

Evolving Publics and the Practice of Public Sociology

Critical Sociology

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Abstract

How do the changing roles of diverse publics affect possibilities for the practice of public sociology? Having set this question in the context of Burawoy's 2004 launch of public sociology, this analysis goes on to look at some distinguished illustrative examples of public sociology, beginning with Du Bois. The goal is to explore how the evolution of surrounding 'archipelagos of publics' creates challenges and opportunities for public sociology. In addition to Du Bois, the work of Edward Webster and his colleagues in South Africa, the unorthodox career of Marshall Ganz and the ethnographic public sociology of Arlie Hochschild are considered. A synoptic sketch of the evolution of publics in Brazil since the 1964 military coup and an example of contemporary Brazilian public sociology—the 'Emancipation Network'—follow. I conclude with a 'neo-Polanyian pessimist' vision of what the contemporary combination of neoliberalism and reactionary authoritarianism might mean for public sociology.

Keywords

publics, public sociology, South Africa, Brazil, neoliberalism, fascism, Polanyi

Introduction

In January 2024, the Board of Governors of the State University System of Florida voted to remove 'Principles of Sociology' as a core course option. This removed the sociology course from among those that students could take to satisfy their core course requirements and replaced it with 'a factual history course'. This decision followed a similar vote by the Florida College System, composed of Florida's 28 state colleges. Florida Commissioner of Education Manny Diaz Jr. explained the decision by saying that 'sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course for students', going on to say, 'Florida's higher education system will focus on preparing students for high-demand, high wage jobs, not woke ideology'. Then, as if to make it very clear the roots of its aversion to sociology, Florida followed up sociology's removal with a decision by the University of Florida 'terminating all diversity, equity and inclusion positions' (*The Guardian*, 2 March 2024).

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Florida's decision came, ironically enough, on roughly the 20th anniversary of Michael Burawoy's launch of public sociology in his 2004 presidential address at the American Sociological Association. The genius of Burawoy's launch lay in not setting public sociology in opposition to traditional 'professional sociology'. To the contrary, public sociology was embedded in a fourfold schema that Talcott Parsons might have envied for its analytical elegance. Burawoy's schema identified four modes of practicing sociology—professional, critical, policy and public—and asserted that, while tensions and conflicts among them might exist, their interdependent interactions gave the discipline its health and vitality.

Burawoy's sense of his constituency was acute. His fellow sociologists may have admired the elegance of his fourfold schema, but what really caught their imagination was, as intended, public sociology. A torrent of debates, symposia, articles and collected volumes was unleashed. Looking back in 2023, Douglas Hartmann (2023) summarized the response succinctly: 'Before the first decade of the new millennium was over, eight different journals had devoted symposia or entire special issues to public sociology, and at least four different readers on the theme were published' (p. 505).

There were, of course, some dissenters. In an article in the *American Sociologist* (2019) entitled 'The More American Sociology Seeks to Become a Politically-Relevant Discipline, the More Irrelevant it Becomes to Solving Societal Problems', Jonathan Turner (2019: 456) lamented that public sociology was undercutting professional sociology's dominant role in the discipline, arguing that, 'this trend is the growing marginalization of those committed to sociology as a science . . . resulting in demoralization of sociology's scientists'. Others found Burawoy's advocacy of public sociology too timid. Feagin et al. (2009) argue for replacing Burawoy's characterization of public sociology with a

view of public sociology as inherently critical (not dividing critical and public sociology like Burawoy) and as a particular form of sociology committed to social justice, a sociology that focuses specifically on historically oppressed and exploited publics: women, people of color, the poor, sexual minorities, and other socially oppressed groups. (p. 72)

Neither those who hoped traditional professional sociology would regain its prior dominance nor those who hoped the practice of sociology would move toward a single-minded focus on promoting social justice are likely to succeed in transforming the discipline. The professionalizers must face the fact that the 'publics' of most immediate importance to the discipline—its own members and students—have become less likely to find a purely professional identity satisfying. Not only does sociology attract people with hopes of contributing to justice-oriented social change, but, in the current era, their experience increasingly reinforces those predilections. Those teaching sociology are more likely to face precarity than to enjoy secure status as comfortable members of the middle class. The increasing numbers of students who are people of color, women, or LGBTQ+ are unlikely to be attracted to a sociological practice that lacks commitment to rectifying the oppression and exclusion that they have faced.

At the same time, the members of the discipline are unlikely to abandon the tenets of professional practice, both because of the intellectual attraction of the scientific analysis and argument and because they realize that being able to invoke this sort of analysis and argumentation creates legitimating value in society. The efforts of the American Sociological Association (ASA) to establish sociology's legitimation in response to Florida's attempt to push the discipline to the margins offer a good illustration. In an op-ed in the *Tampa Bay Times* on 1 February 2024, the leadership of the ASA argued that sociology should be seen as 'the scientific study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior' and that 'the overwhelming majority of professional sociologists base their teaching on empirical research and valid theoretical frameworks'.

Burawoy's version of public sociology anticipated the Scylla of setting it into opposition to 'scientific' professional sociology and the Charybdis of identifying it with a specific set of publics. His public sociology (Burawoy, 2005: 7) 'brings sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in conversation'. It 'strikes up a dialogic relation between sociologist and public in which the agenda of each is brought to the table, in which each adjusts to the other' (Burawoy, 2005: 9). There is no attempt to specify the exact characteristics of groups that qualify as 'publics'. To the contrary, the 'challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways' (Burawoy, 2005: abstract). These conceptualizations may seem 'vague or confusing' (Feagin et al., 2009: 71), but 'vagueness' is in fact, integral to the genius of his launch. The overly generic term 'public' may be irritating, but it serves the purpose of forcing consideration of sociology's connections to disparate groups.

So, how should we think about 'publics'? Burawoy's description suggests a minimalist set of guidelines. Shared categorical identities do not, in themselves, constitute a public. Members of a public are engaged with each other. Some publics might be thought of as 'communities', with shared life experiences, shared identities, and shared narratives about their identities. Members of some publics may have shared projects. Trade unions, workers trying to organize, and social movements are prime potential publics for sociologists.

Publics could be thought of as components of 'civil society'. Without civil society—a broad panorama of social relations independent of the state and going beyond simple instrumental relations of exchange—sociology would have no publics. But, as Burawoy (2005) points out, civil society is not just 'harmonious communalism but it is riven by segregations, dominations, and exploitations' (p. 24). Some publics may be noxious. The Klu Klux Klan was a 'public' whose aim was to re-install racist oppression.

The diverse collections of publics that compose civil society can be imagined as an 'evolving archipelago' of local, national, and global collective actors. 'Evolving' because the set of publics is ever changing. Established publics can shrink or disappear; new ones are always emerging. 'Archipelago' because of their multiplicity and varying inter-connectedness. What the 'evolving archipelago' image does not capture is their different valences in relation to each other and sociology. Some are allies; others are enemies. Some have symbiotic relations with sociology; some are hostile.

My aim here is to explore how the evolution of publics has intersected with the practice of public sociology. I will start with four synoptic, thumbnail sketches of the practice of public sociology. W.E.B. Du Bois and his Black American public is an obvious starting point. From there I skip to the South African symbiosis of anti-apartheid publics and effervescent public sociology, using the work of Edward Webster as a lens. I then move to Marshall Ganz, whose unorthodox career illustrates exceptionally well the power of engagement with publics to propel public sociology. I close my illustrative thumbnails with Arlie Hochschild's (2016a) *Strangers in Their Own Land*, which illustrates the possibilities and limits of engaging a public whose project and worldview diverge from those of sociology. From these four thumbnails, I move to an even more condensed look at the evolution of the archipelago of publics in Brazil since the advent of the 1964 military dictatorship. The Brazilian chronicle illustrates the difficulty of knowing how an archipelago is likely to shift over time. I close it with a vibrant current case of Brazilian public sociology—the 'Emancipation Network'—built in collaboration with poor black publics around an agenda of expanding access to education.

These cases are a 'biased sample'. They focus on what might be called 'progressive' public sociology. The bias is generated by my assumption that sociology's theoretical and epistemological frame has an 'elective affinity' to projects aligned with 'diversity, equity and inclusion'. Accepting the reality that individuals are not the 'captains of their fate', but lead lives that are the product of

the society in which they are embedded, is axiomatic to a sociological worldview. Elevating particular communal identities as inherently deserving a superior place in society is, like enthroning individualism, hard to square with a sociological perspective on civil society.

The character of the archipelago of publics sets the parameters for possibilities of engagement with sociology. As in all attempts to exercise agency, Marx's dictum applies: public sociology operates under circumstances that are given, not of its own choosing. Given a rich set of publics that share an appreciation of how the reality of society molds individual lives, especially if they go beyond this to appreciate how inclusion and social justice foster shared flourishing, progressive public sociology is likely to thrive. If dominant publics are collectively convinced that each individual is the master of his fate and relations with other groups are zero-sum, then thriving is a challenge.

Even while focusing on progressive public sociology, it is important to acknowledge that the rewards associated with supporting the interests of dominant publics make 'regressive public sociology' an attractive option for sociologists. Those who pushed Du Bois out of elite academic institutions were sociologists whose biases reflected the preconceptions of dominant white elites. Before the rise of a vibrant anti-apartheid public sociology, earlier generations of South Africa sociologists were 'the very heart of the apartheid project' (see footnote 3 below). Ignoring the extent to which regressive public sociology is an option would be a perilous error, especially given the uncertain future evolution of archipelagos of publics around the world.

The potentially perilous future is the focus of my concluding section. I will look at possible futures for sociology and its publics from a perspective that I call 'Neo-Polanyian pessimism'. Neo-Polanyian pessimism projects our contemporary context as combining the destructive consequences of the untrammelled reign of self-regulated markets, now known as 'neoliberalism', combined with flight to reactionary authoritarian rule. Neo-Polanyian pessimism projects a daunting context for practicing public sociology, but our array of cases show that public sociology has thrived even in the face of adverse archipelagos. Without pretending that there are any assurances, our panorama of cases reaffirms the resilience of public sociology.

Sociology and Its Publics

W.E.B. Du Bois, whom Burawoy (2021) calls 'the greatest public sociologist of the twentieth century' (p. 14), exemplifies the potential of public sociology. This thumbnail makes no pretense of being a contribution to the now vast opus on Du Bois (see, for example, Itzigsohn and Brown, 2020), but Du Bois and his relation to his primary public—Black America—is the perfect starting point for a discussion of how public sociology can connect to publics.

First, it is worth reiterating the obvious: the range and caliber of Du Bois' scholarly contributions constitute a one-person refutation of the idea that dedication to public sociology is incompatible with superlative performance as a professional sociologist. Those in control of the dominant institutional sites of professional sociology may have succeeded in pushing Du Bois to the institutional margins and in withholding acknowledgment of the seminal contribution of his work,¹ but his current ascendance in the discipline is testimony to their failure to bury his legacy as a professional sociologist.

Being not just engaged with his public, but a member of it, was fundamental to Du Bois' multifarious role as a public sociologist. Even if he had had no active engagement with his public, his books would have been a rich example of 'traditional public sociology', providing the Black public with a lens for understanding itself and offering those in the larger society a sociologically grounded vision of Black America (e.g. Du Bois, 1899, 1903). But, it was his active engagement with Black America that most validates his stature as 'the greatest public sociologist of the twentieth century' (Burawoy, 2021: 14).

Du Bois' engagement with the Black public evolved from a focus primarily on research and scholarship to efforts to build an activist political movement that could serve as a vehicle for transforming the consciousness and structural position of the Black community.² First, he made the most of his exclusion from elite white sociological institutions by creating the Atlanta School of sociological research at the historically black Atlanta University. Then, in 1906, he began to devote his efforts to building the Niagara Movement, which created the foundation for launching the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910.

Encapsulated in this sequence are two axes of struggle. The fundamental struggle was against the rising tide of post-Reconstruction Jim Crow whose goal was to drag Black America back toward a 'second slavery'. But advancing this fight required convincing Black America that militant struggle was the only viable path to moving forward and that the 'accommodationist' path advocated by Booker T. Washington, the most prominent Black spokesperson of the day, could not better the lives of Black Americans, save perhaps a few fortunate elite Blacks.

Du Bois' pursuit of the path of militant struggle required in turn two components. Within the Black public, fostering an activist consciousness that Du Bois sometimes referred to as 'moral mastery' was foundational. The goal was making sure that 'the self-blaming accommodationist attitudes among African Americans were replaced by a fighting spirit animated by moral outrage' (see Schwartz, in press). Bringing this 'fighting spirit' to bear on practical struggles required in turn building the sort of organizational infrastructure embodied in the Niagara movement and the NAACP. In combination, Du Bois' two-pronged effort constituted a public sociology project to enable the unceasing militant agitation that would be necessary to turn back the Jim Crow tide.

Reflecting on Du Bois' fundamentally motivating public—Black America—and his two fronts of struggle—his obvious opponents incarnated in the racist publics of white America and rival claimants to charting the course of the Black public—shows how both positive and negative publics shaped his prolific contributions. Looking at other cases of public sociology expands and reinforces the role of both positive and negative publics in driving sociological practice.

If Du Bois is Burawoy's favorite public sociologist, South Africa was the context that inspired him to think about public sociology. Supportive alliances with publics contesting the dominant social order were central to the effervescence of sociology in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s. Once democracy was established publics evolved in ways that made public sociology more complex. The career of Edward Webster, whose recent death robbed of South Africa of a pioneering scholar and activist, offers an ideal lens for looking at the evolution of South African sociology and its publics.³

South African sociologists' alliance with the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s and 1980s reflected the emergence of stronger and more diverse oppositional publics. From the underground communist militants to the Black Consciousness Movement, a rich mix of movements and organizations provided ideas and inspiration. Nonetheless, allying with anti-apartheid publics took more than seeing the affinities between this movement and sociological formulations of what a just society might look like. It also took courage. Webster was arrested in 1975, under the 'Suppression of Communism Act', ostensibly because of the content of a speech he gave to the National Union of South African Students. Undeterred, he went on to work with South African unions and social movements to build institutions that could link with anti-apartheid publics, the most famous among them being SWOP (The Sociology of Work Program now the Society, Work and Politics Institute; see Burawoy, 2010).

SWOP was a vehicle for connecting sociologists to the practical and political challenges faced by South African unions. Webster and SWOP also created connections between South African realities and global debates. The anti-apartheid struggles of South African unions became emblematic of 'social movement unionism' in global debates (Seidman, 1994; Webster, 1988; Webster et al., 2008).

SWOP's publics were not limited to unions. Burawoy (2021) marvels at 'how SWOP was so successful in engaging with diverse publics through research, seminars, and their famous breakfasts, attended by politicians, government officials, unions, and the wider public' (p. 162). Nonetheless, sociology's relations with South Africa's unions remains the best lens for looking at how evolving publics force the evolution of public sociology.

The advent of democratic majority rule led to a 'paradox of victory' for South Africa's unions (Buhlungu, 2010). For unionists, the single-minded struggle to mobilize the Black population and overthrow the apartheid state was replaced by the less unifying challenges of economic precarity and unemployment. As Seidman (2011) summarizes the shift:

lay-offs meant that formerly militant unions found themselves desperately trying to protect their members' jobs during economic restructuring. Instead of challenging the state or speaking on behalf of poor communities labor leaders often found themselves worrying about sustaining their members' jobs—negotiating with employers through 'social pacts' and negotiating rather than calling for strikes.

As the agendas of their key publics shifted, Webster and his SWOP colleagues put more emphasis on defining their role in terms of 'critical engagement' which emphasized, as Webster (1995) put it, 'Squaring the circle . . . a difficult combination of commitment to the goals of these movements while being faithful to evidence, data and your own judgment and conscience' (p. 18).⁴

'Critical engagement' foregrounds the dynamics of sociology's relation to its key publics more clearly than Burawoy's original conceptualization. It makes it clear that even the most committed sociologists may find themselves in conflict with their allied publics.

As public sociology moves forward in South Africa and expands its focus to include new issues like ecological sustainability (see, for example, Satgar, 2018) the set of publics it engages will expand and evolve in turn. Given the storied history of the South African case, its future is likely to be a bellwether for the global trajectory of sociology's relations with its publics. But, before moving on to look at general trajectories, it is worth looking at other modes through which publics shape sociological practice. Two very different examples follow: the unorthodox case of Marshall Ganz and Arlie Hochschild's engagement with the unlikely public of a Tea Party community in Louisiana.

Marshall Ganz's career as a public sociologist took an unorthodox path. Engagement with publics often underlies the attraction of a career in sociology. Rarely do publics create the path to becoming a public sociologist as clearly as they did in Ganz's case.⁵ Ganz's case also suggests that having publics as an initial driver is a particularly fruitful formula for a career that transmits sociological insights to other publics down the line.

Ganz was propelled to drop out of college by the affinity he felt for a special set of publics—the Civil Rights movement and the United Farm Workers (UFW). He went on to spend the first decades of his career beyond the walls of academe. Once again, contestation with a powerful set of dominant publics—in this case the oppressive social order built around capitalist agriculture in mid-20th-century California—were central to the development of the insights that Ganz brought to his life as a public sociologist.

After working as an organizer for 16 years with the UFW he went on to do a variety of other community, union, and electoral organizing work. Then 28 years after dropping out of school, Ganz returned to academe, finished his undergraduate degree, earned an MPA at the Harvard Kennedy School, and began teaching while working on his PhD in sociology. Since finishing his PhD he has taught full time at Kennedy School. The powerful role of the publics that originally engaged him is clear in both his sociological writing and teaching. His dissertation (Ganz, 2000a) and his subsequent book *Why David Sometimes Wins* (2010) set out a vision of strategic organizing

capacity, extracting analytical lessons from the organizing successes of the UFW (see also Ganz, 2000b, 2002). ‘Public narratives’ is another practice Ganz has developed in his classes at the Kennedy school, again a practice drawn from his career as organizer.

Ganz’s (2002) pedagogy of practice offers a powerful demonstration of how public sociology can use the analytical tools of sociology to connect past and future publics. Practices rooted in past publics function as tools for generating of new publics by teaching organizing as developing leadership, building community capacity and transferring that capacity into the power to achieve change (see syllabi, at <https://scholar.harvard.edu/marshallganz>). Through his courses, workshops, and projects Ganz continues to develop organizing practices learned in earlier struggles with publics around the globe. One good example is the ‘Leading Change Network’, a ‘community of practice’ which generates new learning via “engagement with thousands of participants across multiple learning spaces . . . resulting in ‘the growth of organized communities across 44 countries and conducted in 30 different languages’”.⁶

Shared projects that transcend the boundary between sociology and activist publics with a commitment to sustained learning are fundamental to this unorthodox Ganz model of public sociology. Ganz’s affinity to the social justice projects of his original publics drew him to them. The projects of these publics turned out to fit nicely with the sociological worldview in which he later became immersed. The intellectual tools of sociology could be used in turn to help make these original projects comprehensible to other groups (and to other sociologists).

The symbiotic confluence of projects that Ganz’s trajectory illustrates makes effective public sociology seem like a natural endeavor. Connecting with publics where shared projects are harder to construct is another story. One of the best examples of taking on this challenge is Arlie Hochschild (2016a) *Strangers in Their Own Land*.

Hochschild is a genius at transforming ethnographic research into compelling narratives that resonate with both broad audience and sociologists because they ring true. Her previous work focused primarily on the emotional concomitants of work, especially work done by women. *Strangers in Their Own Land* was a departure. It looked at a community in Lake Charles, Louisiana that was a potentially hostile public. Hochschild’s ethnographic genius turned the challenge into a landmark success. Her account became, in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s electoral success, a sort of Rosetta stone for liberal publics trying to understand what had happened.

In an article in *Contemporary Sociology* Hochschild (2016b) lays out a beautifully condensed version of her ‘three-part method’. (p. 685). Ethnography was the foundation. Over the course of 5 years in Lake Charles Hochschild played cards, went fishing, visited schools and graveyards, attended political meetings and church services, and collected close to 5000 pages of interview transcripts. The second step was constructing what she calls ‘a deep story’ or a ‘feels as if’ story. Using the skills gained in decades of exploring the sociology of emotions, Hochschild captures the emotions of her public and the metaphors that undergird their emotional response, with the core metaphor being one of other groups having ‘cut in line’ ahead of them. Step three is returning to her public to see whether the deep story as she tells it resonates. In this case, it did. Not everyone among the people in Lake Charles that Hochschild had talked to found it complete, but at least some said, ‘I live your analogy’ or, ‘You’ve read my mind’.

Strangers in their Own Land’s success as ‘traditional public sociology’ is unquestionable (per Burawoy, 2005: 7). It conveys the worldview of her public to a larger, distant audience and provides a valued reflection to the members of the public themselves. It is a real conversation between the sociologist and her public. Nonetheless, it stands in contrast to the other examples of public sociologists and their publics that we have looked at.

Hochschild and her public share an interest in making their worldview visible and comprehensible and generating an empathetic understanding of what the book’s subtitle calls their ‘anger and

mourning'. What they can't really share is a forward-looking project. The project that would flow from the 'cut in line' metaphor would be to send people of color and immigrants further back in the line, hardly a project compatible with public sociology. Nor is the project of reducing the role of 'the government' as a means of making life in Lake Charles better a project that public sociology can easily share.

Strangers in Their Own Land is a striking example of how public sociology is powered and limited by its publics. It demonstrates the power of public sociology to connect with unlikely publics while simultaneously showing how a public's agenda limits public sociology. Lacking a public whose forward-looking projects jibe with sociological visions of positive social change there is only so much that public sociology can do.

Just as connections with publics shape the trajectories of individual efforts at public sociology, so structural changes in the archipelago of publics shape collective possibilities for public sociology in different countries at different periods. A variety of trajectories may foster public sociology. Both the emergence of supportive publics and the rise of hostile publics can stimulate its vitality. The emergence of a broad set of anti-apartheid publics in South Africa opened possibilities for South African Sociologists. However, the rise of the threatening publics associated with Jim Crow energized the efforts of Du Bois to connect with and support the forward-looking projects of his Black public. But, as the archipelago evolves, it may also undercut previously fruitful opportunities, forcing changes in practice or requiring the emergence of new foci and practices. To illustrate the evolution of an archipelago over time, I will use a highly condensed chronicle of often surprising rises and falls of different publics in Brazil since the military coup 60 years ago.

An Evolving Archipelago of Publics

In 1964, when the US-backed military coup shut down democratic politics in Brazil, it was unclear what the future held for Brazil's progressive publics, or for sociology. I will careen through the evolution of Brazil's archipelago from struggles against the military regime to the turbulent initial decades of the 21st century. The shifting salience of different public over the course of the last 50 years highlights impermanence as a central feature of the archipelago. Publics that seem central at one point in time fade; new publics come to the fore.

The struggle to unseat the dictatorship took 20 years and involved a disparate set of groups ranging from clandestine armed groups (like the one to which future President Dilma Rousseff belonged) to militant industrial unions, but the repressive regime was the dominant force in shaping the archipelago. Founded 5 years after the coup, CEBRAP (Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento), illustrates sociology's resilience in the face of this adverse environment (see Carloni, 2015). CEBRAP brought together a striking collection of sociologists and other social scientists who were prohibited from employment in public universities. Forming CEBRAP gave them an organizational base from which to continue to do public sociology by generating research and participating in public debates (Baptista, 2010). Marxist analysis may have been the most common shared theoretical perspective among CEBRAP's founders, but their most important public was probably the faction of Brazil's elite and middle classes that had re-democratization as their political agenda. CEBRAP was an important intellectual auxiliary to their re-democratization project. And, eventually, one of its founders, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, outlasted military rule to become a unique example of a sociologist ascending to the presidency of his country.

While pro-democracy middle class publics were important in pushing the military back into the barracks, the public most important to the transition was arguably the militant workers of São Paulo's industrial belt (Keck, 1992; Seidman, 1990, 1994). Their strikes were violently suppressed but their resistance strengthened of the Brazilian union movement, making it a formidable public

(Weffort, 1972). Brazilian unions were paired with South African unions as models of social movement unionism in the global south (Evans, 2014; Seidman, 1994). In 1980, organized workers added an explicitly political vehicle to their organizational repertoire with the formation of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT/Workers' Party). Workers' Party militants brought expanded workers' rights, social rights, and more egalitarian state policies to the fore of the re-democratization agenda. By the time he was elected president, Cardoso had to face accusations from the Workers' Party that he had become the agent of the neo-liberal capitalist status quo. The public sociologist president had to deal with a new public.

In 2002 the Workers' Party candidate, the preternaturally politically talented Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was finally elected President. He was successful in responding to his mandate by implementing programs with relative small fiscal impact but substantial social impact, like the 'Family Budget', which provided direct cash subsidies to families, and 'Hunger Zero'. But, even during the halcyon years of Lula's first two administrations, Brazilian publics were shifting in ways that were undermining his political base.

Shifts in the structure of employment possibilities drove important changes. Brazil's industrial workers were a shrinking share of the workforce and being pulled closer to the uncertain life of the 'precariat'. The effects of a shrinking 'Fordist' industrial working class were exacerbated by the atrophy of mobilization efforts by traditional unions and by the Workers' Party itself. The Workers' Party essentially abandoned its base-building work, disempowering its 'base nuclei' (*Núcleos de Base*) (McKenna, 2020a: 618). Analysts began talking about the 'Rise and Decline of Brazil's New Unionism' (Sluyter-Beltrão, 2010), instead of using Brazil as an example of social movement unionism.

By the time Dilma Rousseff succeeded Lula in 2015, she faced a less propitious global economic environment and different set of publics. The traditional opponents of expanded democratic representation and social rights were still entrenched—ranging from vociferous rural reactionaries, epitomized by the 'biblia, boi e balas' (bible, cattle, and bullets) contingent, to persistently powerful, globally connected Brazilian finance capitalists. At the same time, new publics complicated the archipelago.

A volatile set of mass publics drawn together by WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media took Brazilian politics by surprise in June of 2013 (see Alonso and Mische, 2017). What began as a protest against bus fares became a massive demonstration. All of the established parties were disavowed but the PT was particularly targeted. The evolution of the archipelago had not only moved beyond Cardoso but also beyond the Workers' Party.

Coinciding with the organizational decay of unions was the spectacular rise of Evangelical churches in Brazil. Brazil is now the home to the largest and most rapidly growing Evangelical population in Latin America (McKenna, 2020b). Perhaps even more important, Brazil's Evangelical churches are well-organized, creating a loyal and easily mobilized public. They have also become extremely wealthy. Perhaps the most telling example of the crisscrossed fortunes of unions and Evangelical churches came in 2018 when the Central Union Confederation's insolvency forced it to sell its headquarters to an Evangelical megachurch, which paid in cash (McKenna, 2020a: 616)

Structural, organizational, and mobilizational trends converged in a frightening way in 2018 (Evans, 2018, 2020). Jair Bolsonaro was elected President—a former army officer whom McKenna (2018) describes as purveying a brand of 'digital-first fascism' (p. 17). Bolsonaro's victory grew out of a convergence of at least three principal publics. First, and most important, was the reactionary elite who found traditional center-right parties incapable of rousing electoral enthusiasm (see Evans, 2020: 10). Elites assumed that Bolsonaro's misogyny and racism would not affect their lives and they were attracted by Bolsonaro's hyper-neoliberal economic advisor, Paulo Guedes. Second, were the Evangelicals, who, while not necessarily economically

reactionary,⁷ were attracted by Bolsonaro's superficially Evangelical persona and his support on cultural issues like opposition to legitimating LGBTQ identities. Finally, segments of the amorphous public that had first become prominent in the 2013 demonstrations found Bolsonaro's lack of connection to any established political party a qualification in itself.

Bolsonaro's administration was chaotic, corrupt, and as a repressive as Brazil's surviving institutional guardrails would allow. A re-enfranchised Lula managed to defeat him 2022 and the army refused to back Bolsonaro's Trump-like efforts at an insurrection. Nonetheless, the configuration of publics that enabled Bolsonaro's original ascent to power is still in place, leaving us with the question: 'What space does Brazil's new configuration of publics leave for public sociology?' Surprisingly, the prospects for public sociology are not as dim that might be expected.

The energetic efforts of the University of Sao Paulo's Ruy Braga illuminate contemporary possibilities for public sociology. Braga's engagement builds on both the emergence of the 'precariat' as a principal component of Brazil's working class and the persistent exclusion of marginalized citizens of color who live in Brazil's urban peripheries. His sociological opus combines critical analysis of the declining mobilizational effectiveness with what he sees as the PT's collaboration with the policy agendas of finance capital (see Bianchi and Braga, 2005). His public sociology grows even more directly out of his ethnographic research on strategies of resistance among precariously employed telemarketing workers in São Paulo (see Braga, 2015 [2012]).⁸ For Braga, the emergence of the precariat is an opportunity for public sociology (see Braga, 2023).

Over the course of the last 20 years, the activist component of Braga's public sociology project has culminated in a project called the 'Emancipation Network'. The immediate goal of 'Emancipation Network' is the democratization of access to university education (Braga, in press: 179). It brings together sociology faculty and students in offering 'popular education' courses, primarily to poor black students. The courses are designed to give these marginalized students a better chance of passing the national university entrance exam and being able to enter higher education. The network is

self-managed and self-financed, relying only on grassroots funding and direct support from poor communities . . . All teachers, as well as educational coordinators, are volunteers . . . when a network student enters the public university, they often become a prep teacher, helping other Black students. (Braga, in press: 187)

The network's success as a pedagogical innovation is hard to gainsay: It is by far the largest popular education project in Brazil (Braga, in press: 187).⁹ At the same time, it is closely linked to a larger political project. It is indelibly part of the broader anti-racist struggle in Brazil. In addition, the alliance of the Network with the MTST and the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) has been instrumental in making Guilherme Boulos (who holds leadership roles in both MTST and PSOL) a leading candidate in the 2024 mayoral election in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city.

The Emancipation Network's success shows that the shrinking of publics traditionally considered core constituencies of public sociology (in this case the organized industrial working class) is not the end of the story. The emergence of what looks like a 'disorganized' precarious working class offers new opportunities if public sociology is creative enough to take advantage of them. The involvement of Evangelicals in the MTST makes them a significant component of the network's base as well.

Stepping back, one note of caution and one question emerge from this thumbnail sketch of the evolution of Brazil's archipelago. The note of caution is obvious: we should never presume to be able to predict what the archipelago will look like at the next turn. When the Generals took power in 1964, no one would have predicted that they were unleashing a process that would generate a powerful set of militant unions and a public sociologist president to be followed by a union leader

president. Few would have predicted during Lula's successful terms as President that the evolution of the archipelago would unleash Bolsonaro. In the depths of Bolsonaro's chaos, the idea that sociologists, socialist politicians, and homeless workers would create a potent political alliance whose base was predominantly Evangelicals would have seemed fanciful.

The question remains, 'Will future changes in the configuration of publics leave space for the reconstruction of public sociology?' Even without claiming predictive power, the future of public sociology and its publics must be addressed. This brings us back to exploring the larger context in which Florida's decision to push sociology to the side is embedded. A pessimistic revision of a great optimist—Karl Polanyi—will provide the frame.

Conclusion

As he completed *The Great Transformation* in 1944, Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]) believed that the post-World War II conjuncture had 'ushered in' a great transformation and that, 'Undoubtedly our age will be credited with having seen the end of the self-regulating market' (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 149). His assessment was optimistic but not just wishful thinking (Evans, 2015). Polanyi was writing at an exceptional point in the 'longue durée' of capitalism (cf. Piketty, 2014). The economic collapse of capitalist economies in the 1930s, in combination with the defeat of European fascism, had laid the groundwork for what would become a 30-year 'golden age' of capitalism (see Hobsbawm, 1994).

Sadly, the extent and durability of this transformation fell far short of Polanyi's hopes. A theoretical and ideological counterattack was already underway as Polanyi was writing.¹⁰ The result—'neoliberalism'—was a reconstruction of economic liberalism more aggressive and more thoroughly opposed to state initiatives on behalf of social protection than its predecessors. By the 1970s, it was clear that Polanyi's hoped for 'spontaneous reaction' had failed to halt the ascendancy of the principle of market liberalism.

Polanyi's description of the devastating consequences of the dominion of market liberalism had become a specter for the future of society instead of a description of consequences that had been escaped. As a vision of the future, Polanyian optimism must be reconceptualized as 'neo-Polanyi pessimism'. It remains, however, a powerful vision. The victory of market liberalism still means:

the destruction of family life, the devastation of neighborhoods, the denudation of forests, the pollution of rivers . . . and the general degradation of existence, including housing and arts, as well as the innumerable forms of private and public life that do not affect profits. (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]: 139)

These destructive consequences for people's lives and the still propel flight to authoritarian rule. European fascism was, of course, Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) prime historical example. He saw fascism as 'rooted in a market society that refused to function' (p. 247). For Polanyi (2001 [1944]), 'Freedom's utter frustration in fascism is, indeed, the inevitable result of the liberal philosophy' (p. 265).

A third component of Polanyi's argument is also apt. Polanyi's diagnosis of fascism takes for granted its systematic attacks on any group that can be defined as 'the other'. Affinity for exclusion and marginalization is the natural complement to refusal to see society as a shared project. More broadly, the ideological and political constructions used to legitimate the quest for market utopia obliterate the 'reality of society' as a shared endeavor, crippling the ability of publics to envision themselves as sites for shared transformative projects.

Arlie Hochschild's Tea Party public offers an example of worldviews distorted by living in a society dominated by the neoliberal version of the principle of market liberalism. The people of Lake Charles are being robbed of a sustainable environment by the corporate quests for more profitable extraction of local resources, but the idea of constructing a collective public action to

confront these corporations seems to this public to be an alien endeavor, especially if it might require action by government institutions.

Having set out the bleak general projections that emerge from turning Polanyi's analysis into 'neo-Polanyian pessimism', it is time to review our diverse examples of publics and public sociology. Our examples cannot negate the real possibility that profit-driven destruction and flight to repressive authoritarian rule could dominate the future, but they do provide concrete starting points for thinking about how public sociology might productively respond to the evolution of the archipelagos of publics projected by neo-Polanyian pessimism.

Du Bois confronted an archipelago of publics that was certainly as hostile as our current setting. His principal positive public—Black America—was more thoroughly excluded from citizenship rights than contemporary US publics of color. He faced the burgeoning hostile public of the Klu Klux Klan and a range of less well marked publics supportive of the extension and deepening of Jim Crow. The agency of his own public was undercut by absorption of the negative stereotypes of the white majority. Accommodationist Black elites anxious to avoid provoking their white counterparts also undercut mobilizational energy. Du Bois responded by becoming an agent of the evolution of his own public, ideologically and organizationally. Ideologically, his concepts of 'double consciousness' and 'moral mastery' aimed at countering the debilitating effects of absorption of negative stereotypes. Organizationally, he set out to construct vehicles that could help propel mobilization—first the Niagara movement and then the NAACP. In short, Du Bois saw his public not as an immutable structural given but as one whose evolution he could help shape.

Edward Webster's public sociology also combined ideological and organizational efforts to reshape his archipelago. Powerful, hostile, repressive publics predominated as Webster began his public sociology endeavor. Webster and his comrades did have the good fortune of being part of the profound transformation of political power in South Africa. This transformation opened up more opportunities for Webster and SWOP to work directly with the Black unions that were among their primary publics and to help build ties among different progressive publics, both within South Africa and with social movement unionism around the world. The initial predominance of powerful hostile publics stimulated rather than preventing the emergence of public sociology. Being able to respond to evolution of key publics became essential as the 'paradox of victory' made a stance of 'critical engagement' more crucial. Once again public sociology was a source of agency as publics and public sociology evolved together.

The unorthodox case of Marshall Ganz illustrates a different model for the symbiosis of publics and public sociology. His early immersion in activist publics preceded the formation of Ganz's identity as a public sociologist, inspiring the development of the repertory of pedagogical practices, which enabled him to foster a proliferation of publics around the world. The 'Ganz model' of public sociology shows how ideas and agency can flow from publics to sociology and then be diffused again to publics.

Looking at evolving publics in Brazil chronicled an evolving archipelago full of surprises, but it also showed sociology's ability to weather even adverse surprises. Having survived the military dictatorship, the relative atrophy of Brazil's once vibrant social movement unionism, and the burgeoning role of Evangelical constituencies, Brazilian sociology responded with a creative response that fit their 21st-century archipelago. Ruy Braga and the Emancipation Network built on the continued exclusion of poor, Black Brazilians from public universities and helped generate a novel configuration of publics. The alliance of sociologists, homeless workers (including Evangelicals) and socialists that they helped foster could end up helping to enable a leader of the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) become the mayor of Brazil's largest city.

While Brazil lends itself to an optimistic reading of public sociology's resilience, it reminds us that the negative possibilities projected by neo-Polanyian pessimism are real. The contradictory

combination of elite and mass publics that brought Bolsonaro to power is still potent. A recent (February 2024) rally of 185,000 in support of Bolsonaro was a reminder that, despite his incompetence and corruption, his supporters have not gone away. A similar but better organized reactionary leader could still take Brazil back to exclusionary authoritarian rule like that of the military dictatorship with which our Brazilian narrative began. Brazil reminds us that, especially in the current era, edifices built by public sociology and its publics remain vulnerable.

And this brings us back to Florida, the current archipelago of publics in the United States is as fragile as Brazil's. Neoliberal ideology has a powerful resonance with individualistic traditions, creating a nurturant environment for the sort of socio-political disaster predicted by neo-Polanyian pessimism. Yet, here as elsewhere, adverse archipelagos may stimulate public sociology by challenging it. Florida's attack on sociology provoked Burawoy into giving a polemical speech setting out sociology's role in combative terms that were a far cry from his elegantly equilibrated launch of public sociology of 20 years ago. An excerpt from this speech is a good closing reminder that even in the face of hostile publics, the practice of public sociology will continue:

... why the hell do they care about SOCIOLOGY? ... to promote their vision of the world, which is based on individualism, whiteness, ethnocentrism, sexism, and multiple injustices targeting vulnerable populations ... they need to also destroy the very field—sociology—that in the current day does the exact opposite of what they want. Sociology helps students understand how society is collective, the role of race, of class, of gender. Sociology is the scientific study of inequality and the oppression this entails. Sociology studies the very exclusions promoted by the conservative forces here in Florida. But we study exclusions not to deepen them but to recognize and publicize them, and to better understand how they can be contested and reversed. (Burawoy, speech in Florida, 10 March 2024)

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Notes

1. See Morris (2015).
2. This discussion draws heavily on Schwartz (in press).
3. Alliances with progressive publics had not always been a feature of South African sociology. As Bezuidenhout et al. (2022) put it, 'The discipline in South Africa was at the very heart of the apartheid project. Apartheid as an ideology was elaborated from within the discipline, and its social technocrats were trained by the discipline' (p. 29).
4. For a full-blown examination of the concept, see Bezuidenhout et al. (2022).
5. The UFW's formative role in shaping his career did not, it should be pointed out, prevent Ganz from 'critical engagement'. When he saw the UFW as losing its sense of its own mission Ganz resigned from his position with the union in 1981.

6. See Leading Change Network, *2022 Annual Report* @ <https://leadingchangenetwork.org> To get a quick flavor of organizers who went from Ganz classes to organizing new publics see Nisreen Haj Ahmad <https://www.belfercenter.org/person/nisreen-haj-ahmad> and Art Reyes <https://leadingchangenetwork.org/event/faces-of-change-live-art-reyes-iii/>
7. Guilherme Boulos, Socialist and head of the radical Homeless Workers Movement (MTST), noted that, ‘The largest part of our base, of the MTST, is by far, [made up of] Pentecostal Evangelicals’ (quoted in McKenna 2020a: 622).
8. Braga’s public sociology also fits nicely with his institutional role at the University of São Paulo where in addition to being a Professor of Sociology he is a director of CENEDIC, an institute dedicated to researching citizenship rights. See <https://sociologia.fflch.usp.br/cenedic>.
9. Other pedagogic innovations with broad political implications could easily be added to this case. The pedagogy of the rural based Landless Workers Movement has produced equally impressive results (see Tarlau, 2019).
10. Friedrich Hayek’s through the looking glass view of social protection, *The Road to Serfdom*, was also published in 1944.

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