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W.E.B. DU BOIS AS PUBLIC SOCIOLOGIST

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Reconstructing Sociology by Michael Burawoy And W.E.B. du Bois

Michael Burawoy is one of those energetic and restless sociologists who never stop asking hard questions, challenging the conservatism of an ingrained common sense or always rediscovering new sources of inspiration for refreshing sociological insights.

When we invited him to address the Institute of Sociology's annual conference (2022) our thoughts were in his recent book *Public Sociology*, in which, following Wright Mills, Burawoy intersects biography with history, in connection with his trajectory in the contemporary world, fabricating a kind of intellectual autobiography. His concern is to be observant in the world and, from his position in various dimensions of the social space, to take on an involved and transformative stance. Thus, the knowledge to which he aspires is not socially relevant, detached from subjects who are observed and who observe those who observe them. This knowledge is not built on the myth of the monopoly of quantitative scientific objectivity, ignoring the intricate webs of social relations that require a careful, deep, complex and lengthy study. It is not total, majestic, "pure" knowledge detached from primordial substantive issues. Lastly, this knowledge does not rest on an impregnable and unfruitful division of work among sociologists (academics and those of "companies"; those within and those outside, in the "real world"; intellectuals and civil society; scientists and activists). Instead, this knowledge insists on the idea that one always asks the same question: "What is this knowledge for? Who is this knowledge for?". This broadens the possibility for it to resonate with the world – being in and with the world –, bringing us closer to Burawoy's proposed "lived experience" theory, through which he seeks to return knowledge to the social agents, who in turn incorporate it in their cognitive maps and reconstruct it. What would become of sociology in which social agents did not acknowledge themselves and discover something new about themselves?

Yet Michael did not wish to talk about his book. When he responded to our invitation, he objected:

"However, I'm not sure I have much more to say about public sociology than when I was last in Porto! I think Portuguese sociologists know more about this than I. As I said I give lectures or seminars on WEB Du Bois - the greatest public sociologist to have walked the earth! Sadly little known in Europe".

Hence the reason for this conference, which faithfully renders the text which Burawoy published "Why is classical theory classical? Theorizing the canon and canonizing Du Bois" and which he kindly allowed us to republish!. The text makes us realise the difference that studying W.E.B. Du Bois can make, offering a socio-historical analysis of social inequalities in the United States (intersecting class and race) that offers a broader overall understanding of power systems and how they are construed in the life of a black intellectual. Two key takeaways:

- i) First, that the (re)discovery of an author who has been overlooked for a long time is not a pretext for destroying the sociological canon, but rather to deepen, complexify and reconstruct it (Burawoy establishes a dialogue between Du Bois's perspective and Marx, Weber and Durkheim's framework references, offering new potential for sociological thinking);
- ii) Secondly, Du Bois's trajectory illustrates, in its genius and in its intense contradictions, that it is possible to have an interdisciplinary, reflexive, engaged ("public!"), global, and historical sociology that analyses capitalism within the tangled colonial and imperialist configurations, broadening, through effort and example, "the changing limitations of possibility".

At the end of the conference, Burawoy confessed to the audience his admiration for Du Bois's persistence: someone who, until his death at the age of 95, never stopped worrying, questioning, writing, reviewing, deepening and elaborating on his analyses. Knowing Michael, one understands well the root of this admiration: the tenacity of a sociologist and his relentless goal to understand and transform the world.

João Teixeira Lopes

Coordinator of the Institute of Sociology

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