



# OVERCOMING SOCIOLOGICAL NARCISSISM. THE HETEROGENEOUS LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC ACTION

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It seems to me that in the conversation about public sociology today we should discuss the actual experiences of public activity of *different social scientists, artists, and activists*, and also think about the *competences* required for such activity. This is more appropriate than abstract theorizing on the public nature of sociology or designing normative scenarios, for example by legislating that our mission is to turn the supposedly confused and incompetent activists of NGOs into professional sociologists (an idea that was expressed in one of the numerous debates on this topic). Reducing the discussion to abstract models or normative courses of action only serves to emphasize sociologists' desire to preserve the status quo and their expert position, and also to limit the debate to their own professional community. In my view, charting the current spectrum of public actions and mapping existing practices are much more productive ways to reach a better understanding of our situation. Opting for this perspective, I will concentrate on those questions that I consider relevant to the debate about public sociology as it has been developing in the professional community.

## QUESTION 3 (THE TASKS AND LIMITS OF PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY)

I recently reviewed *Belformat* (Usmanova 2008), a collective volume edited by colleagues from the European Humanities University [a Belarusian university-in-exile based in Vilnius, Lithuania—*editor's note*]. The civic thrust of that project is obvious—it is our colleagues' attempt to offer their perspective on the contemporary Belarusian situation, to reveal the hidden basis of that country's repressive social order. The ease and refinement of the book's style made it comprehensible to a wide audience, and the richly detailed account of everyday activity and everyday situations demonstrated the authors' immersion in the reality they described as well as their attention to the opinions of non-sociologists. I was immediately struck by the obviously public nature of the book, and indeed by how neatly it fit into a public sociology framework. One might have expected that the authors would describe themselves as professional sociologists, or that the project itself would be classified as sociological. But no such terminology or professional identification was used—it simply proved redundant.

This example makes me wonder: why is it that sociologists are suddenly trying to talk about the public nature of their discipline and ask questions about its boundaries, as the present questionnaire does? To be public is obviously something the social sciences have been trying to do for a long time, and sociology has no monopoly on this. Suffice it to mention such related and relatively recent endeavors as feminism, situationism, Birmingham school cultural studies, and a great many others. The designation of publicness as solely and

precisely a sociological project which underlies the metaphor of “public sociology” appears to me to be based on an implicit attempt to find a niche in distinction to rival disciplines such as cultural studies. The project of public sociology in this understanding (a rather tenacious one, to judge by the way the editors phrased their question about “neighboring social sciences”) is a return to a century-old disciplinary divide, an unabashed refusal to acknowledge the current state of the social sciences, which strive toward integration rather than an emphasis on differences between disciplines. To me, publicness—understood in this case as expressing one’s civic position by presenting one’s research results to a wide audience and initiating a public debate—is an established common practice and a task for different social sciences, rather than a feature unique to sociology.

If we understand publicness as a special feature common to all the social sciences, I believe it is more fruitful to try to conceptualize this line of activity and the criteria that might be used to evaluate it, than to reflect on how it is realized by different disciplines. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that researchers’ public activities are often strongly influenced by non-scholarly traditions, stemming for example from art, which the postmodernist project sees as an equally valid mode of reflecting on, and presenting, the results of research.

#### QUESTION 4

##### (THE INSUFFICIENT INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE DISCIPLINE AS THE REASON FOR A LACK OF PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY)

None of the components of this assessment seem to me to be either intelligible or persuasive. What does “adequacy” mean in this case, and when will it materialize if it is lacking today? Why is there a lack of public sociology? Do we understand public sociology, among other things, as a discipline whose results are accessible to a mass, non-academic audience? Well, then, certain people do make daily appearances on national TV channels: “ideologically correct” scholarly experts who legitimize whichever point of view happens to be opportune at any given moment. So lamenting a lack of public sociology may be tantamount to expressing regret that “the wrong people” are present in the media.

What is important to discuss today, in my opinion, is not so much the presence or absence of publicity—that discussion would have been appropriate a few decades ago—but rather the quality of researchers’ various public/media appearances, and the criteria for evaluating that quality. The situations at Moscow State University, the European University at Saint Petersburg, and earlier at the European Humanities University in Minsk highlight the importance of a *competent* representation of the social sciences in the media and other venues, when conveying one’s position to a broad audience. Let me narrow the question down somewhat and concentrate on those media whose significance was most strongly felt during the events surrounding the above-mentioned institutions.

As these events convincingly demonstrated, the role of the sociologist/expert who speaks on a given topic and fits into an existing media format is by far not the only possible role. No less important today is the ability to be a newsmaker, to initiate discussion, to be able to grab the audience’s attention with your message, to choose the right channel as well as interesting and comprehensible means of introducing yourself to the audience. Let me mention a few recent examples of such professional use of the media. First, a series of television programs about lifestyle changes in Belarus, produced by colleagues at the European Humanities University, which probe the hidden meaning of widespread current practices such as *evroremont* [“euro-renovation,” the replacement of Soviet-style home furnishings by Western-looking ones—*editor’s note*] or consumerism. Second, *Vinogradar’* (*Viticulor*), a festival of non-profit advertising organized by colleagues from the *Region* Center in Ulyanovsk. Third, the ironic street performances by faculty and students of the European University at Saint Petersburg at the time of the university’s shutdown. There are many more successful attempts

to utilize channels of dissemination that go beyond the university and resonate among a non-academic audience. Widening the spectrum of possible public roles and moving from “talking head” to newsmaker requires researchers to collaborate with those who have the necessary competences—journalists, film-makers, artists, and others. This blurs the boundaries of the scholarly field and makes it obvious that scholars’ competences in this area are limited. Professional social scientists should recognize the need for such competences and rise up to the challenge. If they fail to do so, their science will ossify, and they will find themselves debating each other in empty university auditoriums.

“Public sociology” will probably become one of the key concepts that serve to question the criteria and limits of what counts as scientific. I don’t believe we should build walls between different scholarly communities and between them and artists or other non-academics pursuing the same objectives. We should meet each other half-way, learn each others’ skills, and develop the competences that enable us to “go public.” Extending the boundaries of what we do will result in a new type of activity and the need to revise disciplinary canons.

#### QUESTION 6

(LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FOR PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY FROM THE CLOSURE OF VTsIOM AS WELL AS EVENTS AT THE SOCIOLOGICAL DEPARTMENT OF MOSCOW STATE UNIVERSITY AND THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY AT SAINT PETERSBURG)

It is difficult to consider these events as unequivocal examples of public sociology. For all the ambiguity and metaphorical quality of the concept, I believe that “public sociology” has something to do with fostering a dialog with society on topics that are not limited by the interests of one professional group. I agree with those participants in the debate who have stressed the need to reduce the distance between society and the professional sociological community. I believe there are two components to this: On the one hand, the social sciences, with all their problems and contradictions, should be open to society’s scrutiny; on the other hand, sociologists should be immersed in pressing social problems. Devoting too much attention to the former aspects may lead to isolationism and solipsism. We should certainly talk about intra-disciplinary problems, but we should not consider them the main topic of our dialog with society, lest we begin to perceive society as a resource that sociologists only need when their discipline is in crisis or they come into conflict with the authorities.

*Authorized translation from the Russian by Mischa Gabowitsch*

#### REFERENCES

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