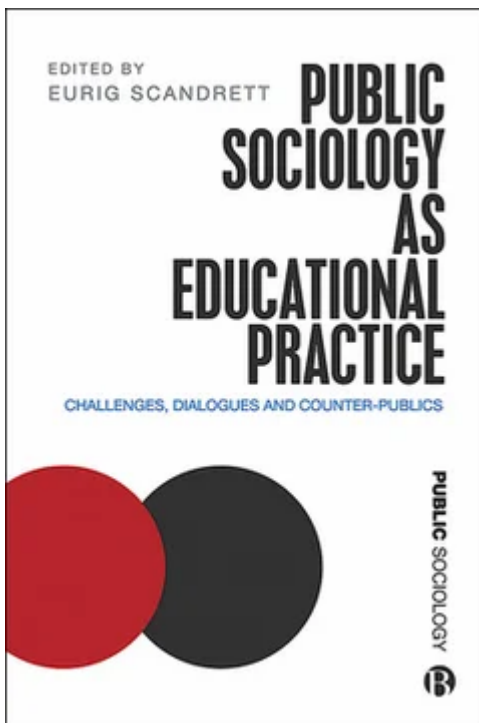


REVIEWS

Public Sociology as Educational Practice edited by Scandrett, and Critical Engagement with Public Sociology edited by Bezuidenhout et al

Reviewed by Sara McHaffie

10th October 2023

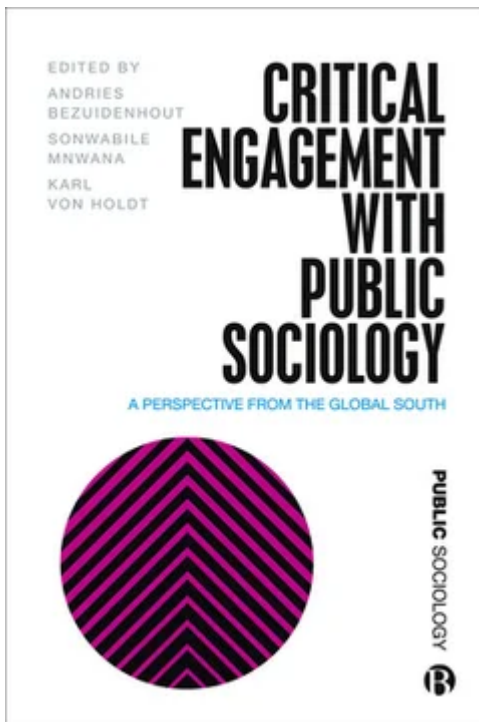


Eurig Scandrett (Editors)

Public Sociology as Educational Practice: Challenges, Dialogues and Counter-Publics

Bristol University Press, 2022

ISBN: 9781529201420



Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mswana and Karl von Holdt (Editors)

Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective from the Global South

Bristol University Press, 2024

ISBN: 9781529221152

What is a public sociologist? When they hear the term, people might imagine an academic explaining sociological concepts and research to the general public, perhaps on the radio, in a unidirectional way. In 2004, Michael Burawoy challenged this perception with his American Sociological Association (ASA) address on bringing “sociology into a conversation with publics”. Burawoy evoked a different kind of sociologist, co-generating knowledge alongside other people (such as a group of activists) and in dialogue with them, instead of talking at them.

Public Sociology as Educational Practice, edited by Eurig Scandrett, fully embraces the term “public sociology”. While *Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective from the Global South*, edited by Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mswana and Karl Van Holdt, instead problematises the naming and characterising of this sub-discipline.

Published as part of Bristol University Press’ public sociology series, these two books expand our understanding of what constitutes a public, the nature of conversations between sociologists and publics, and the power dynamics these conversations embody.

Public Sociology as Educational Practice addresses the practical concerns for public sociology, including how it works as a discipline in practice. Much of this work stems from the public sociological scholarship of Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, where Scandrett and some of the other

contributors are based. This infuses the dialogue with a comfortable familiarity that enables robust challenge between the co-authors, modelling the dialogical approach discussed in the text.

Meanwhile, *Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective from the Global South* addresses public sociology differently, bringing it back to its arguable birthplace in South Africa. It is an important intervention that describes a critically engaged form of sociology, which predates Burawoy's characterisation of public sociology. Bezuidenhout, Mnwana and von Holdt turn this lens of critical engagement on the field of public sociological scholarship from the two decades since Burawoy's ASA address, alongside reasserting the Global South roots of public sociology.

The public sociology discussed in *Public Sociology as Educational Practice* goes beyond a traditional understanding of simply working with a public. While some chapters do examine projects where this happens, such as Hutchings and Lewis' discussion of service learning, the authors investigate the work from a critical perspective, conscious of the concerns of social justice movements that students connect with.

The contributors explore the function of a public sociologist in depth, considering that "if public sociology is defined as Nancy Fraser does (and not as Burawoy does), then we sociologists have to engage with a subaltern group that is also counterpublic". Feminist philosopher Fraser's term "subaltern counterpublics" describes spaces where members of oppressed groups can enter into dialogue and cogenerate ideas that enable them to affirm their identities and resist their oppression, for example, the consciousness-raising groups of the women's liberation movement.

Scandrett divides his text into three sections: publics, knowledges and practices. Each is grounded in a compassionate and change-oriented theoretical perspective, which is useful for both those new to public sociology, and students and researchers wishing to situate their practice within a public sociological context.

The section on publics begins with a provocation on "class, gender and identity: axes of structure and difference in subaltern counterpublics", building on Fraser's theory and bringing in other relevant concepts such as intersectionality, which considers how different oppressions interact to produce unique experiences of disadvantage. The chapter, "Mad People's History and Identity", highlights an interesting project that resulted in the establishment of the first MSc course in Mad Studies, demonstrating the link between engaged public sociological scholarship, academic innovation and improved recognition of marginalised people.

Using the heuristic of "really useful knowledge", the second section on knowledges examines "public sociology education". The chapter "English Last" by Phipps, Sitholé, Tordzro and Tordzro asks how, if there is no "pure place to work from", we negotiate the "fraught intersectional sociological politics of education and representation". The text is practical and joyous, brimming with creative interventions. Language is a tangible topic from which to start conversations about decolonising with students or

other communities. Being an autistic activist working within communities who often use alternatives to speaking, “English last” provides parallels with my work that puts the spoken word in last place.

The final section on practices explores how public sociologists might practice “within, outside, at the edges of, despite, because of and against” higher education institutions. It challenges “disciplinary self-understandings”, which are used to further marginalise oppressed people seeking to engage with sociological ideas. Karl Johnson’s chapter, “Student-Public-Sociologist”, reflects on whether a public sociological emphasis on dialogue can enable us to “find common ground and engage in a more reciprocal form of teaching”, which connects to the widening access agenda. This will resonate with any sociologist working within the constraints of present-day higher education in the United Kingdom and be of interest to anyone seeking to better articulate their approach to teaching.

Along with the conclusion, which draws the three themes together, the structure of *Public Sociology as Educational Practice* enriches our understanding of public sociology, what it is for, who does it and how.

Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective from the Global South edited by Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonwabile Mnwana and Karl von Holdt, contrasts Burawoy’s definition of public sociology with “critically engaged sociology”. It showcases work from this perspective, such as research on food justice and rural mining.

Karl von Holdt (in chapter 5) offers a “critique from the South”, charting a three-decade-long dialogue between Johannesburg’s Society, Work and Politics Institute and Burawoy. This chapter echoes Scandrett’s book, claiming that “the engagement with subaltern movements transforms sociology itself through the production of new knowledge”.

Ntokozo Yingwana’s chapter on feminist participatory action research includes a case study where members of the African Sex Workers Alliance articulate what feminism means to them, using the creative method of bodymapping. Participants draw and write on a sketch of a body to reflect on and express aspects of their embodied life. The author engages with African feminism(s) along with a discussion of “the constant negotiation and (re)negotiation with both patriarchy and feminism” within this group.

Yingwana also critiques Burawoy’s definition of public sociology, with its distinction between “instrumental and reflexive knowledge”, with which Burawoy divides policy and professional sociologists (who he says use instrumental knowledge) from critical and public sociologists (who he says use reflexive knowledge). For the feminists of the African Sex Workers Alliance, this distinction is false and unhelpful.

Burawoy is afforded a right of reply in a reflective chapter, where he engages with the work presented earlier in the book, considering the possibilities of a Southern sociology, as opposed to the dominant Western sociology. The book’s rigorous conclusion exhorts the possibilities of North-South solidarity,

which is modelled within *Critical Engagement with Public Sociology: A Perspective from the Global South* as a dialogue that pulls no punches.

For those seeking alternative perspectives on public sociology, both titles are valuable resources. They go beyond Burawoy's description of public sociology and offer a critique that reclaims sociology as a discipline that can shed light on injustices. The authors suggest that sociology can also find and engage with those resisting these injustices as co-researchers and experts on their lives and identities. They offer a riot of real-world examples that apply sociological theory and serve as a reminder that public sociology and its older cousin, critically engaged sociology, are vibrant disciplines that speak to and with today's world.

References and further reading

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