

## Introduction

### Burawoy's Public Sociology. Origins, assumptions, critical aspects

The proposal for a public sociology, launched in 2004, by Michael Burawoy, at the American Sociological Association Meeting<sup>1</sup> in San Francisco, has reached a great echo in the world's sociological community and has represented a positive shock for it. Proof is the fact that this Presidential Address has been causing wide debate - conferences, seminars, forum - and the publication of numerous books and articles<sup>2</sup> widely distributed in these 15 years. Today, public sociology is an expression that has entered in the language of the sociologists, a term that immediately recalls a certain practice of sociology, a *sociological style* born with the aim to revive the place of sociology, revitalize its moral fiber and make capable of affecting the living flesh of problems of Western societies and not. Over time, the moral thrust of this proposal has not failed, and the awareness that public sociology can assume the features of a global sociological proposal, by surpassing the size of the nation state and provincializing the point of view of the United States, makes it the best proposal in order to represent the point of view from below, that is the point of view of the civil society. As stated by the same author, «[...] the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology - and in particular its public face - defends the interests of humanity» (Burawoy, 2005, 24) and, lately, «without abandoning public engagement, sociology's challenge today is to go global» (Burawoy, 2016, 950).

According to these first notes, it is evident that public sociology runs the risk of being the victim of a paradoxical destiny. Its diffusion and its success, in fact, risk to nullify its moral and innovative core, especially when it should be institutionalized, thus becoming something similar to the professional sociology of today that, on several occasions, Burawoy describes how the cultural, historical and moral betrayal<sup>3</sup> of the sociological tradition, the mortification of nature and soul of sociology, especially with respect to the original proposal formulated by the classics (Dukheim, Weber, Bourdieu, Du Bois, etc.).

In fact, if we have correctly grasped the original intention of the author, public sociology - and the public sociologist - should resemble the Socratic horsefly of Athens<sup>4</sup>, who seeks the truth through constant dialogue with the interlocutor, crumbling his/her previous certainties.

Clearly Burawoy is not opposed to professional sociology in itself, but to the drift that it has taken. So much so that public sociology intertwines with the other forms of sociology - professional, policy and criticism -, and, combining with them according to a scheme in which each implies the others, does not deny professional sociology but rather completed it: "herein lies the promise and challenge of public sociology, the complement and not the negation of professional sociology" (Burawoy, 2005, 4).

At the same time it would increasingly connote itself as something that escapes an absolute definition, and aims to reinvigorate the sociological tradition, to overcome cultural barriers and material and symbolic borders, developing, from below, a global approach to social issues, against the tyranny of the market (and of the State): "the success of public sociology will not come from above but from below. [...] I envision myriads of nodes, each forging collaborations of sociologists with their publics, flowing

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<sup>1</sup>For a description of the atmosphere in which this presidential address was pronounced see Ollion, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Burawoy himself offers extensive proofs of this debate on his website (<http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS.Webpage/ps.mainpage.htm>). See also. <http://sociologicalimagination.org/resources/public-sociology-bibliography>

<sup>3</sup> And we would also add a generational betrayal if we reflect on the following lines by Burawoy: "so equally we must appreciate the importance of the non-careerist underpinnings of careers. Many of the 50% to 70% of graduate students who survive to receive their PhD, sustain their original commitment by doing public sociology on the side - often hidden from their supervisor. How often have I heard faculty advise their students to leave public sociology until after tenure - not realizing (or realizing all too well?) that public sociology is what keeps sociological passion alive. If they follow their advisor's advice, they may end up a contingent worker in which case there will be even less time for public sociology, or they may be lucky enough to find a tenure track job, in which case they have to worry about publishing articles in accredited journals or publishing books with recognized university presses. Once they have tenure, they are free to indulge their youthful passions, but by then they are no longer youthful. They may have lost all interest in public sociology, preferring the more lucrative policy world of consultants or a niche in professional sociology. Better to indulge the commitment to public sociology from the beginning, and that way ignite the torch of professional sociology" (Burawoy, 2005, 15).

<sup>4</sup> See Plato, *Apology of Socrates*.

together into a single current. They will draw on a century of extensive research, elaborate theories, practical interventions, and critical thinking, reaching common understandings across multiple boundaries, not least but not only across national boundaries, and in so doing shedding insularities of old” (Burawoy, 2005, 25).

It is therefore a matter of developing a public sociological style made up of severe criticism, open-mindedness, building a common path with the various publics that this proposal contributes not only to engaging in the debate but also to creating<sup>5</sup>.

On several occasions the author, while reaffirming, in the text, the need to safeguard the reflective dimension of sociology, threatened by the instrumental one - «I believe it is the *reflexive* dimension of sociology that is in danger, not the instrumental dimension. At least in the United States professional and policy sociologies - the one supplying careers and the other supplying funds - dictate the direction of the discipline» (Burawoy, 2005, 18) - claims that “despite the normalizing pressures of careers, the originating moral impetus is rarely vanquished, the sociological spirit cannot be extinguished so easily” (Burawoy, 2005, 5).

Therefore, a proposal emerges which, from the outset, rests, in our opinion, on the following pillars.

- a) Recovery of the most limpid and direct sociological tradition, with authors such as Durkheim, Du Bois, Mills, Bourdieu that works as a moral ideal for the younger generations of sociologists;
- b) Importance of the category of public, understood both as opposed to private and as public towards which and with which sociologists must operate: «the interest in a public sociology is, in part, a reaction and a response to the privatization of everything. Its vitality depends on the resuscitation of the very idea of ‘public’, another casualty of the storm of progress» (Burawoy, 2005, 7);
- c) A clear stance in favor of civil society (a standpoint), defended and valued by public sociology against State and Market: “if the standpoint of economics is the market and its expansion, and the standpoint of political science is the state and the guarantee of political stability, then the standpoint of sociology is civil society and the defense of the social. In times of market tyranny and state despotism, sociology - and in particular its public face - defends the interests of humanity (Burawoy, 2005, 24)<sup>6</sup>. And “today, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although communism has dissolved and fascism is a haunting memory, the debris continues to grow skyward. Unfettered capitalism fuels market tyrannies and untold inequities on a global scale, while resurgent democracy too often becomes a thin veil for powerful interests, disenfranchisement, mendacity, and even violence” (Burawoy, 2005, 4).
- d) The need for public sociology, due to its tradition and the notion of the public, to overcome the limits of methodological nationalism - Beck is another author very quoted by Burawoy - or of US parochialism to meet other sociologies, helping both European and US sociologies to emerge from their provincialism, and non-European societies to emerge from their state of minority, through, as stated in a 2008 paper, the protagonism of the local, regional and national level reconciled in a global synthesis: “contesting domination at all levels depends on the valorization of local, national and regional sociologies, allowing voices from the periphery to enter into debates with the center” (Burawoy, 2008, 443), and thus becoming both a champion of global civil society and a global proposal.

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<sup>5</sup> In one passage he indeed affirms: “indeed, part of our business as sociologists is to define human categories - people with AIDS, women with breast cancer, women, gays - and if we do so with their collaboration we create publics. The category woman became the basis of a public - an active, thick, visible, national nay international counter -public—because intellectuals, sociologists among them, defined women as marginalized, left out, oppressed, and silenced, that is, defined them in ways they recognized [...]it is clear that public sociology needs to develop a sociology of publics» (Burawoy, 2005, 8).

<sup>6</sup> Even this contrast appears a bit excessive, as claimed by Prentice: “Although many social movement actors see the state as a site of remedy for social problems, Burawoy reproduces the neoliberal conviction that the state is always and only beleaguering, coercive, and despotic [...] Beyond demonizing the state, Burawoy also romanticizes civil society” (Prentice, 2014).

On this last point we seem to be able to affirm, retracing the debate and production accumulated over the years, as well as the same positions taken by Burawoy, - including a 2016 article with the significant title *Promise of Sociology* - that he basically wants to insert himself, from the beginning, and more so in recent times, in a debate on the role of sociology in the global arena, an aspiration absolutely consistent with the assumptions of its original proposal. As we have seen before, sociology is the guarantor and expression of civil society: either it is global or it is not.

This is certainly an ambitious and shareable program, especially for a discipline such as sociology, so young if compared to other disciplines, and subject to constant dangers of colonization, or other internal proposals of self-reform<sup>7</sup>. A program that, and Burawoy is absolutely aware of it<sup>8</sup>, lends itself to two orders of dangers: in addition to the danger we have previously underlined - the institutionalization of the proposal and therefore the weakening of its moral fiber - even to criticism and widespread skepticism that his proposal would have aroused - then promptly verified.

Obviously, in these years Burawoy has fought a fierce intellectual battle to defend his proposal and numerous were the replies to the critics that he has elaborated, an unequivocal sign, once again, of the vitality of a debate on the foundations of sociology in our time, triggered by the American sociologist.

For our part, we believe that in order to avoid the failing of his ambitious program, it is necessary that public sociology, assuming a reflective role - that is, reflecting on itself, its epistemological foundations, its goals - operates a reform of itself and that it has to become aware of some of the problematic nodes that the critical debate aroused over time has gradually come to light and that, in our opinion, can be traced back to what we call the *fundamental dualism* that runs through it and that we will try to clarify.

In our opinion, it is possible to find this fundamental dualism in three dimensions:

a) the communicative dimension, that is the distinction between sociologists and the public; b) the ethical-political one, the distinction so dear to Burawoy between the instrumental and reflective dimension of sociology; and, finally, c) the epistemological one, the distinction between local and global sociological practices, between an epistemology of the North and one of the South. Such dualism risks, in particular, to frustrate the global and democratic aspirations of public sociology.

In the following pages, we will review the three dimensions mentioned above emphasizing the substantial analogy of the three forms of dualism that characterize Burawoy's proposal, whose common element is precisely the risk of leaving an empty space between sociologist and public, reflective and professional sociology, local and global knowledge, or North and South. We will outline, based on critical literature, the solutions hypotheses that have been promoted for each dimensions. And, finally, we introduce a working in progress hypothesis of solution, applicable, especially, to the epistemological question.

## 1. Communicative dimension

Burawoy distinguishes two types of public sociology, based on two distinct publics. He immediately avoids the trap of a first explicit dualism, underlining how these two sociologies are in close contact, arguing that "between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education. [...] Traditional and organic public sociologies are not antithetical but complementary. Each informs the other" (Burawoy, 2005, 8). His proposal, however, does not elude a second type of

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<sup>7</sup> On several occasions, Burawoy talks about the attempts to reform Sociology, among which he cites the one proposed by Wallerstein, the dissolution of sociology in the social sciences (Burawoy, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the critical bibliography is extremely broad and can be summarized in the expression used by Burawoy: *public sociology wars*. Among the most critical we remember Deflem (2005) and Tittle (2004). We add that one of the leitmotifs of this criticism lies in the fact that the diffusion and the echo of the Public Sociology, typically American proposal - Burawoy himself says - demonstrate the cultural power of the United States in the world, precisely that power that Burawoy would like to resize and provincialize!

dualism, implicit and deeper, to introduce which we must first define, according to Burawoy, the two sociologies from the perspective of a public.

Thus, he defines its traits and aims: “in [...] what I call *traditional public sociology* we can locate sociologists who write in the opinion pages of our national newspapers where they comment on matters of public importance [...]. With traditional public sociology the publics being addressed are generally invisible in that they cannot be seen, thin in that they do not generate much internal interaction, passive in that they do not constitute a movement or organization, and they are usually mainstream [...]. The *organic public sociology* in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter public [...]. The recognition of 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 part of our sociological life.”

And he continues by saying that “we should not think of publics as fixed but in flux and that we can participate in their creation as well as their transformation (Burawoy, 2005, 7-8).

The critical debate immediately highlighted the risks that come from such a distinction. They reside not so much in the distance between the two types of public sociologies - a risk that Burawoy avoids by supporting the complementarity between the two types - as far as distance, the empty space that risks creating each type of sociological discourse - and therefore scientific - and the public, between the sociologist and his publics, given that the latter often lacks the skills to understand the meaning of sociological language.

If it is already difficult to communicate and be understood by a public of university students - the public *par excellence* of professional sociology - it is even more so if we think of the public that is generated by the two types of sociology that Burawoy reports. At this point, either a solution is found that reconciles the two parts, or there is the risk that scientific sociology must be watered down with the risk of losing its scientific criteria, betraying in some way that classic tradition to which it is inspired.

Burawoy obviously does not admit this risk, but it can be deduced from the critical debate we were referring to and which has developed, in relation to this specific communicative aspect, in two directions. On the one hand, the insistence with which some authors have emphasized the need to simplify the question of sociological language, on the other hand attempts made by others to try to overcome this implicit dualism.

Regarding the first point, the question of language is undoubtedly fundamental, ie the choice of a simple and direct language. An author like Gans, who is responsible for the invention of public sociology, claims that the public sociologist must “resist the prevailing anti-populist prejudices that inform the thinking of the cultural elites. Respect for the public is important” and more besides that “the abstracts of our journal articles and the summaries of our academic books [should] be written in non technical English [and not] in ‘Sociologese’ (Gans in Mayrl and Westbrook 2009). And Furedi states that “language and attitude to language is crucial. One of our tasks is to convey complex ideas in a simple - not simplistic! - form. Nor is it simply the case of taking our sociology to a wider audience. It is also a question of developing a sociology that is open-ended and able to yield to new experience” (Furedi, 2007).

Regarding the second point, the hypotheses formulated are among the most varied. Let's start from the notion of *amphibious sociology* (Garavito, 2014), “an approach sociology capable of breathing in the two worlds of academia and the public sphere, of synthesizing the two lives of the sociologist into one, without drowning in the process. In making the case for amphibious sociology, I single out the need to increase the types of texts and forms of diffusion of sociological work in order to take advantage of a world that is increasingly multimedia and, thereby, advance the project of public sociology”.

He seems to foresee the dualism (“I believe that one of the principal reasons for which public sociologists suffer from dispersion and burnout is that the valid formats for the academic world - indexed journal articles and books in university presses - have a language and communication codes that differ markedly from those that their other audiences expect - such as readers of newspapers, social movement leaders, marginalized communities, television viewers or the anonymous public of social media. The distance between these formats is so great that to be relevant in different worlds one must live two (or more) parallel lives”) and the need to deal with a language that is increasingly affected by the presence of the Internet and in general social media, to the point of proposing his solution: “in the face of this dilemma, one solution is to cultivate intermediate genres of writing and diversify the formats in which the results of public sociology are disseminated. The first implies producing texts that are legible for a wider audience, without losing academic rigor. The second means that public sociology must be a multimedia sociology. As an amphibious animal moves from one natural medium to another, so the amphibious sociologist translates his or her work products to different publication media, from books and articles to videos, podcasts, blogs and online classes. In both cases, the goal is to synthesize his or her efforts in products that can be circulated in both academic audiences and the public sphere”.

And further he translates the amphibious sociology into practical advice: “the opportunities to fill this gap are multiple. For example, the fact that internet users spend more than 80% of their time online watching videos creates a valuable opportunity for amphibious sociology. Given that public sociologists have access to situations and people that are interesting for broad audiences, all they need to do is incorporate a video camera into their toolbox, along with the tape recorder and notebook. In this way they can generate valuable images that can be used in classes, training courses for marginalized communities, evidence in legal proceedings, or as accompaniments to texts that result from the research”.

He mentions the difficulty in making himself understood by the public, a difficulty that each of us, as a professor and scholar of sociology, can measure daily in his sociological practice<sup>9</sup>. And in which also famous public sociologists have incurred<sup>10</sup>.

He also mentions the role of the media. In this last case, it is a field of analysis, themed by some authors, whose proposals are also aimed at the theming and possible overcoming of the dualism to which we referred. In short, social media as an intermediary tool. For example, Schneider (2014), after emphasizing the novelty represented by social networks, “and Internet as a communicative tool, which is a completely new medium to reach the public”, points out “the problem is to build an ‘e-public sociology’ - a form of public sociology that through the use of social media merges traditional and organic forms of public sociology, allowing sociologists to become simultaneously both a generator and interlocutor of dialogue with publics”.

Schneider claims that “sociologists are at a crossroads. The emergence and proliferation of social media in the past few years prompt us to reexamine our roles and commitments as sociologists and teachers. Are we obligated simply to study the impact of these media upon society, or might we also consider utilizing these media to disseminate knowledge and interact with various publics, including our students? What function do these media now play in our role as professional sociologists? Critical sociologists? Policy sociologists? Public sociologists? The use of social media connects the traditional and organic forms of public sociology where the sociologist is vehicle for generating dialogue within and among publics as well as public sociology in which the sociologist is the interlocutor. Social media consist of a hybrid of traditional and organic forms of public sociology, a form of social media interaction among publics that can be either public or private”.

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<sup>9</sup> We have tested a sort of housemade public sociology in prison, deducing risks and what we’re arguing.

<sup>10</sup> Burawoy reports how Bourdieu himself was a victim of his creature, public sociology. Citing the movie, *Sociology is a combat sport* (2001), he claims: “curiously, in this film, everything is quite harmonious until the last scene where Bourdieu enters a hall in the banlieue to engage with its disaffected youth. They reject him, the outside intellectual, as well as his sociological conceit that claims to know them better than they know themselves. They send him packing back to Paris. He comes out of this unnerving encounter sweating, relieved to return to his circle of admirers. It is, indeed, a brave encounter, demonstrating that bringing sociology to publics can be a precarious endeavor”.

And he concludes: “I refer to this form as e-public sociology where the distance between organic and traditional public sociology is pragmatically exceeded by the network’s own configuration: Social media *bridge* the two genres of public sociology, advancing a new component, one that consists simultaneously of both organic and traditional elements of public sociology, or e-public sociology” (Schneider, 2014, 218).

According to Schneider, Healey talks about the question of disintermediation (Healy 2017): “I return here to some of the decade-old themes in Burawoy’s manifesto. I shall argue that one of social media’s effects on social science has been to move us from a world where some people are trying to do “public sociology” to one where we are all, increasingly, doing “sociology in public.” This process has had three aspects. First, social media platforms have disintermediated communication between scholars and publics, as technologies of this sort are apt to do... Second, new social media platforms have made it easier to be seen. Thirdly, new social media platforms make it easier for these small-p public engagements to be measured. They create or extend opportunities to count visitors and downloads, to track followers and favorites, influencers and impacts. In this way they create the conditions for a new wave of administrative and market elaboration in the field of public conversation. New brokers and new evaluators arise as people take the opportunity to talk to one another. They also encourage new methods of monitoring, and new systems of punishment and reward for participation. Universities and professional associations, for example, become interested in promoting scholars who have “impact” in this sphere”.

Gans, finally (2014), raises the problem of different types of audience and identifies the journalist as an intermediate element between students and those who have never heard of sociology: “the less educated public includes the rest of the population and the myriad of communication outlets that serve it, and it was once described as a mass audience and studied as mass communication. The so-called mass audience is hardest to reach, partially because it has often obtained only rudimentary instruction in social studies, but also because many sociologists are not trained to reach it. Status differences create yet further communication obstacles. Writing and creating content for this set of publics requires special skills that sociologists often lack. Consequently, most sociology that reaches this public takes the form of journalistic summaries...public sociology is any sociological writing or other product created by sociologists that obtains the attention of some of the publics that make up the general public....sociologists must understand how presenters make indirect and direct contact with their publics and when and why they try to present a sociological product as public sociology. Although some presenters keep in touch with a number of sociologists, others wait until they learn about something that calls for a sociologist. Presenters come in several varieties. The first and often initial presenters are teachers who assign sociological readings and now various digital products, some of which may have already attracted a general public. A second set consists primarily of journalists and their editors as well as columnists, oped writers, book reviewers and the like. The journalists are likely to be beat reporters who cover a social science, culture or lifestyle beat. They may also be free lancers who write about or draw on sociology and the social sciences for their work”.

In our opinion, the amphibious sociology, the e-public sociology, the disintermediation and the sociologist as a journalist all appear hypotheses due to the risk that an empty space opens up, an unbridgeable hiatus between the knowledge producer and the person (s) to whom scientific message is direct (the public). Mix the cards, speaking of a knowledge generator that is also a user, to identify a new, ontologically new, medium, which allows to bridge the distance or the risk; to identify hybrid figures like the journalist, all appear interesting and ingenious solutions to face a danger that is not easy to avoid, as the authors in question admit: “all this is easier to propose than to practice, since the conditions under which journalists and sociologists work are so different that the virtues of one discipline are often impractical for the other” (Gans, 2014).

## **2. Ethical-Political dimension**

This issue will be reflected in the relationship between values and politics, between what Burawoy calls the professional/instrumental dimension and the reflective dimension of sociology. As we know it is a

classification that is useful to Burawoy, on several occasions, to present as a unitary system the four types of sociologies that he proposes (Burawoy, 2005, 11).

Even in this second case, a duality emerges again, just between the instrumental and the reflective dimension. In particular, following Abbott's critique (2007), let's see what it looks like and what solution Abbott hypothesizes. While recognizing value to the Burawoy proposal, Abbott emphasizes his worry about "Burawoy's implicit association between critique/reflexivity and left politics". The insistence of Burawoy on this almost Manichean distinction distorts the real work of sociologists since it inserts them aprioristically into a political faction, on the contrary "reflexive work is not necessarily left; it can also be to all intents and purposes apolitical. These facts raise problems for Burawoy because in the course of his analysis he more or less conflates the normative, the moral, and the political under the one head of the critical. By identifying critique with leftness, he equates [...] a particular politics with all of reflexivity. And since he attributes the legitimacy of critical sociology to its moral vision, he in effect also asserts that only opposition (i.e., critique) is morally justified. It follows from this argument [...] that one cannot be in the professional mainstream and have moral vision or justification. Yet it is obviously possible to choose - morally, reflexively, and critically - to be in the dominant mainstream. One can be a heedless mainstream sociologist and even a cowardly one. But one can also be in the mainstream for moral reasons as profound as those that put others in opposition". This position is due to a deeper one: "he is willing to separate instrumental and reflexive knowledge. I am not. [...] The division itself is both a cognitive mistake and a normative delict, because sociology is simultaneously a cognitive and a moral enterprise [...]".

Sociology is inevitably linked and guided by values, it is a scientific enterprise that analyzes the social world, which is also made up of values: "the value-ladenness of sociology thus lies not so much in the imposed values of the sociologists as in the fact that the social process is itself a process of values: not so much in the knower as in the known. There is, therefore, literally no such thing as 'professional sociology' - a sociology without any values in it. Even the most apparently objective categories of analysis are just so many congealed social values [...]. I argue that sociology is at one and the same time a cognitive and a normative enterprise. When we pretend that it is not, our work becomes arbitrarily deformed [...]. If we recognize, then, that academic sociological research must inevitably be both instrumental and reflexive, we must ask what is the right way to enact this *duality* in practice. The simplest answer seems to be that cognitive and normative thinking must be perpetually succeeding phases in the research process. Any project and any scholarly life must see a continual succession of the one, then the other, then the one, and so on. We have to alternate between reflection - questioning our assumptions and in particular our value assumptions - and routine cognitive analysis".

A choice of field like that of Burawoy risks identifying a rigid hierarchy of values, and choosing social action based on this hierarchy and ending up in a political position. To this vision Abbott opposes his idea of a *humanist sociology*: "the humanist sociologist is interested in understanding the social world (as a value enterprise) rather than in changing it. The humanist thinks it presumptuous of the sociologist to judge the rights and wrongs of others. He or she starts from the presumption that the other is a version of humanity, to be granted the dignity of being taken seriously on his or her own terms, to be understood or translated by whatever methodology into something recognizable both in his or her original world and in that of the analysis. A humanist sociologist is hesitant to judge that others 'have false consciousness,' that is, that we the sociologists know their own needs better than they themselves do. It is in this latter sense - understanding the other in terms of (definitionally imperfect) translation into our own world - that sociology does indeed constitute, in my view, the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake. Burawoy's mistake in dismissing this position flows from his belief that the only form of moral behavior is political behavior in the broadest sense. That is, he thinks that a moral person who understands the moral nature of the social process must of necessity want to change it. I think he is wrong about that. The project of understanding the social process—which is in itself a moral process and cannot be otherwise analyzed—is inherently a moral project, whether we go on to exercise our undoubted political right to urge change or not".

The proposal of a humanist sociology basically reflects, once again, the idea that we can overcome the dualism reflexivity/instrumentalism (a term that, we have seen, Abbott himself recalls in one passage) identifying an intermediate ground represented by the proposal itself, which is essentially based on the idea that professional aspects and values are closely intertwined. In the ethical-political field, dualism is a present risk and it is overcome through a new approach, an approach that, by accepting the ideal and moral foundations of public sociology, rejects some maximalist positions and leads sociology back to the inextricable intertwining of professional values in the daily life of sociological practice.

### 3. Epistemological dimension

It is the most delicate and interesting element of Burawoy's proposal because in his last reflections where he aspires to make public sociology a global sociology, the local, regional and global dimension of social problems must be reconciled.

Taking a position with respect to this desired reconciliation, Burawoy is part of a debate that has been going on for a long time on the role of the social sciences - and of sociology - in the age of global society, and on the contraposition - another dualism - between northern sociology of the world and the south of the world, between the epistemology of the north and the epistemology of the South.

On several occasions, we have seen it, Burawoy underlines the global aspirations of (public) sociology and its vocation to become an interpreter and a guarantor of civil society: "what then is our discipline of sociology? If it is not defined by a distinctive object of knowledge then how do we define its unity? I argue its unity is defined by a 'standpoint' - the standpoint of civil society - or rather the standpoints of civil society, since it is far from being a unified, homogeneous entity [...] keeping alive the critical standpoint of civil society against the overextension of the market and its accomplice the regulatory state [...] Without abandoning public engagement, sociology's challenge today is to go global. It can no longer be confined to a national container; it has to wrestle with the realities of global conflict and global inequality as they shape both its object of analysis and its practice as a science" (Burawoy, 2016).

This program passes, duque, necessarily from the overcoming of the methodological nationalism and the parochialism of the American sociology, and from the valorization of other sociological voices, belonging to countries of the South of the World.

We have to develop a dialogue, once again, with other national sociologies, recognizing their local traditions or their aspirations to indigenize sociology: "we have to think in global terms, to recognize the emergent global division of sociological labor. If the United States rules the roost with its professional sociology, then we have to foster public sociologies of the Global South and the policy sociologies of Europe. We have to encourage networks of critical sociologies that transcend not just disciplines but also national boundaries (Burawoy, 2005, 22). Burawoy's ambition is to build "a 21st century public sociology of global dimensions". (Burawoy, 2005, 20).

The aspirations are obvious and certainly shared. What appears less clear is how such a conciliation can actually be achieved, working to overcome another fundamental dualism that runs through the Burawoy proposal, analogous to the previous ones, but of an epistemological nature. An empty ground, an empty space between the southern point of view and the northern point of view. The point of view of the North has dominated and today it has to be reduced and provincialized. But starting from the perspective of the South, it risks re-proposing the same problems of unilateralism, which were imputed to the North and of making impossible an unitary vision, of creating an empty space between the different points of view.

Burawoy is aware of this difficulty ("the point, however, is to somehow do both to build ties to the local that sustains a critical engagement with the global. And this will be important not just for subaltern sociologies, but for the survival of sociology of and in the North, if it is to retain its relevance in an ever more globally connected world") but it does not seem to offer convincing solutions. Recently, Go (2016) offered an interesting proposal. Starting from the same purpose as Burawoy, *id est* the need for "an intellectual revolution against the provinciality of social science", he points out that "the premise of this revolution is that disciplinary sociology's concerns, categories and theories have been formulated, forged, and enacted within Anglo-European metropolises in the interest



of those metropolitan societies, and so a new 'global sociology' that transcends this provinciality is necessary. [...] How can we craft sociologies that escape sociology's Anglo-European provenance?". And after mentioning Burawoy proposal - that sociology should reach beyond its "provincialism" by scaling up the concept of "civil society" in order to analyze "global civil society", make his own proposal: "this paper advances an alternative analytic strategy for overcoming sociology's provinciality and cultivating a more global social science. I refer to this strategy as the Southern Standpoint, and I ground it in a philosophical framework I call perspectival realism [...]. This is a social science from below; a sociology that starts not with the standpoint of the metropole but the standpoint of subjugated groups. There are two thus moves here: one, to explicate the basic idea of the Southern standpoint for overcoming sociology's provincialism, and two, rooting that strategy in an epistemological and ontological frame – perspectival realism – that renders this strategy feasible and desirable".

This is evidently just a proposal that in order to avoid the risk of simply replacing the point of view of the North with that of the South, introduces the Southern Standpoint - an intermediate point of view, although still belonging to the South - epistemologically justifying it - and ontologically - through the use of a perspective like that of scientific perspectivism which belongs to the philosophy of science (Giere, 2006).

Let's briefly summarize Go's proposal, and then introduce our work hypothesis that follows that of Go, above all in the use of tools, categories and concepts typical of hard sciences, in particular of mathematical analysis.

"Perspectival realism as an ontology and epistemology upon which to mount the Southern standpoint approach" is attributable to "scientific perspectivism in science studies and post-foundationalist standpoint theory as found in postcolonial and recent feminist thought" and has the merit "to enables us to advance a Southern standpoint approach that draws upon the indigenous sociology and Southern theory movement without resorting to essentialism or relativism".

This solution hypothesis arises from the awareness that the project of a global sociology, which appears to be a perspective able "to make sociology more adequate for a global setting", although much debated and towards which the global sociological community seems strongly oriented, is a difficult solution to be reached: "But if there is agreement on the problem and the goal, there is less agreement on the route [...].

The "third stage" approach, studying the world from the standpoint of global civil society, has been criticized because it would replicate globally "theories constructed from and directed at the concerns and categories of Euro-American contexts [...] simply extending or scaling up prior categories and theories developed in relation to the Global North – such as cosmopolitanism or civil society"; in its place an approach has developed that pushes for an idea of sociology that is "native, turning to the experience, practices, and voices of subaltern populations and thinkers in the Global South to cultivate a more global sociology". The problem, suggests Go, is that this approach risks falling into fallacies that are specular to those of the North, not only because the iron grip of the North maintains its material and symbolic grip on alternative points of view, but because there are epistemological limits in it, exactly specular with respect to an epistemology of the North.

Thus, "what, then, can be done? [...] My suggestion is to draw exactly from the Southern theory/indigenous sociology movement but articulate it with a distinct ontology and epistemology that can absorb the foregoing criticisms of the movement. I refer to this approach not as Southern theory but the 'Southern standpoint'. [...] Standpoint theory highlights the social situatedness of knowledge [...]. By Southern standpoint, then, I mean a social position of knowing [rooted] [...] in geopolitics and global social hierarchy. It captures the position, and hence the activities, experiences, concerns and perspectives, of globally peripheral (e.g. colonized and postcolonized) populations. A Southern standpoint approach for global sociology would thus overcome metrocentrism by adopting the Southern standpoint as the beginning point for social theory, just as indigenous/Southern sociology would suggest".

We can highlight two elements of this approach:

- 1) It saves the point of view of the South and therefore constitutes a perspective of the

indigenous/Southern sociology without the limits that have been contested.

2) To save it, it resorts to a review/explanation of its epistemological/ontological foundations, using the philosophy of science, appropriately revisited and introducing the social point of analysis as the epistemological foundation of the Southern standpoint.

These are the terms used by Go: “what I refer to “perspectival realism” can be seen as an extension of “scientific perspectivism” – an ontology of scientific knowledge and practice that emerges from science studies and philosophies of science. Leading advocates of scientific perspectivism include the philosophers Ronald Giere and Helen Longino. Scientific perspectivism offers us at least two important insights for our purposes. First, it enables us to find a *middle ground between the extremism of “objective realism” on the one hand, and radical “constructivism” in science on the other*<sup>11</sup>. While ‘objective realism’ insists that there are truths in the world to be discovered and that the truths primarily come in the form of laws, ‘constructivism’ holds that truths are discursively (i.e. socially) constructed by scientists [...]. Scientific perspectivism claims that what scientific inquiry and research actually shows us is that ‘truths’ are the convergence of the physical world on the one hand and the scientists’ ‘perspective’ on the other and that, therefore, the perspective of the scientist-observer is paramount. The claim, in short, is that knowledge is always perspectival yet also objective. Knowledge arises neither from pure objectivity or subjectivity but from the convergence of the observer’s perspective and the objective world”.

This is a remarkable step forward in terms of knowledge theory and epistemology because, as indicated in the italic line, it overcomes the realism-constructivism dualism by identifying a middle ground between the two extremes, precisely that intermediate ground that, in our opinion, the Burawoy proposal requires to be considered epistemologically and politically effective.

The next step, in Go’s reasoning, is to adapt this perspective to social knowledge: “my proposition is that social knowledge is also subject to the same epistemological principles, and that recognizing this offers a warrant for a Southern standpoint approach. But to make this work, we must be able to extend scientific perspectivism to apply to social science [...]. So how can we translate it into sociology? In particular, we must ask: where do the different ‘perspectives’ that ultimately yield new knowledge come from? For Giere, the different perspectives arise from different ‘means of observation’ or instruments. What about social science? Drawing upon post-positivist standpoint theory, I argue that the social science equivalent to what Giere refers to as ‘perspective’ is the *social entry point of analysis*; or, in other words, the *standpoint of analysis*”.

Here, in this case, Go suggests a politically neutral perspective that, from an epistemological point of view, supports the Southern standpoint.

It has many advantages: “First, it eschews essentialism for the more basic sociological claim that all knowledge is shaped socially. Post-positivist standpoint theory abjures the biological determination of standpoints with a recognition of social determination. This insight relates to constructivist sociologies of science, that show that scientists’ knowledge is determined by social context. In this scholarship, the type or form of “context” varies: it can be the social interests driving the research, the social experiences of the researchers, the social dynamics of scientific fields, or the sociological characteristics of laboratories. But the basic shared insight is that all knowledge is socially shaped in one way or another – it is socially-situated – and post-positivist standpoint theory extends this premise to society as a whole. It is not just that the dynamics of the fields of science or the lab shape knowledge, it is that different social positions within society each offer different perspectives or standpoints. Different social positions mean that different groups of individuals have different experiences, and different experiences contribute to different perspectives. What one sees is shaped by where one stands within society [...]”.

The second difference with conventional standpoint theory is that post-positivist standpoint theory eschews the belief in epistemic privilege. Post-positivist standpoint theory does not claim that certain standpoints offer superior, better, or more complete knowledge; “only that they offer different knowledge. [...] In other words, all knowledge is socially positioned; so-called objective reality can be

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<sup>11</sup> Italics is ours

differentially perceived – or ‘known’ – in the sense that different aspects of the same thing might be viewed or discovered as opposed to others”.

Based on these assumptions, Go believes that post-positivist standpoint theory and scientific perspectivalism can be articulated together as a warrant for a subaltern standpoint approach that does not fall prey to the criticisms leveled against Southern theory and indigenous sociology. “First, when it comes to social knowledge, different social positions contribute to different perspectives – that is, different standpoints. The point is not to fix, a priori, which social contexts or social identities matter for knowledge, but merely to highlight that social positions do matter: they are each distinct standpoints. Different social identities are afforded distinct experiences and hence lenses by which to view the world.

Second, the particular experiences and meanings from different standpoints serve as the basis for new concepts and/or theories. The distinct lens or social experience constituting standpoints are the necessary bases for social knowledge and hence theory construction; they each offer the data or meanings that in turn enable us to theorize and understand. They enable us to construct a “map” of the social world based upon that original place. [...] It is a perspective or starting point for crafting maps of the social world, and which does not refer to an essential identity, either racial, cultural or geographic. The Southern standpoint instead refers to a relational position within global hierarchies. This is a geopolitical and social position, constituted historically within broader relations of power, that embeds the viewpoint of peripheral groups.[...] A southern standpoint refers not to an essence but a differential position: a position that is different from the imperial-metropolitan position of extant conventional social theory, and the difference does not lie in biological, anthropological or spatial factors but in social experience and history. What constitutes a subaltern standpoint is its positionality: it refers to the subjectivity of subordinated positions within global imperial hierarchies. It refers to a subjectivity attendant with the experience of geopolitical and global socioeconomic subjugation. It is an effect of power relations [...] What makes the subaltern standpoint worthy of theoretical specification is that it brings to the fore global imperial relations and conventional social science’s place within it. It recognizes that social theory and disciplinary sociology adopts a Northern (and hence equally provincial) standpoint and seeks to circumvent it by adopting a standpoint from the geopolitical and socioeconomic South.

Third, the charge that a standpoint is reversely (if not perversely) ethnocentric because it claims epistemic privilege can be dispatched on the same grounds. Privilege is not at stake; at stake is epistemic difference. To admit of standpoints is to recognize that dominant social science knowledge – that is, the knowledge attendant with conventional disciplinary sociology or Anglo-European social theory – represents one standpoint (or perhaps a set of standpoints) among others; and that those other possible standpoints have too long repressed, excluded and marginalized. Or, in the terms of Giere’s scientific perspectivalism, there are always-already only different “perspectives” offering partial knowledge. There is never a single totalizing map; only different maps representing different subject positions and hence offering different points of entry for social knowledge. Hence, a standpoint is a perspective that is, as perspectival realism insists, the only ground for even so-called “objective” knowledge. Subaltern standpoint is neither a recourse to conventional positivist objectivism but neither is it pure postmodern play and subjectivism.

Fourth, the idea that different standpoints occlude the possibility of ‘objective’ truth and runs into pure relativism must be resisted on these grounds too. To advocate for different maps does not necessarily mean that every map is right [...] the partial character of knowledge does not mean all knowledge is equally true: that is to say, the co-existence of different theories, rooted in different standpoints, does not necessitate epistemic relativism. Scientific pluralism permits multiple objectivities. Fifth, we can dispute the claim that a Southern standpoint necessarily obscures macrostructures, institutions, or larger patterns of domination. Adopting a standpoint approach is an entry point for analyzing larger structures or systems, not an end point that necessarily obscures them. One begins from the standpoint but ends up with much more. A sociology starting with the Southern standpoint would approach empirics similarly. It would start from the activities, experiences, and perspectives of subaltern groups but it would not end there. In short: the strategy is to suspend or circumvent the analytic categories

constructed from the Northern-metropolitan standpoint and instead start from the ground up. Start, in brief, from the standpoint of the Southern – where ‘the Southern’ is akin to the concept ‘subaltern’: it marks not a singular or essential subjectivity but a relational location from which to begin. Start with the concerns and experiences, categories and discourses, perceptions and problems of those groups visited by imperial and neoimperial imposition (those very imposers and posers of power whose activities have served to subjugate those groups’ standpoints, their alternative knowledges, in the first place). Start from their perspectives, perceptions, and practices, and reconstruct social worlds from there”.

Go’s conclusions recapture the overall sense of his approach: “the indigenous sociology and Southern theory movement has it right: one way to overcome social science’s Northern provincialism and cultivate a more global sociology is to listen to voices from beyond social science’s initial domain of metropolitan centers and root social theory in the experiences of other populations besides metropolitan elites in the Global North. But it also mounts the approach upon perspectival realism. This offers a number of advantages, and pushes the project of Southern theory further along. First, as argued above, it allows us to listen to propose something akin to indigenous sociology/Southern theory without falling into the traps of essentialism. A standpoint is a relational position, not an essence. Second, and relatedly, perspectival realism allows us to recognize the virtue of theoretical plurality without promoting epistemic relativism, and summons thus the value of Southern standpoints (even as they offer, just like Northern theory, only partial knowledge). Finally, perspectival realism as the epistemology and ontology of a Southern standpoint approach not only helps to absorb critiques that would otherwise plague indigenous sociology/Southern theory, it also gives an epistemic warrant to the project of globalizing sociology. It uniquely articulates the epistemic necessity of global sociology. Often, the only warrant given for global sociology is politics and ethics: we should open sociology up to new voices from the global south to be more inclusive and democratic. This is a fine warrant but it might not win over skeptics who still worry about how this might reinscribe epistemic relativism or essentialism; or skeptics who do not see the intellectual value of a global sociology. A Southern standpoint approach, rooted in perspectival realism, offers a different warrant than just politics and ethics. It suggests that we need to open up sociology to voices from the global south for better knowledge. [...] Southern standpoint approach promulgated in this essay suggests that the more standpoints we have from which to theorize and research, the better our understanding of our social world will be. [...] Theories, concepts and analyses based upon the Southern standpoint are thus needed not just for political, ethical or identity reasons but also for reasons that all social scientists can get behind: a larger repertoire of knowledge by which to think about and engage the social world”.

This hypothesis obviously aroused a wide debate<sup>12</sup>. For our part we limit ourselves to supporting a proposal in accordance with Go and his choice, drawing on some constructs of the hard sciences, in particular from mathematical analysis. Our working in progress hypothesis is inspired in particular by Go when he claims that «rooting the social point of analysis in an epistemological and ontological frame – perspectival realism –renders the strategy feasible and desirable» [Go, 2016], that is a standpoint of analysis that functions as an intermediary element between different levels. Here, it seems to us that a similar role can be played by a concept of mathematical analysis that takes the name of ‘neighbourhood of a point’, (circle or complete neighbourhood): it is an open interval, centered in a real number. The reference point is called the center of the neighborhood, the half-width of the interval is called the radius of the neighborhood. The interval or neighbourhood can be opened to the left or to the right, and you can specify or not the radius in which case we will talk about  $X_0$  and radius as the set of  $X$  points that are distant from  $X_0$  less than the radius, on the left or at right. In other terms, the neighbourhood of a point is helpful to qualify the idea of a close point to something else, with borders, and at the same time opened, a reference point and an area around this reference point that get its meaning from this reference point.

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<sup>12</sup> See the debate included in *Sociologica*, 2016, 2.

What seems interesting to us is that it is a concept that, if translated on the social level, (social neighbourhood of a point) possesses at the same time the characteristics of a point placed in space and open on the right or left, so it is a fixed point that defines the points (real numbers in analysis, social points in sociology) around it which are such by virtue of the point itself. The definition of neighbourhood of a point closed, or open on the left or right, appears similar to that of Go when he talks of a standpoint of analysis, a point of view from which to; or a social entry point of analysis that has therefore those intermediate, partial and, at the same time, non-relativistic characteristics that allow reconciliation of opposites.

The advantages of this hypothesis are as follows:

- a) Using a neutral concept of mathematical analysis that can function as an epistemological foundation for social theorizing, identifying the concept of an open set/range, but bounded by a radius and centered in a precise point. Transforming the mathematical notion of 'neighbourhood of a point' in the notion of 'social neighbourhood of a point', it allows us to identify a sufficiently flexible range and at the same time defined concept in order both to look and to connect the local dimension to the regional and global dimensions.
- a) Although it is necessary to refine this hypothesis, it seems very useful to rely on certain constructs of the philosophy of science or analysis (in this case), not to return to forms of positivism now outdated, but to develop transdisciplinary analysis and use concepts particularly useful in these fields.
- b) This concept is a working hypothesis to be pursued to respond to the goal of making public sociology an instrument capable of responding to the need to make sociological knowledge relevant and applicable to global, regional and local problems. Combining this notion with the Go's notion, it avoids the risk to make the viewpoint of South of the world – and South Europe too – either as a mere reflection of the North or to repeat the same self-referential error of what it wants to eliminate (just the metrocentrism).

## Conclusions

We have seen how Burawoy's proposal has been very successful in recent years, but at the same time, precisely because it deeply questions the very meaning of sociological discipline and its practice, and because it aspires to present itself as a global perspective, it has given rise to a wide debate and has raised numerous criticisms. We have limited ourselves, in this contribution, by fully drawing on the current debate, to highlight a fundamental dualism that we think is tracing in it, traced in particular in three dimensions: communicative, ethical-political and epistemological.

Beyond the solutions formulated by the critical debate for every single aspect, we seem to be able to say that this dualism can be traced back to the same logic, ie the risk of leaving a gap between different levels of analysis, proposal or perspective: the risk of misunderstanding between the sociologist and his/her audience: what he says and proposes is not understood by the public, he falls into the void: the risk of subordinating the sociological debate and the action of the sociologist to a Manicheism between a reflexive and instrumental dimension that it prevents us from grasping the mixed nature of sociological practice; and, finally, the difficulty in identifying an intermediate solution to the attempt to reconcile the local, regional, national and global dimensions of sociology, which allows the proposal of a truly global sociology.

We therefore focused in particular on the epistemological dimension, analyzing closely a proposal of mediation and overcoming, which draws on the philosophy of science and on which we have grafted our working in progress proposal defined by the concept of the social neighborhood of a point. It brings together an epistemological and mathematical dimension with a posture/positioning that make it possible to start the reflection from a point of analysis both opened and circumscribed.

In our opinion it is necessary that Burawoy's proposal takes into account such dualisms that it is necessary to correct and try to overcome if it wants to maintain the effectiveness and the fascination that the critics recognize them. This, because I reiterate how public sociology, aware of such methodological limits, can be a formidable tool for reviving the role of sociology as public knowledge, as an antidote to the neoliberal drift, and above all as a means to express, without falling into a rhetoric of the 'South', the view of the South.

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