can compete with Wal-Mart, which has entered the grocery business in a big way. Many economic sociologists work on socially significant issues that belong on the op-ed pages of daily newspapers and on radio talk shows — and we should keep trying to get our views aired there.

*Restrict words like “embedded” to your day job.* Paul Krugman didn’t get to be a widely read Op-Ed columnist by using a language unfamiliar to most college graduates. Writing in specialized terms may speak to the concerns of a discipline or subfield, but it doesn’t respond to wider circles of anxiety. People don’t want to know how sociologists think; they want to know how they think. And they want to know — even if we think we can’t give it to them — what will make their lives better.

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Should Public Sociologists Provide a Universal Formula for Public Action?

The Leviathan and the Air Pump revisited

Grégoire Mallard

The last issue of *Accounts* showed that economic sociologists are actively striving to provide a broad public an alternative to supply-side economics. To do so though, they are often tempted to imitate the economists’ strategy, e.g. to gather under one paradigmatic banner that provides universal solutions to policy makers and other economic actors. But ever since the downfall of Marxism, sociologists have been left without a universal paradigmatic banner to huddle under. Many of them turned to claiming that all issues and political battles are local. Today, can sociologist really construct a universal formula for public action or are they doomed to participate only in local conflicts? I present the alternatives that emerged from the debate among French sociologists in reaction to Pierre Bourdieu’s interventions in the public sphere since the late nineties.

After supporting different movements and social protests (especially the unemployed workers) since 1995, Pierre Bourdieu renewed efforts to provide a universal sociological rhetoric that any social movements could appropriate to formulate their claims (whether coming from feminism and environmentalism or from multiculturalism and Marxism). The idea was to produce a global and objective kind of knowledge that social actors could not access, being unaware of the logics of their practice. Instead of specifying the kinds of claims that social actors might fight for, he rather identified a common enemy of all social movements, e.g. the symbolic domination that subjects all critical discourses to the gate-keeping power of experts in the media, in think-tanks and in certain academic departments. The strategy finds its deep roots in Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological agenda. Indeed, for Bourdieu, symbolic domination subsumes all other types of social relation, and alternative cultural practices are always defined through their relation to the so-called “dominant” discourses (Grignon and Passeron 1989). Therefore, Bourdieu and his followers first tried to provide protesters an objective representation of this symbolic domi-

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1 Many thanks to Eleonore Lepinard, Griselda Mora and Steven Shafer.

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nation along with a radical rhetoric of denunciation (Bourdieu 1998).

"Bourdieu and his followers first tried to provide protesters an objective representation of their symbolic domination along with a radical rhetoric of denunciation."

Even if the books he edited reached tremendous success, showing the public’s interest, the question that remains is: should all public sociologists accept this agenda? Pierre Bourdieu’s strategy stirred a great deal of debate among French sociologists. Different authors advanced diverse reasons why this strategy is not appropriate for sociologists. First, the delivery of a ready made discourse, supposed to be universal — be it radical or not — buries the specific claims that specific groups voice. In particular, many sociologists were not convinced that it was the right solution exactly because they criticize neo-liberalism for being a universal discourse inattentive of the concrete realities of economic life. Second, using a universal discourse based on Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic domination assumes that all public sociologists would have a “strong commitment” to his theory (Thoenig 1999). And unlike economists, many sociologists are not ready to work only with one paradigm (Dubet 1999). Thirdly, it is not sure that this strategy brings any good for specific social movements. In the context of a democratic State, if protesters develop a rhetoric of general denunciation, it will be hard for politicians to understand their specific claims, hence to include them in their specific constituencies, and thus offer them social benefits (Dubet 1999). Hence, many sociologists argued against this proposal of universal formula. But is the motto that all conflicts are local the only alternative to this strategy?

Interestingly, that it is not what other authors argued. Michel Callon (1999) especially proposed to reject the opposition between local and universal formula. To him, the responsibility that public sociologists should endorse is to elevate the generality of certain claims, instead of superposing a universal rhetoric on them. Sociologists are used to searching for the right level of generality in their analyses (Caillé 1999) and hence to look for similarities between different situations. Such a process of association is not very different from the one of activists or politicians and other spokespersons, who try to identify and gather local groups who may face similar situations. Sociologists and social actors engage in a reflexive process when making alliances, testing the robustness of their discourse and the loyalty of their allies. Thus, to Michel Callon (1999), sociologists are not useful to other publics because they produce an “objective” knowledge of higher authority, but rather because they create these associations. Public sociologists can analyse and act upon these situations as they participate in the process of problem solving for some groups, and as they publicize it and make it available for other groups. For instance, Callon and Rabeharisoa (1999) document how one group of families affected by a specific disease (myopathy) fought the expertise of scientists and politicians. This specific experience is neither universal, nor local. It offers a model of relations between experts and non-experts that Michel Callon can publicise and try to help institutionalise. This model can then be used to organise relations between workers exposed to contamination, and experts, or associations against trade acts protecting patents over cures for AIDS and pharmaceutical firms, etc. Sociologists can hence produce public knowledge by identifying the list of potential publics sharing the same kind of situation.

In a sense, this debate is not new. It resembles a lot the controversy that Shapin and Shaffer (1985) documented, opposing Hobbes

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to Boyle, the Leviathan to the Air-Pump, the natural to the experimental philosophers. It pits Hobbes’ and Bourdieu’s conception that philosophers enounce universal rules based on objective matters of reason against Boyle and Callon’s conception that scientists can only produce — step by step — some generalizability through multiple witnessing experiences. As this historical perspective shows, the question is far from being settled. Public economic sociologists will certainly face the alternative for some time to come.

References


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Economic Sociology and its Publics

The Case of UK Higher Education Reform

Jeffrey Roberts

Every Friday morning around 8:45, almost like clockwork, there’s a ruckus at my front door. First comes the intense grating: the sound of an object too big for its allotted space being forced into position. Then comes the thud as it hits the hallway floor. The Times Higher Education Supplement, with its plastic wrap, clearly announces its arrival as it’s forced through the mail-slot in my front door, which was apparently designed with more elegant postal materials in mind. However, the excitement of the morning post, often the highlight of an otherwise cloistered day of PhD preparation, is soon dashed when I open the newly arrived package. Financial times are not good in UK higher education, the THES reports. But hope need not be lost, the Government tells us, because market reforms will save the day.

With the release of the Higher Education White Paper (HEWP) in January 2003, the shape of these proposed reforms came into clearer focus. The HEWP establishes three central prob-