

Artículos / Articles

Public sociology and southern European societies: a critical view / *Sociología pública y sociedades del sur de Europa: una visión crítica*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of our paper is to analyze the role that a properly reformed public sociology can play in enhancing the perspective of southern European societies. By properly reformed public sociology we mean a public sociology that is reflective and aware of some limits, which we will try to highlight. By southern European societies we mean an area of southern Europe, made up of countries like Portugal, Italy, Spain and Greece, which —for historical, economic, political and social reasons— the post-colonial debate and that on indigenous sociology consider similar to the countries of the South of the world rather than those of the North. The paper is organized in three parts. In the first part, we summarize the main aspects of Burawoy’s proposal, developed from 2004 to date, while in the second part we will focus on three dimensions (communication, ethical-political and epistemological dimensions), detecting the *fundamental dualism* that runs through them and which we will try to clarify. In the third part we emphasize the substantial analogy of the three forms of dualism that characterize Burawoy’s proposal —which share the risk of leaving an empty space between sociologist and public, reflective and professional sociology, local and global knowledge, or North and South epistemology— and suggest hypotheses of the solutions that have been promoted in the international debate; we will introduce our work in progress hypothesis of solution in accordance with the solution proposed for the epistemological dimension.

**Keywords:** public sociology; epistemology; south of the world; social point of view; dualism.

RESUMEN

*El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el papel que puede desempeñar una sociología pública, debidamente reformada, para mejorar la perspectiva de las sociedades del sur de Europa. Por sociología pública debidamente reformada nos referimos a una sociología pública reflexiva y consciente de algunas limitaciones que trataremos de resaltar. Por las sociedades del sur de Europa nos referimos a un área del sur de Europa, formada por países como Portugal, Italia, España y Grecia, que el debate poscolonial y sobre la sociología indígena considera, por razones históricas, económicas, políticas y sociales, similares a los países del sur del mundo, en lugar de los del norte. El artículo se encuentra dividido en tres partes. En la primera parte resumimos los aspectos principales de la propuesta de Burawoy, desarrollada desde 2004 hasta hoy, mientras que en la segunda parte nos centraremos en tres dimensiones (comunicación, dimensión ético-política y epistemológica), detectando el dualismo fundamental que las atraviesa y que trataremos de aclarar. En la tercera parte sugerimos las hipótesis de soluciones que han sido promovidas por el debate internacional, enfatizando la analogía sustancial de las tres formas de dualismo que caracterizan la propuesta de Burawoy, cuyo elemento común es precisamente el riesgo de dejar un espacio vacío entre sociólogo y público, sociología reflexiva y profesional, conocimiento local y global, o entre la epistemología del Norte y del Sur; e introduciremos una hipótesis de solución en progreso, de acuerdo con la solución propuesta para la dimensión epistemológica.*

**Palabras clave:** sociología pública; epistemología; mundo del sur; punto de vista social; dualismo.

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## INTRODUCTION

In our contribution, we analyze the role that a properly reformed public sociology can play in enhancing the perspective of southern European societies.

The public sociology proposal, (re)launched by Michael Burawoy in 2004 at the ASA in San Francisco, is a perspective that has its roots in the history of sociological thought, particularly in the work of classic authors such as Wright Mills and Gouldner, and was introduced in 1988 by ASA's 78th President Herbert J. Gans, who first spoke explicitly in a presidential address about public sociology. The merit of Burawoy is undoubtedly that of relaunching it and making it popular, through a very heartfelt appeal in a historical phase marked by the crisis of sociology. In the intentions of the author, the perspective aspires to constitute itself as a sociological point of view that opposes "categories, theories and concepts that have been formulated and enacted within Anglo-European metropolises in the interest of those metropolitan societies". Burawoy wants to promote a new "global sociology" that transcends the provincialism of the sociology of our time and invites social theory "to shift its analytic focus from Europe to the entire 'world-system' to the various 'civilizations' and 'multiple modernities' that traverse the world-system, or to the 'connected histories' by which modernity has been constituted" (Go, 2016: 1). It is only by placing itself within this critical framework that public sociology can become a voice for the point of view of the South of the world and, within it, of southern European societies, that is, of countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. According to Sousa Santos (2016), due to the recent economic crisis, and also for historical, geographical and social reasons, these countries are considered to differ from the rest of Europe, subordinated to the processes of globalization and characterized by a history of subjection to northern Europe and the Global North in general. In order to respond effectively to the ambitions that the author attributes to it, namely to constitute a global sociological perspective, Burawoy's proposal—which has given rise to numerous criticisms and a broad debate—should, in our opinion, be aware of certain limitations that characterize it and which we

intend to highlight, looking in particular at three dimensions: the communicative, ethical-political and epistemological dimensions. We will attempt to discuss these dimensions, emphasizing the substantial analogy of the three forms of dualism that characterize Burawoy's proposal, which share the risk of leaving an empty space between sociologist and public, reflective and professional sociology, local and global knowledge, or North and South epistemology.

For each dimension we will outline the hypotheses of the solutions that have been promoted, based on critical literature. We will then introduce a work in progress hypothesis of a solution, based on the adoption of a construct of mathematical analysis and inspired in particular by the debate on the epistemology of the South versus the North, able to suggest a peculiar way out for going beyond the dualism we have identified. In fact, if the author we refer to in the final part of our contribution, J. Go, formulates the hypothesis of the *Southern standpoint of analysis*, we will proceed further, suggesting that the notion of *neighborhood of a point* be operationalized in the social field. In fact, in our opinion, through a mathematical formalization, this notion helps to constitute a middle ground that is sufficiently flexible and at the same time a defined concept, epistemologically founded and value-free, and able to delimit, from time to time, an area of social space from which to look at more complex phenomena, without falling into forms of absolutism or relativism. In the specific case of the topic we are dealing with, this will also give an epistemological and cognitive foundation to that intermediate point of view, necessary for public sociology in order to connect the local dimension to the regional and global dimensions.

Our contribution is organized in three parts. In the first part, we summarize the main aspects of Burawoy's proposal, developed from 2004 to date, highlighting some of the critical issues of his proposal, while in the second part we will focus on the three dimensions (communication, ethical-political and epistemological dimensions), detecting the fundamental dualism that runs through them and which we will attempt to clarify. Finally, in the third part, we suggest the hypotheses of solutions that have been promoted in the international debate

and we will introduce our work in progress hypothesis of solution, in accordance with the solution proposed for the epistemological dimension.

### THE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY OF BURAWOY. ORIGINS, FOUNDATION, CRITICAL ASPECTS

The proposal for a public sociology, launched in 2004 by Michael Burawoy in his presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association<sup>1</sup> in San Francisco, caused quite a stir in the world's sociological community, where it acted as a positive shock. This is demonstrated by the fact that this address has led to a broad debate —conferences, forums, seminars— and to the publication of numerous books and articles widely distributed during these 15 years<sup>2</sup>. Public sociology is an expression which is now part of the language of sociologists, a term that immediately recalls a certain kind of *practice of sociology*, a *sociological style* born with the aim of reviving the place of sociology, of revitalizing its moral fiber and of making it capable of affecting the living flesh of the problems of Western societies and non-Western societies. 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, going beyond 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 civil society. As the author himself said, in fact, “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, more recently, “without abandoning public engage-

ment, sociology's challenge today is to go global” (Burawoy, 2016: 950).

Based on 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 nullifying its moral and innovative impact, particularly should it be institutionalized, thereby becoming something similar to the professional sociology of today which, on several occasions, Burawoy describes as the cultural, historical and moral betrayal of sociological tradition<sup>3</sup>, the mortification of the nature and soul of sociology, particularly in respect of the original proposal formulated by the classics (Durkheim, Weber, Bourdieu, Du Bois, Mills, etc.).

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 truth through constant dialogue with the interlocutor, crumbling previous certainties.

Clearly Burawoy does not oppose professional sociology per se, but the drift it has taken. So much so that public sociology intertwines with other forms of sociology —professional, policy and criti-

1 For an instructive description of the atmosphere in which this presidential address was pronounced see Ollion, 2009.

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

3 And we would also add generational, if we reflect on the following piece 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).

4 See Plato, *Apology of Socrates*.

cal—and therefore it does not reject professional sociology but completes 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, though, it would increasingly be characterized as something that escapes an absolute definition, and which strives to reinvigorate sociological tradition, to overcome cultural barriers and material and symbolic borders, developing, bottom-up, 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 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 question of developing a public sociological style made up of severe criticism, open-mindedness and the construction of a common path with the various publics which such a proposal not only contributes to engaging in debate, but also to creating<sup>5</sup>.

Although reiterating 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)—on several occasions the author argues 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, in our opinion, rests from the outset on the following pillars:

a) The recovery of the most clear and direct sociological tradition, with authors such as Durkheim, Du Bois, Mills, Bourdieu, which acts as a moral ideal for the younger generations of sociologists.

b) The importance of the category of public, intended both as the opposite of private and as the 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-cut standpoint in favor of civil society, 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).

d) Because of its tradition and the notion of public, the need for public sociology to overcome the limits of methodological nationalism —Beck is another author often quoted by Burawoy— or of US parochialism in order to link up with other sociologies, helping both European and American sociologies to emerge from their provincialism, and non-European countries to rise from their minority status, through, as stated in a 2008 contribution, the protagonism of the local, regional and national dimension reconciled within 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),

5 In a passage he 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).

and thus becoming both champion of global civil society and global proposal.

As regards this last point, retracing the debate and the production collected over the years, as well as Burawoy's self-same standpoints—including a 2016 article with the significant title *The Promise of Sociology*—we can say that basically, right from the beginning and even more so in recent times, he wishes to contribute to a debate concerning the role of sociology in the global arena, an aspiration which is totally consistent with the assumptions of his original proposal. We saw previously that sociology is the guarantor and expression of civil society: either it is global or it is not.

This is certainly an ambitious and acceptable program, especially for a discipline such as sociology; one which is young compared with other disciplines, and subject to a constant danger of being colonized, or to other internal proposals of self-reform<sup>6</sup>. A program which—and Burawoy is absolutely aware of this—lends itself to two types of danger. In addition to the danger we previously underlined—institutionalization of the proposal and therefore weakening of its moral fiber—also to the criticism and widespread skepticism which his proposal would have raised and something which then duly occurred.

Obviously, during these years, Burawoy engaged in a fierce intellectual battle to defend his proposal and the replies that he elaborated against his critics have been many, an unequivocal sign, once again, of the vitality of a debate concerning the foundation of sociology in our time triggered by the American sociologist.

Among the many criticisms<sup>7</sup> that have been addressed to Burawoy, it should be remembered first of all that his proposal is not original, insofar as the term public sociology was coined at the time by

H. Gans and presented during his presidential address at the ASA in 1988; not only, it has a long history and other protagonists such as Agger (2000). The merit of Burawoy certainly consists in having recovered the term and having made it popular at a critical moment for the discipline. Another problematic aspect regards the way in which Burawoy deals with certain categories, such as those of state, civil society, market and professional sociology. The impression, in fact, is that he treats them as homogeneous and basically ahistorical concepts, counterposing, for example, civil society—of which public sociology makes itself defender—to the state and the market; or public sociology to professional sociology. In actual sociological practice, in fact, professional sociology develops—contrary to Burawoy's claims—in civil society more than in universities.

Likewise, according to Prentice, the idealization of civil society leads Burawoy to some excesses and contradictions. First of all, “Burawoy's rejection of the state [...] makes some sense in the context of a liberal welfare regime. It is, however, surprisingly unhelpful where nation-states act differently and so—as both cause and consequence—publics engage differently with the state. Burawoy is ‘thoroughly hostile’ to the state. He demonizes the state largely as a counterpoint to his celebration of civil society [...]. He valorizes civil society through a rhetorical and conceptual opposition to state-focused activism and thus dismisses sociology that engages critically with public policy. European social scientists have developed strong relationships with public policy and the many movements that target the state”.

Moreover “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: 143).

A similar reasoning can be made for the concepts of globalization and neoliberalism, taken as monolithic and absolute concepts. Reasoning in these terms, there emerges an underlying limit of his proposal, namely the idea that public sociology responds more to an invocation, a call to romantic arms, a vague revolutionary calling for change, instead of coherent arguments that would seek to reform the sociological discipline epistemically.

6 On several occasions, in his contributions Burawoy talks about the attempts to reform Sociology, among which he quotes the one suggested by Wallerstein of breaking-up sociology into social sciences (see Burawoy, 2008).

7 Obviously, the critical bibliography is extremely broad and can be summarised in the expression used by Burawoy: *public sociology wars* (Burawoy, 2009). Among the most critical we can mention Deflem (2005) and Tittle (2004).

As has been stated, “Burawoy’s text often reads more like an emotive manifesto or an urgent appeal to our sociological conscience, rather than a fully-fledged rational argument or account of the current climate in which sociology is practiced and made” (Fatsis, 2014: 50).

Finally, a non-secondary limitation of his proposal lies in the contradiction between the will to overcome provincialism and American parochialism and, secondly, in the fact that public sociology is typically an American proposal —Burawoy himself says it— which demonstrates the cultural power of the United States throughout the world, precisely the power which Burawoy would like to resize and provincialize!

According to Prentice, “Burawoy’s model fails to recognize its Americanism, even as he calls for a ‘21st century public sociology of global dimensions’ and encourages the decentering of America. While acknowledging that the very term ‘public sociology’ is an American invention, Burawoy misrecognizes the scope of the phenomenon [...]. He takes his own national context for granted” (Prentice, 2014: 141).

And she continues: “The fourfold division of sociology makes sense in only some settings, and is far from a transnational reality, an assumption relied upon by Burawoy and many of his adherents” (Prentice, 2014: 142).

In a very recent contribution, Lozano states that “Burawoy admitted that this term is an ‘American invention’ —I assume he meant a US invention— unnecessary in other contexts where it is taken for granted that intellectuals will engage their expertise in public debate beyond academic boundaries [...]. He is aware of that and acknowledges that when he speaks about public sociology outside the US [...], the common reaction is that ‘my audiences look at me nonplussed. What else could sociology be, if not an engagement with diverse publics about public issues?’ [...]. He also recognizes the hegemonic role of US sociology, and its enormous impact upon other national and regional traditions [...]. He is obviously aware of these problems, but I think that they continue to shape his own work; to a great extent, he reproduces what he criticizes by seeking to universalize a concept based on the particular experience of US sociology” (Lozano, 2018: 97-98).

Lozano emphasizes an aspect that many non-American sociologists have very clear: for them, public sociology in their respective countries, is an everyday reality, and has been practiced for a long time, without it being necessary to theorize it.

In the end, therefore, the question of public sociology seems to be more an American preoccupation than a question of world sociology.

Despite the numerous criticisms, almost no one questions the relevance of the Burawoy proposal and the ambitions that inspire it.

For our part, we believe that in order that the ambitious program should not fail, it is necessary for public sociology to aim at reforming itself by taking on a reflexive role —*i. e.* reflecting on itself, its epistemological foundation, its purposes— and that it needs to become aware of some of the problematic nodes that the critical debate aroused over time has gradually brought to light. In our opinion, it can be traced back to what we call the *fundamental dualism* that runs through it and which we will try to clarify.

This fundamental dualism may be found in three different dimensions:

- a) The communicative dimension, *i. e.* the distinction between sociologists and the public.
- b) The ethical-political dimension, the distinction between the instrumental and reflective dimensions of sociology so dear to Burawoy.
- c) The epistemological dimension, the distinction between local and global sociological practices, between an epistemology of the North of the world and one of the South.

This dualism risks, in particular, frustrating the global and democratic aspirations of public sociology, and not being of help to those regions of southern Europe which the recent global economic crisis has revealed to be countries that belong to the South of the world rather than the North. As Sousa Santos argues, because of their history they are in a condition of subjection to the countries of the North: “The Global South is not a geographical concept [...]. The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering.

It is, therefore, an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America)” (Sousa Santos, 2016: 18).

Let us start now with analysis of the three dimensions.

## THE COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSION

Burawoy draws a distinction between 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 dualism which is implicit and deeper. In order to introduce this we must first define, according to Burawoy, the two sociologies from the point of view of a public.

He defines its traits and purposes thus: “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. [...] There is, however, another type of public sociology - *organic public sociology* in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often 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 goes on to say 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 highlights the risks that derive from such a distinction. They reside not so much in the distance between the two types of public sociologies —a risk which Burawoy avoids by affirming the complementarity between the two types— but in the distance, in the empty space which could originate between each type of sociological discourse —and therefore scientific— and the public, between the sociologist and his audience, as the latter often lacks the skills to understand the sense of sociological language.

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

Burawoy obviously does not admit this risk, but its presence can be deduced from the critical debate we were referring to and which 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 matter of sociological language, on the other, the attempts made by others to try to overcome this implicit dualism.

As concerns the first point, the question of language is undoubtedly fundamental, *i. e.* the choice of a simple and direct language. An author like Furedi (2009) 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” (p. 182), while Gans claims 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’” (social jargon) (as cited in Mayrl and Westbrook, 2009: 153). Furedi (2009) argues 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” (p. 183).

As concerns the second point, the hypotheses formulated are among the most varied. We start from the notion of *amphibious sociology* (Garavito, 2014: 157), a “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 perceive 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 which is increasingly affected by the presence of internet and in general of 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” (p. 163).

Further on, he translates this 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” (p. 164).

Garavito mentions the difficulty of being understood by the public, a difficulty which each of us, in our capacity as professor and scholar of sociology, can daily measure in our sociological practice<sup>8</sup>.

He also refers to the role of the media. In this last case, it consists of 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, after underlining the novelty represented by social networks “and Internet as a communicative tool, which is a completely new medium to reach the public”, Schneider (2014) points out that “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” (p. 206).

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

8 The writer tried his hand at a home-made practical experiment of public sociology in prison, thereby inferring the risks and what we are discussing.



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” (p. 208).

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” (p. 218).

Healey (2017) seems to move along a similar line of reflection when speaking of the question of disintermediation: “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” (p. 771).

Finally, Gans (2015) raises the problem of the different types of public 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, op-ed 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” (p. 7).

In our opinion, amphibious sociology, e-public sociology, disintermediation and the sociologist as a journalist all appear to be hypotheses ascribable to the risk that an empty space should open up, an unbridgeable hiatus between the producer of knowledge and the person(s) towards whom the scientific message is aimed (the publics). Mixing the cards, speaking of a knowledge generator who is also a user, identifying a new medium, onto-

logically new, which allows bridging the distance or the risk; identifying hybrid figures such as the journalist, all appear to be interesting and ingenious solutions to face a danger which is not easily avoided, as Gans (2015) admits: “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” (p. 10); and —we may add— which questions the very meaning of the sociological discipline in the manner that it is interpreted, conceived and practiced by those who define themselves as sociologists.

## THE 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 which helps Burawoy, on several occasions, to present as a unitary system the four types of sociologies which he proposes.

In this second case, a duality also emerges again, right between the instrumental and the reflective dimension. Following in particular Abbott’s critique (2007), we see in what terms it re-proposes dualism and what solution Abbott hypothesizes. Although he recognizes the value of Burawoy’s proposal, Abbott emphasizes his concern about “Burawoy’s implicit association between critique/reflexivity and left politics” (p. 195). Burawoy’s insistence on this almost Manichaeian distinction distorts the real work of sociologists since it places them aprioristically in 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” (Abbott, 2007: 197).

This standpoint is based on 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” (p. 217). Sociology is inevitably value-laden; it is a scientific enterprise that analyses 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 the right way is 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” (pp. 199–202).

Burawoy’s choice carries with it the risks of identifying a rigid hierarchy between values, and of attributing social action to that hierarchy, resulting in a political position. In contrast to this, Abbott proposes 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 presump-

tuous of the sociologist to judge the rights and wrongs of others. [...] 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” (p. 204).

Once again, the proposal of a humanist sociology basically reflects the idea that the dualism of reflexivity/instrumentalism can be overcome by identifying an intermediate ground represented by the proposal itself, which is essentially based on the idea that professional aspects and values progress strictly intertwined. In the ethical-political field, dualism is a constant risk and it is overcome by means of a new approach, an approach which, by accepting the ideal and moral foundation of public sociology, rejects some maximalist positions and leads sociology back to the inextricable profession-value intertwining within the ordinary life of sociological practice.

## THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIMENSION

This 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. By taking a position in relation to this desired reconciliation, Burawoy sets himself within a debate which has been going on for some time concerning the role of social sciences—and sociology—in the age of global society, and on the juxtaposition—another dualism—between the sociology of the North of the world and of the South of the world, between the epistemology of the North and the epistemology of the South<sup>9</sup>.

9 With this term, Sousa Santos—one of the leading exponents of the contemporary debate on overcoming the sociological perspective centred on Western society—summarises his proposal of a thought that primarily invests the epistemological dimension and which identifies in some southern European countries realities similar to the countries of the South in general. In a recent contribution, Sousa Santos admits that through history “southern Europe became a periphery, subordinated in economic,

On several occasions, as we have seen, Burawoy underlines the global aspirations of (public) sociology and its vocation to become an interpreter and champion of civil society: “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: 950).

This program inevitably occurs, therefore, by abandoning the methodological nationalism and the provincialism of US sociology, and by giving value to other sociological voices, belonging to the countries of the South of the world. According to the author, it is necessary 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”

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political, and cultural terms to northern Europe and the core that produced the Enlightenment [...]. This has now become very visible with the financial crisis” (Sousa Santos, 2016: 17). Colonial domination is presented as a process which, among others, “involves the deliberate destruction of other cultures and the destruction of knowledge (besides the genocide of indigenous people); is what I call epistemicide: the destruction of the knowledge and cultures of these populations, of their memories and ancestral links and their manner of relating to others and to nature”. Given that colonial domination passes through a multiplicity of strategies of destruction, including that of knowledge, he develops an analysis centred on epistemology: “That is why my thinking has increasingly turned to epistemological issues—that is, an engagement with the ways of knowing from the perspectives of those who have systematically suffered the injustices, dominations and oppressions caused by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy—. This is the definition I give of ‘epistemologies of the South’: a crucial epistemological transformation is required in order to reinvent social emancipation on a global scale. These evoke plural forms of emancipation not simply based on a Western understanding of the world” (p. 18).

(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 can certainly be sustained. What seems less clear is how such a conciliation can actually be achieved, working to overcome another fundamental dualism running through Burawoy's proposal, of an epistemological nature, and similar to the previous ones. An empty ground, an empty space between the southern point of view and the northern one. The point of view of the North has dominated and now must be reduced and provincialized. But, to start from the perspective of the South risks re-proposing the same problems of unilateralism which were imputed to the North and making a common and not partial vision impossible, creating an empty space between the different points of view. Burawoy (2016) 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", p. 957) but does not seem to offer convincing solutions.

## A HYPOTHESIS OF SOLUTION

In analyzing the three dimensions —communicative, ethical-political and epistemological—, a similar dualism emerged that undermines the effectiveness of action of public sociology: in other words, an empty space is created, a gap between apparently irreconcilable positions. For each area, criticism has become aware of this risk and has proposed some attempts at a solution. In particular, as regards the epistemological dimension, in which the dualism between the sociology of the North of the world and the sociology of the South of the world, between the epistemology of the North and the epistemology of the South, threatens to see the global aspirations of Burawoy's public sociology dashed, a hypothesis of solution has recently been formulated by J. Go (2016).

Let us briefly summarize Go's proposal, and then introduce our working hypothesis which tries

to operationalize Go's proposal, particularly by using tools, categories and concepts typical of the hard sciences, in particular of mathematical analysis.

Starting from Burawoy's same purpose, *i. e.* the need for an intellectual revolution against the provinciality of social science, Go 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?" (p. 1). After quoting Burawoy's proposal that "sociology should reach beyond its provincialism by scaling up the concept of civil society in order to analyze global civil society", he makes his own proposal, that is the *Southern standpoint*, grounded in a philosophical framework that he calls 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" (pp. 1-2).

This is obviously a proposal which introduces the Southern standpoint in order to avoid the risk of simply replacing the point of view of the North with that of the South —an intermediate point of view, although still belonging to the South— justifying it from an epistemological —and ontological— point of view through the use of a perspective such as that of scientific perspectivism which belongs to the philosophy of science (Gieryn, 2006).

"Perspectival realism as an ontology and epistemology upon which to mount the Southern standpoint approach" is attributable to the "scientific perspectivism in science studies and post-foundationalist standpoint theory as found in postcolonial and recent feminist thought" and has the merit of enabling us to "advance a Southern standpoint approach that draws upon the indigenous sociology

and Southern theory movement without resorting to essentialism or relativism” (Go, 2016: 3).

This solution hypothesis arises from the awareness that the project of a global sociology, which appears to be a perspective to make sociology more adequate for a global setting although much debated and towards which the global sociological community seems strongly oriented, does not presuppose an easy solution to be reached: “But if there is agreement on the problem and the goal, there is less agreement on the route” (p. 7).

The “third stage” approach, studying the world from the standpoint of global civil society, has been criticized for globally replicating “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 been developed which 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” (Go, 2016: 11). The problem, suggests Go, is that this approach risks falling into fallacies that are symmetrical to those of the North, so much so that although it has long been theorized it has never become established, and not only because the iron grip of the North maintains its material and symbolic hold on alternative points of view, but because it contains epistemological limits, precisely specular in relation to an epistemology of the North.

So, what, then, can be done? Go suggests drawing precisely 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. He refers to this approach as 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” (Go, 2016: 14).

We can highlight two elements of this approach:

1) It *saves* the point of view of the South and therefore constitutes a perspective of indigenous/Southern sociology without the limits which have been alleged for it.

2) In order to save it, it resorts to a revision/explanation of its epistemological/ontological foundation, resorting to the philosophy of science, appropriately revisited and introducing the social entry point of analysis as the epistemological foundation of the Southern standpoint.

In fact, Go (2016) sees it thus: “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. 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>10</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” (p. 15).

This is a remarkable step forward in terms of theory of knowledge and epistemology because, as is indicated in the line in italics, it overcomes the realism-constructivism dualism by identifying a middle

<sup>10</sup> Italics added by us.

ground between the two extremes, precisely that intermediate ground which, in our opinion, Burawoy's proposal greatly requires in order 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*" (Go, 2016: 17).

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

It has many advantages: first of all, it eschews essentialism for the more basic sociological claim that all knowledge is shaped socially. Post-positivist standpoint theory replaces the biological determination of standpoints with a recognition of social determination. Whatever the type or form of "context", "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" (p. 19).

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 differentially perceived—or 'known'—in the sense that different aspects of the same thing might be viewed or discovered as opposed to others" (p. 20).

Based on these assumptions, Go believes that "post-positivist standpoint theory and scientific perspectivism 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. [...] Different social positions contribute to different perspectives—that is, different standpoints—. [...] Different social identities are afforded distinct experiences and hence lenses by which to view the world. These different standpoints [...] offer respectively different perspectives. They each allow us to see in the world in a certain way, highlighting some things but not others, and helping us to interpret the meaning of some things in ways that might be different from the interpretations that other social experiences might afford" (p. 21).

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 avoiding any essentialism.

Moreover, "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. 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" (p. 22). Further, advocating for different maps does not necessarily mean that every map is right, because "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” (p. 23).

Go’s conclusions resume the overall sense of his approach: “If it is widely accepted that some kind of global sociology is needed to advance social knowledge and transcend sociology’s parochial origins, it is less clear how to do so. This essay follows the route paved by the indigenous sociology/Southern theory movement and completes it by advocating for a Southern standpoint approach. [...] This essay thereby suggests that 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 [...]. 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 [...]. 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. [...] A Southern standpoint approach, rooted in perspectival realism, [...] suggests that we need to open up sociology to voices from the global south for better knowledge. 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” (pp. 33-34).

This hypothesis obviously aroused a broad debate<sup>11</sup>. For our part, we limit ourselves to support-

ing a proposal which moves in agreement with Go’s and with his choice to draw on some constructs of hard sciences, in particular of mathematical analysis. Our work 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 this strategy feasible and desirable” (Go, 2016, 2), *i. e.* a standpoint of analysis that acts as an intermediary element between different levels, a standpoint of analysis that represents a middle ground between the extremism of “objective realism” on the one hand and radical “constructivism” in science on the other.

Here, it seems to us that a similar role can be played by a concept of mathematical analysis named “neighborhood of a point (circle or complete neighborhood)”. 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 neighborhood of a point can be opened to the left or to the right, and the radius can be specified or not, in which case we will talk about  $X_0$  and radius  $e$  as the set of  $X$  points which are less than  $X_0$ , to the left or to the right. In other terms, the neighborhood of a point is a useful concept to identify the idea of a point close to a limit, with borders and at the same time open, a reference point and an area around that point which acquires an own value and meaning thanks to this point.

What seems interesting to us is that it is a concept which, if translated on the social level (social neighborhood), has at the same time the characteristics of a point positioned in space and open to the right or left, therefore it is a fixed point which defines the points (real numbers in analysis) around it that are such by virtue of the point itself. The definition of closed neighborhood, open to the left or to the right, appears similar to Go’s when he speaks of a standpoint of analysis, a point of view from which to look; or a social entry point of analysis, which therefore possesses those intermediate, partial and at the same time non-relativistic characteristics which allow a reconciliation of opposites. It attempts to operationalize the Go proposal for the following reasons:

11 See the debate included in *Sociologica*, 2016, 2.

1. It resorts to a neutral concept of mathematical analysis that can function as an epistemological foundation to social theorizations, in particular introducing in sociological analysis the notion of “neighborhood of a point” (circle or complete neighborhood), identifying the concept of an open set/range, but bounded by a radius and centered on a precise point. Transforming the mathematical notion of “neighborhood of a point” into the notion of “social neighborhood of a point” allows us to identify a sufficiently flexible range and at the same time defined concept in order both to look at and connect the local dimension to the regional and global dimensions.

It avoids the risk of falling into forms of essentialism or relativism, provides a flexible tool for sociological analysis and at the same time is sufficiently scientifically founded to apply it to all those conditions in which it is necessary to identify a portion of social space, delimited by a boundary, which is necessary as a starting or observation point to proceed in a broader reflection. Like the construct developed by Go, it functions as a reference system in social space, from an intermediate point of view, from a neutral position to which to anchor itself in order to proceed with the analysis and construction of broader cognitive perspectives, avoiding any subjectivism. In fact, taking up what Go says about his construct: “It is the standpoint that matters, not the identity of those who are standing” (Go, 2016: 33).

2. Although it is necessary to perfect this hypothesis, relying on certain constructs of the philosophy of science or of analysis (in this case) seems very useful, not to return to forms of positivism which are now outdated but to develop transdisciplinary analyses and to use particularly useful concepts in these fields.

3. Coming to the use that can be made of it, in the face of the limits of public sociology we have highlighted, 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 Go’s notion, it avoids the risk of making the viewpoint of the South of the world —and also of southern Europe— ei-

ther a mere reflection of the North or of repeating the same self-referential error of what it wishes to eliminate (just the metrocentrism).

## CONCLUSIONS

The main goal of our article has been to show how a properly reformed public sociology can contribute to the enhancement of southern Europe, including in this last definition all the countries which, for economic and historical reasons, can be assimilated to the South of the world.

In order to do that we engaged in a reflection organized in three parts. First of all, we have seen how Burawoy’s proposal has achieved great success 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 offer itself as a global perspective, it has prompted a wide-ranging debate and provoked considerable criticism, substantially linked to the simplistic use of the categories, for example, of civil society, of professional sociology. Furthermore, this proposal is based on a contradiction: on the one hand it aspires to free itself from methodological nationalism, on the other it is the product of a national sociology like that of the United States.

In the second part, by fully drawing on the current debate, we have limited ourselves to highlighting an underlying dualism which we think runs through it, particularly within three dimensions: communicative, ethical-political and epistemological.

Regarding the first dimension, what emerges is the risk of an increasing distance, an empty space which could originate between each type of sociological discourse —and therefore scientific— and the public, between the sociologist and his/her audience, as the latter often lacks the skills to understand the sense of sociological language. Many attempts at a solution for bridging the gap have been formulated (the amphibious sociology of Garavito, the disintermediation of Healey, etc.), attempts in which awareness of a dualism between the producer of knowledge and the person(s) towards whom the scientific message is aimed (the publics)



is clearly present. This is a dualism that questions the very meaning of the sociological discipline in the manner that it is interpreted, conceived and practiced by those who define themselves as sociologists.

Regarding the second dimension, the ethical-political dimension, a duality emerges again, precisely between the instrumental and the reflective dimension of the sociological practice. The solution suggested by Abbott and which we have briefly summarized, shows, through the idea of a humanist sociology, that we are facing a dualism analogous to the first, a gap, an empty space between two apparently irreconcilable positions and thus, in order to overcome this dualism, we need to identify an intermediate ground, represented in this case by Abbott's proposal, which is essentially based on the idea that professional aspects and value progress are strictly intertwined.

The third aspect we have treated concerns the global aspiration of a public sociology. Here we see how such aspirations can be frustrated by the difficulty in bridging the space between the sociology of the North of the world and of the South of the world, between the epistemology of the North and the epistemology of the South, not to mention the connection to be sought among local, regional and global dimensions. It is evidently and above all an epistemological and cognitive problem that the author followed in this last part and attempts to fill by using the construct of the *Southern standpoint of analysis*, based on a solid scientific perspective like that of perspective realism. Beyond the solutions formulated by the literature for every single aspect, we have shown in the third part how this dualism can be traced back to the same logic, *i. e.* the risk of leaving a gap between different analysis, proposal or perspective planes: the risk of misunderstanding between the sociologist and his/her public, what he/she says and proposes is not understood by the public, it falls on deaf ears; there is the risk of subordinating the sociological debate and the action of the sociologist to a Manichaeism between a reflexive and an instrumental dimension which once again prevents grasping the mixed nature of sociological practice; and finally the difficulty in identifying a solution to the attempt to reconcile

the local, regional, national and global dimensions of sociology, allowing the proposal of a truly global sociology.

Starting from the epistemological dimension in particular, we have closely analyzed a mediating and overcoming suggestion which draws on the philosophy of science and on which we have grafted our work in progress proposal defined by the concept of *social neighborhood*. It brings together an epistemological and mathematical dimension with a posture/positioning which allows us to begin reflection from a point of view which is at the same time both open and circumscribed.

We are convinced that it is necessary for Burawoy's proposal to take into account these dualisms, which should be corrected and attempted to be overcome if it wishes to maintain the effectiveness and the fascination that critics in any case acknowledge for it. This is why we 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 for expressing the view of southern European societies without falling into the trap of an epistemology of the South which, criticizing the epistemology of the North, risks re-proposing the same dangers of self-referentiality that it wants to overcome, thus negating any global aspiration of public sociology.

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