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'Patient Denied Hospitalization' or 'In Defence of Sociology'

by Nikita Pokrovsky, State University-Higher School of Economics, Moscow, President of the Society of Professional Sociologists, Russia, Member of the ISA Executive Committee

After spending many years in the field of professional and international sociology I have a strong feeling that in today's world the future of sociology is seriously endangered. Its destiny is more uncertain and our professional ranks more dispersed than ever before. I will try to rationalize my inner feelings and intuitions. "Do we really need to defend sociology? From whom? Why now?" I often ask myself these questions regarding both Russia, my home country, and the international scene. I hate to sound pessimistic but I have to. There are, in my opinion, critical external risks to sociology as well as threats coming from within our own professional group.

The menace from outside

The external dangers consist of one main threat. To put it straightforwardly, in today's world sociology is fast losing its influence and authority. Neither power structures (above all the state and business) nor the populace are very interested in what we would call 'rational diagnosis' of the clinical condition of the social. Instead, various irrational forces take the lead. Old and newly invented forms of religion, social mythology, ideology and mass blindness prevail almost everywhere. These forces have pushed aside rationality without difficulty, even in the social sciences. Under such conditions the sphere of rationalistic and scholarly sociology is greatly diminishing. In my opinion, the light of reason is the only foundation upon which the power and capacity of sociology rest. We sociologists can provide societies with a diagnosis. But increasingly it seems that the 'clients' or 'patients', i.e. our societies, choose to refuse hospitalization. Our societies feel rather good without sociological diagnosis despite the fact that the condition of the 'patient' is really critical in many cases. In other words, sociology's external danger stems from society's denial of rational and scientifically-based analysis of the present situation. Indeed, this is a case of 'patient denied hospitalization'.

The menace from within

No wonder that internal threats to sociology also exist, and these are related to the external one. Since many sociologists and sociological communities see that their social role and public significance are increasingly declining, they have decided to turn sociology into a 'social force', a sort of broad social movement for a better society. From the perspective of this concept of sociology, issues of scholarship and higher learning are moved into the remote background and the agenda of sociology as a public service is emphasized. 'Sociologists have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' This well-known slogan of Marx, slightly re-worded, is, in fact, the motto of those who try today to change the world long before we are able to understand and interpret it in a scholarly way. For such sociologists action precedes knowledge. Can we agree with this? I cannot. Simply because in this country, Russia, we know well, from the previous history beginning in 1917, what it means to radically reconstruct society before undertaking an analysis.

What we should (and should not) do

I am convinced that the place of the sociologist is not on the public/political barricades whilst he or she wears the white robe of a scientist. Of course, a sociologist may at any time become a social and political worrier for any public goal. However, that would immediately deprive them of the right to represent the science of sociology. We are not supposed to take part in the treatment (as distinct from the analysis) of society. There are many social institutions whose main task is to carry out that

treatment: the state, political sphere, public organizations and movements, the press, public opinion, etc. Anyone familiar with the clinical process knows very well that the role of diagnosis is immense, and the final success of the treatment depends utterly on its accuracy and correctness. But diagnosis cannot and should not be mixed up with treatment. They belong to different spheres of expertise. Yes, we can and should contribute to changing the world by maintaining our professional scholarly objectives and also by increasing sociological culture and awareness within our societies through education and mass media. This alone is the 'public mission of sociology'. Otherwise we would be inclined to become blind guides leading the blind.

By saying this I am strongly supporting the ten theses of Piotr Sztopka in defense of sociology. The science of sociology for him as for myself is primarily and predominantly scholarship and professional excellence. Everything else is much more questionable.

Ten Theses on the Status of Sociology in an Unequal World

by Piotr Sztopka, University of Krakow, Poland, former ISA President

Almost ten years ago at the ISA World Congress of Sociology at Brisbane 2002 I won the Presidency of ISA running on a very 'politically incorrect' slogan, 'Excellence rather than balance'. Now the slogan seems relevant again, especially after the 2010 World Congress in Gothenburg and the sweeping victory of Michael Burawoy who again injected revolutionary fervor into the ISA: the claim of some 'alternative', 'indigenous' sociologies, the oppressive nature of Western methods and theories, and the 'imperialism' of the English language. We have stated our opposite points of view on the pages of *Contemporary Sociology* (July 2011, pp.388-404) but because this has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of my position, and earning me such undeserved labels as 'the last positivist', and a blind fan of the US, I want to state my case again as concisely and precisely as possible, in ten points. Michael has generously accepted my statement for *Global Dialogue* for which he deserves thanks.

First, *one should not draw epistemological conclusions from the actual conditions of the world, or from the concrete differences in the institutional status of our discipline in various parts of the world.* Most sociologists, myself included, due to their professional sensitiveness are strongly aware of the unjust inequalities among, as well as within contemporary societies, which also include different research opportunities. But this does not imply that there must be a different sociology for the privileged and underprivileged. Good sociology is equally able to understand riches and poverty.

Second, in a reversal of a famous adage, *if one really wants to change the unequal world, the first duty is to understand it.* Again, most sociologists, myself included, are reform-oriented, but our activist aspirations cannot be realized by moralizing, preaching, or ideological manifestoes, but only by the discovery of the mechanisms and regularities of social life, including those creating and petrifying inequalities and injustices. Karl Marx spent most of his life in the library, and not on the barricades, and is a giant of social science not because of the *Communist Manifesto*, but because of *Das Kapital*.

Third, *there is one sociology for many social worlds*^[1]. The mechanisms and regularities of social life are universal for human race, although, of course, their manifestations differ across civilizations,

cultures, societies, or segments of societies. Even the latter, though, are slowly becoming more uniform due to globalization, except those which refer to unjust inequalities (North versus South, core versus peripheries, race, gender and class divisions within societies), as well as religious fundamentalisms (believers versus infidels).

Fourth, *the standards of sociological research and good theory are universal*, and included in the cumulatively developing toolbox of methods and the pluralistic archive of sociological theories. This has nothing to do with any 'positivism', because the qualitative methodologies as well as the interpretive theories dominant today, recognizing the peculiarity of their social subject matter, also require universal standards, even though the standards are different from those of 'positivistic' sociology attempting to imitate the natural sciences.

Fifth, *the sin of origins does not disqualify the result*. The historical fact that the standard toolbox and pluralistic archive of theories has been initiated by bearded old men, mostly Jewish, living in Germany, France and Britain, and then developed mostly in Western Europe and the US, has nothing to do with their intrinsic quality. The latter has always been and should be subjected to sceptical scrutiny, corrections and improvements. But rejecting this methodological and theoretical tradition as 'imperialist' is a mark of obscurantism. Instead I would recommend, with Newton and Merton, 'to stand on the shoulders of giants'.

Sixth, *the futile attempt to create 'alternative' or 'indigenous' sociologies is pernicious for the discipline*. Science, including social science, does not know borders. It develops as a common pool of knowledge to which all national, continental, regional or even local sociologies are more than welcome to contribute. They may have unique research opportunities, unique research agendas, particular problem-emphases or orientations, but they do not require any alternative methodologies, or indigenous theories. Instead of arguing for the need for indigenous sociologies, my advice is: just do it. There is a lot of important sociological work done in the non-Western world. But it is usually based on standard methodologies and contributes to universal pool of theories. Nothing alternative or indigenous there, but simply good sociology.

Seventh, *the claims for national sociologies do not make much sense in this globalizing and more and more cosmopolitan social world of today*. The fact that countries or nation-states differ does not mean that their sociologies are, or should be, different. The only meaning of 'national' in this area has to do with some remaining institutional differences, different founding fathers, different research foci. But the results, if they deserve the name of 'sociology' and not just area studies or local statistics, must be abstract enough to enrich the universal pool of sociological knowledge. The future, also in ISA, is not with national sociologies but with research groups or networks (today's RCs, TGs, or WGs).

Eighth, the historical fact that a natural language, *English*, rather than some artificial, specially devised language (say Esperanto), has become the most used communication tool in the airlines, tourism, computers, Internet and science, including sociology, *is not a disaster but a great opportunity*. This is particularly so for sociologists from limited language-areas (like my own) who now have at their disposal most of the universal sociological heritage (through translations into English) and acquire visibility and opportunity to contribute to the universal pool (by publishing in English).

Ninth, *it is an error to believe that the existential situation of the researcher provides epistemological benefit*. The disclosure of the mechanisms and regularities of injustices and inequalities has not been the exclusive achievement of underdogs or insiders. Numerous examples point to the opposite. The only valid legitimacy in science can be provided by the quality of results and not the social status of the scholar.

Tenth, *value judgments and ideological biases are unavoidable, and even admissible in sociology at the heuristic stage* of selecting a problem, or research theme, but should have no place in the final results and their justification. And all values, as Gunnar Myrdal has advised^[2], should be openly disclosed for debate. This is what I have been attempting in my ten theses.

^[1] See my article in *The ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions* (Sage, 2010), ed. by Sujata Patel.

^[2] *Objectivity in Social Research* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).