Towards an ethic of public sociology

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Among scholars of social movements there is presently a lively debate about the ethics of social research. While the topic of research ethics is rarely one that excites non-specialists (except when Facebook are involved in emotional manipulation experiments) the debate has some important ramifications. Below, I argue that questions of research ethics always take us beyond the bureaucratic approach of ethics committees and into vital questions of the moral character of sociological research. To answer those questions we need a deeper understanding of the political role of a public sociology, and that understanding must be informed by publics themselves.

In putting together a collection of articles on Research Ethics and Social Movements my co-editor, Jenny Pickerill, and I were struck by the ways in which seemingly narrow questions
about the acceptability of particular research interactions in specific locales ineluctably led researchers into much wider questions concerning the nature of knowledge production and the political positioning of social science in general. In the following paragraphs I will bring an ethics-driven approach to those two questions into conversation with the rather separate debate on public sociology that has been taking place over the last decade. Reconsidering the relationships that researchers enter into with their ‘research subjects’, their audiences and their publics - demands a broad, but openly political vision of the role of sociology.

The academy is a privileged site of knowledge production thanks to our institutional resources and the cultural capital that accrues with degrees and professional accreditation. Other sites of knowledge production are widely recognised too, of course: corporate R&D centres, political think tanks or government policy units for instance. Universities are thus important nodes in larger ‘epistemic networks’ or knowledge communities around particular research problems. A current trend in social movement scholarship is to highlight the sociologically-relevant knowledge production going on within social movements. To some extent this is a rediscovery of a position described by Eyerman and Jamison, when they argued that social movements are defined by their ‘cognitive praxis’ - that is, their knowledge producing behaviours - and, ‘that much if not all new knowledge emanates from the cognitive praxis of social movements.’

Social movements often emerge through the definition of particular kinds of social problems: environmental politics since the 1960s is a clear example, as is the critique of international financial institutions developed in the alter-globalisation movement since the mid-1990s. The more complex task of identifying solutions and strategies for social change is also something that movements are deeply involved in, even if their claims here less often gain traction in either the mainstream media or academic research. This may be in part because the mode of knowledge production in movements is unfamiliar to outsiders. As Laurence Cox recently argued, ‘contemporary movement theorising is more collective, democratic and practice based; it seeks above all a mode of conversation between different intellectual languages.’

The relevance of all this to research ethics lies in its effects on the character of the relationship between academics and movement participants. Scholars need to guard against unwittingly reproducing an extractive mode of engagement with ‘research subjects’ and instead take seriously the idea of co-production of knowledge that recognises the expertise of movement groups involved in the analysis of social problems. Given the inequalities built into research relationships that are often sparked by academics with agendas that have been set already, and in conversation with problems defined in scholarly literature, this is a difficult task that should be embedded in the design of research projects and operate continuously through data collection, analysis and dissemination.

That is not, of course, to say that all research should be some form of participatory action research, much less that scholars should simply translate movement analyses into academic language. There will be many possible solutions here, but the problem must be seen as one of how we relate, ethically, to the individuals or organisations we envelop in our research projects. For instance, the dividing lines between ‘research subjects’ and what funding bodies call ‘research users’ should be overcome; considering one’s own position as one
'node' in an ‘epistemic network’ that extends far beyond the university might be helpful in that regard.

This view of knowledge production should also help us understand what the oft-repeated demand for more ‘public sociology’ might entail. Most often, public sociology is interpreted mainly as a matter of seeking extra-academic audiences. For Michael Burawoy this is part of a four-way division of sociological labour, the other roles being professional, critical and policy sociology. At times public sociology is seen as a ‘back-translation’ of scientific knowledge produced by professional sociology so that it can be of more value to society at large. Of itself, this is a laudable aim that is well exemplified in the December 2014 issue of Discover Society. From this view the requirement on sociologists is that they seek outlets beyond the pay-walled academic journals that present professional sociology’s gold standard research. However, in setting the public sociology debate in train, Burawoy characterised public sociology as generating ‘reflexive knowledge [which] interrogates the value premises of our society’. This is potentially much more than a translation of the findings of professional sociology and clearly fits the kinds of knowledge found in movements’ cognitive praxis. But taking account of recent demands for more co-production of knowledge means engaging our ‘publics’ as much more than audiences, consumers or users of research just as it means treating movement participants as more than ‘research subjects’.

The closer the relationship between sociologists and their publics, however, the more important is the political positioning of sociological research. While some scholar-activists argue that sociologists should align their own goals with those of the movements they study, I have argued elsewhere that this is a problematic ambition. It diminishes the autonomy of scholarship and, at the same time, doesn’t seem an especially effective way of supporting one’s political goals: as Croteau has it, ‘Becoming an academic to support social movements is akin to launching a space program to develop a pen that writes upside down. At best, it is a circuitous route.’ Moreover, using the alignment of politics between scholar and ‘research subject’ as a criterion of ethical research would greatly reduce the scope of possible research problems. Some of the most important research problems today require that we engage with ‘subjects’ with whom we may well disagree profoundly, whether that is studying the ‘ugly movements’ of nationalism or fundamentalism, say, or broader phenomena such as racism or homophobia. An ethical approach to such topics demands that we treat research respondents with the respect we would accord all individuals. That may require honesty with respect to our research agendas; although in studying topics like terrorism one could likely argue that the import of the research and safety of the researcher justifies a more covert approach. In less obvious cases a sensitive approach to the political positioning of a research project will be required but our individual commitments may ultimately impact on what research strategies are feasible. Nevertheless, blurring the boundaries between subjects and publics, as suggested above, also allows us to recognise all of our research interactions – from the earliest approaches to potential gatekeepers to the last instances of dissemination of results – as engaging publics. Not all relevant publics will be sympathetic to a sociological perspective, but that may be all the more reason to attempt to engage them throughout the research process.

If the political ramifications of research are something that ought properly to be considered in any ethical approach to study then this becomes all the more urgent when our aim is to
conduct public sociology. The above point suggests that at the very least, political positioning must be considered when we ask, ‘what publics?’ For Burawoy public sociology is inherently aligned with civil society, which is to say both that it is within civil society that sociology will most likely find its public audiences and that in interrogating the ‘value premises of our society’ public sociology will likely be focused on the colonization of civil society by state and market. In supporting the notion of public sociology in general, Craig Calhoun disrupts the separation of the spheres implicit in Burawoy’s privileging of civil society. Calhoun argues that the separation of disciplines by which we attempt to understand social structures simply mirror dominant capitalist ideologies and thus market, state and civil society must be understood together.

In this regard, Erik Olin Wright’s attempt to set out the characteristics of an emancipatory social science is a potential corrective. Wright’s project is to identify the ‘real utopias’ that indicate ways in which social, political and economic powers might be realigned to the benefit of subaltern groups. Wright bases his investigation on the almost trivially uncontroversial principle that some causes of human suffering may be found in social structures that are, in principle at least, amenable to change. Civil society organisations and social movement groups are, of course, similarly convinced that understanding the social causes of social problems is the first step in working towards beneficial social change. If Cox’s characterisation of movement knowledge production quoted above is correct, then like the social problems they confront, movements have no particular respect for the disciplinary boundaries of the academe.

The claims above suggest that Burawoy’s influential vision for public sociology, at least as it has most often been interpreted, may be too narrow - with an excessive focus on ‘the social’ that might disable a more politically engaged understanding of social reality - and too unidirectional - with a view of new knowledge flowing outwards from the professional core. Social movement scholars’ calls for more movement-relevant and politically committed research offer an alternative vision for engaged research. The danger here is that we lose sight of the particular contribution that rigorous academic scholarship might play in wider systems of knowledge production. Recognising movements as centres of knowledge production is an important step but movement knowledge is not, in itself, necessarily more valid that knowledge produced elsewhere. If knowledge is always partial then it is in increasing the number of viewpoints, rather than fetishizing the grassroots, that we move towards a fuller and more politically potent understanding of social problems. Since most sociological research projects engage ‘publics’ in various guises, then any ethically-driven approach must recognise the contribution of those publics to the generation of new knowledge. Finally, the debates on both public sociology and social movement scholarship have mostly taken place, rather ironically, in academic journals and professional association meetings. It must be time to invite the public into these debates. What role do our publics think sociology ought to play in solving today’s pressing social problems?

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