

Review

Public Sociology Colloquium, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh: 7th November 2018

As Public Sociology Masters students, we came to the Colloquium expecting a day-long treatise on Michael Burawoy, full of highly sociological concepts, and maybe a genuine but superficial and weak attempt at interdisciplinary collaboration. In reality, the Public Sociology Colloquium, to us, was an immensely inspiring and surprising event because it did not fulfil our expectations, dared to go further, and stayed true to the message that really lies at the heart of public sociology.

The first surprise for us as MSc Public Sociology students was the number of speakers who might not be immediately identified as sociologists. There were community educators, occupational therapists, public services management scholars, feminist trade unionists, communication scholars and, yes, a few researchers who studied and do research in sociology. Instead of a token scholar or two from a closely allied field, we witnessed an honest and passionate celebration of interdisciplinarity. The fusion of these groups created a forum which could rightfully be called public sociology, without it becoming incomprehensible and uninteresting for the public, which might often happen with overly sociological events. The Colloquium was full of interdisciplinary sharing, linking, new ideas that could be or were transformed into public sociology, and new places where public sociology could go. Public sociology truly demonstrated itself as a gateway of sociology to other disciplines and, of course, other disciplines to sociological knowledge. This also made the sociological concepts much more comprehensible, the language less difficult and elitist, and the space much more accessible for everyone. It was interesting to see the ways in which each speaker did public sociology in different ways, specifically within different disciplines.

The second thing that surprised us all was that Michael Burawoy (who is often seen as the face of public sociology) was only mentioned once. We are not sure whether the lack of reference to Burawoy was down to the majority of the speakers not being sociologists, or whether public sociology can, in fact, be viewed outwith Burawoy's

presidential address to the American Sociological Association. It was refreshing for us, as students who have been spending much time looking critically at Burawoy, that Public Sociology is not framed by his famous address, and that it could be taken further. What particularly dominated the Colloquium was the Freirean notion of dialogue. Dialogue was, in fact, probably the most-used word of the day. It was a method utilised in most of the research discussed: it was central in Emma Woods's dialogue project in Malawi, in Elaine Ballantyne's Mad Studies research, Marion Ellison's study with young people, Sarah Kantartzis's engagement with critical occupational therapy, and Peter Rule's exploration of popular resistance in South Africa. We also noticed that dialogue, instead of being 'methodised' – focusing on how it works as a general method - was rather 'localised', i.e. discussed in terms of how it works embedded in a particular locality, therefore becoming more relevant to those localised communities.

Professional sociology is particularly framed by extensive consideration of method, which can often lead to strict 'rules' which the researcher cannot step out of. In this sense, then, it was interesting that no speaker (other than Elaine Ballantyne who used Participatory Action Research, which is led by participants and is a particularly important method within public sociology) mentioned a particular method which guided their research or practice. We believe, as Public Sociologists, that the move away from strict methods, to increasingly non-method driven research/practice, is liberating both for ourselves as Public Sociologists and for the knowledge we aim to contribute to the world through our discipline. The treatment of dialogue here was another surprise to us. Dialogue, in this Colloquium, was promoted from a mere method of data collection - it really became an epistemology, a way of knowing in the social world.

Dialogue was also central to the structure of the event: a lot of time was dedicated to dialogue between everyone present; for example in Maddie Breeze's panel discussion with Lena Wånggren, Jan Law and Jim Crowther, when everyone was encouraged to participate. Additionally, it was critically evaluated with respect to populism and democracy, with excellent input by Peter Falconer. This, especially thanks to Callum McGregor and Jim Crowther from a community education background, was linked to

problem-posing education and critical consciousness, creating a sort of triangulation for engaged public sociology.

With the Freirean concept of pedagogy underpinning Public Sociology, particularly focused on the co-production of knowledge, we found that the Mad Studies research participants (Penny Stafford and Shirley-Ann Collie) and Gift's input (Emma Wood's project in Malawi) brought Public Sociology to life in the Colloquium. Not only that, it also showed the speakers' effort in co-producing knowledge with those who hold experiential knowledge of the issue being addressed. It really just confirmed to us the importance of public sociology practice, and helped us understand what can happen if you engage more with groups outwith the 'ivory tower' of the sociology discipline.

Finally, what interested us as students of Public Sociology was how Margaret Petrie interestingly applied the exploration of feelings and emotions in adult education, particularly focusing on the 'Da Vinci Rapist' incident in Roslin, Midlothian. She recognised the importance of understanding feelings and emotions in relation to reaction. This proposition of the importance of understanding feelings and emotions resonated with us as public sociology students, not only in the sense that we also have feelings (which is sometimes perceived as a crime within professional sociology) but also because we believe that feelings and emotions can make a critical contribution to sociological knowledge.

The Public Sociology Colloquium was a truly inspiring, immensely powerful, and thoroughly enjoyable event.

Shiraz Avraham, Zuz Olsinova, and the rest of the MSc Public Sociology students at the Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh