRIDA," *Connexions*, 1, no 111, *Innovations démocratiques et dispositifs d'intervention*, pp. 63–76.
- Marx, K. (1983 [1846]). *Misère de la philosophie*. In P.-J. Proudhon, *Philosophie de la misère*, T. III. Paris: Fresnes-A fédération anarchiste, pp. 165–321.
- Pignarre, P. and Stengers, I. (2011). *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Polanyi, K. (2001 [1944]). *The Great Transformation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Proudhon, P.J. (1964 [1952]). "Lettre aux ouvriers en vue des élections de 1864," *Contradictions politiques*. Paris: Marcel Rivière, pp. 312–326.
- Proudhon, P.-J. (1977 [1865]). *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières*. Paris: Editions du monde libertaire.
- Proudhon, P.J. (1983 [1846]). *Système des contradictions économiques ou Philosophie de la misère*, T. II. Paris: Fresnes-A fédération anarchiste.
- Ranger, C. and Gagnon-Bouchard, L. (2019). "Posture privilégiée et production de savoir décolonial," Working paper, Montréal.
- Storup, B. (2012). *La recherche participative comme mode de production des savoirs*. Paris: Fondation Sciences Citoyennes.