

In Pursuit of Real Utopias: Kerr Preibisch as an Organic
Public Sociologist

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offers an overview of how Kerry's work started in critical sociology but quickly turned into organic public sociology in neoliberal times.

BETWEEN UTOPIANISM AND ANTI-UTOPIANISM

Since the nineteenth century, sociology has oscillated between Utopianism (Karl Marx) and anti-Utopianism (Max Weber), between a vision of progress toward human emancipation, and one of further dehumanization into an iron cage of oligarchy. Between these two destinations lies the possibility of envisioning real Utopias (Wright 2010), smaller achievements which can be approximated by piecemeal reforms that are viable and achievable, and yet do not reproduce the status quo. Instead, they enhance the conditions for human emancipation and flourishing in the short to medium term. But how can a sociologist contribute to the pursuit of real Utopias?

As an academic discipline, sociology has been marked by the tension highlighted by Max Weber in two separate essays: "science as a vocation," which calls for "value-free" science; and "politics as a vocation," in which he distinguished between "living for" politics and "living off" politics, with the attendant ethical conundrums. Weber's sociology was great at delineating these tensions but did not clarify how sociologists might adopt a standpoint from the heterogeneous interests existing in civil society while conducting

Marx envisioned a classless society in which exploitation and private ownership of the means of production would be abolished, and each member of society would contribute according to their capabilities and receive according to their needs. This is the brief outline of what Marx called communism. By contrast, toward the end of his life and career, Max Weber (1958) was overcome with pessimism that human society would be dominated by the bureaucracies of capitalism and confront a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness” (p. 128). Yet, even Max Weber (1958) could conceive of a Utopian possibility for human development when he articulated this phrase at the end of his “Politics as a Vocation”: “Man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible” (p. 128).

The paradox in Weber’s sociology lies in his conception of the discipline as the interpretive understanding of value-oriented social action, which calls for its own value standpoint because sociology cannot be its own exception (Burawoy 2016:379). As a form of social action, says Michael Burawoy, sociology too must be impelled by value commitments. Yet, Weber offered no clues as to where individuals would choose their values from to conduct sociological research. Consistent with his methodological individualism, Weber left value relevance to individual choice.

But individuals do not invent their value choices. They are rooted in society itself. We needed the development of civil society, even in all of its heterogeneity with conflicting interests, in order to ground sociological research in a concrete standpoint. Civil society may have been gelatinous in Weber’s time, seen by him as susceptible of manipulation by politicians and intellectuals or dilettantes into a “mass society.” But by the 1960s in North America, there was a resurgence of Marxism and the consolidation of feminism, along with vigorous civil-rights movements (e.g., Collins 2002). These theoretical and movement perspectives took a clear standpoint in the interests and values of the exploited and oppressed groups and classes in society. One could say that these were the most important theoretical influences in Kerry’s work. But how did she articulate the tensions between values entailed in the passion for a cause with the scientific canons of social research? Let me first discuss Kerry’s vocation as a sociologist.

SOCIOLOGY AS A VOCATION

Marx saw in the division of labor a chief force for human alienation, so it would have to be abolished, along with the abolition of private ownership as the means of production. In contrast, Emile Durkheim, another classical sociologist, thought that the division of labor could be perfected if everyone in society acknowledged our mutual dependency on each other, thus generating a collective consciousness around the cult of the individual. The cult of the individual, by the way, did not have to mean the free rein of egoism; on the contrary, against the utilitarian philosophers, for

Durkheim it meant the mutual recognition of each other human being's uniqueness and individuality to work in concert. It was not self-interest but being a member of society that guided individuals' action in organic solidarity.

Weber saw the division of labor as debilitating, as Marx did, but he saw it as a societal feature that was here to stay. How then are sociologists to specialize in their profession without becoming alienated? Weber's implicit answer, says Burawoy, lies in turning sociology into a vocation, something to be pursued as an end in itself. To do it well, to live for sociology, one must have passion in choosing the profession, and one must be prepared to perform it without guarantees of any specific outcomes. The same is true for the politician who is driven by passionate devotion to a cause, which must be balanced with an ethics of responsibility, that is, a sense of proportion (Burawoy 2016:381).

So, what drove Kerry's commitment to sociology? Similarly to our great predecessors, "Western sociology is marked by an abiding rejection of utilitarianism, the reduction of human action to economic rationality" (Burawoy 2016:381). So, if there is a social science antidote to neoliberal hegemony, this antidote lies primarily in sociology (Bourdieu 2003).

Kerry was particularly concerned with the impacts of neoliberalism on the lives of many rural Latin Americans who could no longer make a living in their home countries. To make ends meet, these people had to migrate to Canada and work under precarious conditions, most often separated from their families for extended periods of time. Female workers faced specific forms of oppression simply due to their gender, on top of the precarious working conditions shared by other workers. Kerry firmly believed that Canada could be reformed to incorporate its migrant workers as full members of society. Further, she believed, as Alvin Gouldner argued in the early 1960s, "the long-standing mythology of 'value-free science' needs to be replaced by value-committed science" (cited in Burawoy 2016:382). Feminist sociology pushed the discipline toward engagement, and Kerry was committed and engaged with society from the outset.

Kerry's challenge, of course, was how to engage in research driven by values and yet be vigilant so that her values would not distort her scientific enterprise. The committed sociologist's values in research places her in a parallel position to politics, which stands between an "ethic of responsibility" (as to what means to an end are used) and an "ethic of absolute ends" (perhaps without regard to the means used). On one hand, the sociologist

has to be driven by a cause, an ethic of absolute ends grounded in unshakable goals and compelling visions. On the other, a true [sociologist], mindful of the cause, must follow an ethic of responsibility, that is temper[ed by] the pursuit of a cause with a sense of realism that weighs up and takes into account the consequences of that pursuit The task of the social scientist qua policy

scientist is to develop a sense of what is possible and impossible in any given political situation. (Burawoy 2016:384)

Of all the various civil society standpoints, feminism has perhaps been the most influential in sociology and in society, and definitely in Kerry's work: "feminism has compelled the recognition of 'standpoint' and the fact

the status quo, is unlikely to be welcome in the corridors of power. Therefore, a critical sociologist with no links to state power brokers is likely to go nowhere with her or his policy recommendations. It is only when the critical sociologist becomes engaged with existing, organized publics that her research stands a chance of being heard, and perhaps even influence change in public policy. Thus, alongside traditional public sociology, Burawoy points also to an “organic” public sociology. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) concept of organic intellectuals, organic public sociology aims to elaborate the standpoint of a fundamental class or social group in society, such as feminism has done with the interests of women (e.g., Barndt 2002; Goldring 1996; Sachs 1991; Sassen 2000; Smith 1990). But such elaboration occurs in interaction between sociology and the social group. An organic public sociologist is thus one that involves the unmediated face-to-face relation of sociologists with publics such as trade unions, religious organizations, or the organizations of migrants and their advocates. Observing Kerry Preibisch’s career trajectory can leave no doubt that she became an effective, appreciated, and loved organic public sociologist of migrant workers, particularly female workers.

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