

Review

Eurig Scandrett (ed) (2020) *Public Sociology as Educational Practice: Challenges, Dialogues and Counter-Publics*, Bristol University Press, 396pp, ISBN 978-1529201403, £80.00

Public Sociology as Educational Practice frames, critically engages with and seeks to further the theory and practice of public sociology as popularised by public sociologist, Michael Burawoy. Public sociology is about taking sociology outside the university, and using it to support ‘publics’ or communities to generate knowledge about society and how it can be changed. To readers of a journal about community education this aim will likely sound familiar; the explicit and implicit links between arguments for public sociology and the dialogical pedagogy of Paulo Freire are clear throughout the book.

Published in 2020 by Bristol University Press, and edited by Eurig Scandrett, the book advocates a public sociology in which dialogical education is key to generating knowledge and deepening understanding by sociologists and publics both inside and outside the university. Other contributions come from people practising public sociology in a range of fields including academia, trade union organising, art, activism, health and community work.

In its format the book echoes Burawoy’s extended case method in that it seeks to engage critically with and further public sociology education theory and is rooted in the methodological principle of dialogue. It is split into three sections, each of which begins with a series of theoretical provocations. Section I is concerned with the constitution of ‘publics’, Section II with the production of knowledge(s), and Section III with the practice of public sociology. The provocations are followed by a series of case studies which are in turn followed by rich and insightful ‘dialogue sections’. The case studies take the form of examples of educational practice delivered with a wide range of publics including survivors of domestic abuse, mad-identified people, academics (as workers in the neoliberal university), migrants, children and young people, and working class people. In the dialogue

sections, contributors are invited to engage with one another and with the editor with a view to ‘challenging, interrogating and developing further the argument ... in the context of wider political and historical processes’ (8).

Section I explores who are the ‘publics’ that public sociologists should engage through their pedagogical activities. Here, and throughout the book, Nancy Fraser’s concept of ‘subaltern counter-publics’, ‘those engaged in resistance, resilience, or building alternatives to some form of oppression, exploitation or injustice’ (13), is prominent. Scandrett argues that it is they who should be central to public sociology and, furthermore, that validation of public sociology should come, at least in part, from dialogue with subaltern counter-publics.

Much of Section II draws on the dialogical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and reinforces the need for public sociology to centre dialogue between public sociologists and publics as well as dialogue between sociological knowledge and knowledge production by these publics. It highlights the colonial, gendered and classist nature of knowledge production, and reflects critically on how public sociologists can and should avoid reproducing these hierarchies in validating public sociology knowledge.

Section III looks at what public sociologists do, and how public sociology does and might operate in different contexts. This section focuses more than the first two on how public sociology education can operate in the context of, or in close connection with, the increasingly neoliberal university. It demonstrates how public sociology education is possible in spite of or, as in a case study about collective union struggles as a result of, the expansion of market forces and market values into Scottish and English universities.

Through its provocations, case studies and dialogue sections, *Public Sociology as Educational Practice* engages critically with current debates from both public sociology and struggles for social justice more generally. Scandrett explains that whilst sociology cannot be an adjudicator in many of such debates, ‘it does provide resources through which the debate can be conducted’ (347).

Scandrett frames class, and a deepening of class analysis, as central to public sociology (whilst noting that references to class are noticeably absent from many of the case studies) but goes further to argue that public sociology education must also incorporate other forms of oppression and injustice that are ‘not reducible to capitalist relations of production’ (20).

The book makes a case for a public sociology education that not only centres subaltern counter-publics who are engaged in struggles against exploitation and oppression, but also one that enables public sociologists to become part of these struggles through their educational practice.

Dialogue I, from Section I of the book, includes Scandrett’s response to what are legitimate questions regarding who the ‘publics’ of public sociology should be and how subaltern counter-publics should be defined. Here, and throughout the book, Scandrett makes a strong case for why Fraser’s subaltern counter-publics should be privileged in public sociology education, but this section and some of the case studies in sections II and III highlight the key point that ‘sociologists are not united in their interpretations of axes of power and oppression and, therefore, where to locate subalternity’ (15).

Finally, throughout the book contributors demonstrate that public sociology theory and practice must be validated by both the academic community and subaltern counter-publics outside the university. Furthermore, it is only through dialogical processes with subaltern counter-publics that public sociology knowledge can be validated as ‘really useful’ in the context of their struggles and movements.

Public Sociology as Educational Practice will be useful, illuminating and challenging for people from a range of fields who are engaged in learning, working, and resistance. It seeks not only to bridge the gap between sociology and non-academic audiences, but encourages the reader - whether student, practitioner, activist or educator - to think about how public sociology as educational practice can contribute to, and become part of, struggles for social justice and liberation.

Unfortunately, the book costs £80 so, unless it is in a local or university library, it is unlikely to be accessible to many of the people or groups that would find it useful or interesting.

Drawing on public sociology practices in Scotland and England means the book reflects Burawoy's call for 'provincialised' public sociology, and one in which publics are 'always contingent [and] relational' (343). In spite of this, however, this book will be useful and interesting to a wide range of people from far beyond Scotland and England.

Public Sociology as Educational Practice advocates a public sociology that is pedagogical, dialectical, radical and, most importantly, rooted in subaltern movements for social justice and change. In the context of neoliberalism, increasing inequality, a global pandemic and a climate emergency, this book is more relevant than ever, and makes a case for bringing to bear, through public sociology education (and, indeed, community education), the analytical tools of sociology to support a wide range of struggles against oppression and exploitation.

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