



Preface

Corey Dolgon and Mary Chayko

The movement toward public sociology is exciting! More and more, scholars and practitioners (especially younger ones) are taking their sociological training directly to—and from—the public in order to change the everyday lives of people and their communities. And it’s about time.

For those of us connected to the Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS) and its journal, *Humanity and Society*, both the process and goal of doing sociological work has always been to address social problems and make the world a better place. Every article in this anthology provides a certain insight into this kind of sociology: theories and concepts to help us better understand it, methods used to investigate it, ways to practice it, its future—and how you can be a part of it. And each article is followed by a rejoinder written by a member of the AHS that offers a reflection, critique or update to the original article.

Many of the most important thinkers and researchers in this tradition are represented here: Al McClung Lee, Patricia Hill Collins, Mary Jo Deegan, Ashley “Woody” Doane, Walda Katz-Fishman. They—and the other fine writers and researchers contributing to this volume—have been “pioneering” public sociology for well over a quarter of a century. In this book, they contribute many creative, useful and provocative ideas for bringing sociology to the public and working on behalf of the public.

AHS has been at the forefront of public sociology since its inception in 1976. Our mission statement makes clear this purpose:

Humanist sociologists strive as professionals, as scholars and as activists, to uncover and address social issues, working with others to lessen the pain of social problems. We view people not merely as products of social forces, but also as shapers of social life, capable of creating social orders in which everyone’s potential can unfold. Difficult times give humanist sociologists opportunities to apply their special skills and perspectives for the purpose of creating a more humane world.

Now, we see increased publications about public sociology, myriad conferences and workshops dedicated to it, and even entire undergraduate and graduate programs focused on it.

AHS takes great pride in watching the rest of the discipline come around to our way of thinking about (and doing) sociology.

Yet, while we celebrate the increasing “mainstreaming” of public sociology, we also recognize the need to keep what becomes popular grounded in some basic principles. Years ago, Raymond Williams (1989) argued that the institutionalization of radical intellectual practices puts new pressures on those radical intellectuals responsible for such formalization in the first place. Institutions of higher education and professional organizations require a kind of mainstreaming that often depoliticizes work in favor of the demands for funding and grants, institutional assessment and advancement, peer recognition and rewards. The project of radical transformation can be transformed by the bureaucratic and often reactionary forces of conservative institutions and ideologies.

Former ASA President, Michael Burawoy (2004), harkening back to Robert Lynd’s question of “sociology for what?” and our own Al McClung Lee’s question of “sociology for whom?” asked his own set of framing questions for public sociology and its practitioners:

Do we take the values and goals of our research for granted, handed down to us by some external (funding or policy) agency? Should we only concentrate on providing solutions to predefined problems, focusing on the means to achieve predetermined ends, on what Weber called technical rationality and what I call instrumental knowledge? In other words, should we repress the question of ends and pretend that knowledge and laws spring spontaneously from the data, if only we can develop the right methods? Or should we be concerned explicitly with the goals for which our research may be mobilized, and with the values that underpin and guide our research? Going further afield, should sociologists be in the business of stimulating public discussions about the possible meanings of the “good society”? (p. 1606)

AHS members and contributors to *Humanity and Society* would respond in much the same way that Bob Dylan’s thief “kindly” responds to the joker in *All Along the Watchtower*:

But you and I, we’ve been through that,
And this is not our fate,
So let us not talk falsely now,
The hour is getting late.

Or, we would go further back to Albert Camus (1965), whose character Tarrou claimed: “All I know is that there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as is possible, not to join forces with the pestilences” (p. 301). Camus later says of *The Plague*’s hero, Dr. Rieux, that “the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could only be the record of what had to be done, and what surely would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers” (p. 325). It seems to us that public sociology is *the* principled, moral response to this, as we dedicate our knowledge and abilities to making the world a better, more humane place.

This collection of articles from the first thirty years of *Humanity and Society* reminds us again and again that, in a world filled with pestilence, we must employ all the intellectual and practical tools at our disposal to fight against it, side with the victims of plagues, and comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable—especially in cases when the source of comfort is one of the root causes of the pestilence. The scholar activists and activist scholars in this collection (and many others in the Association for Humanist Sociology) are the true “pioneers of public sociology”—practicing public sociology in a wide variety of ways and settings for decades. In other words, AHS was doing public sociology long before it became “cool.”

Our job now is to maintain the radical, humanist, politically principled edges of public sociology as it moves from margins to center. We hope that this engaged, motivated, practical approach to sociology fuels your interest in public sociology and in “using” the study of sociology to make the world a better place. And we hope this book gives you specific ideas for how to go about doing so. Using your knowledge of sociology to work directly on behalf of people is a much needed and very rewarding way to make your mark on society. And you should never feel alone. As the rejoinders to these articles show us, we don’t follow in these pioneers’ footsteps so much as we walk alongside them toward a more humane future.

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