

1. Many Ukrainian students of sociology choose to pursue their careers in marketing research and commercial sociology. However your name is often mentioned in connection to the term “critical sociology.” What is your view of the sociologist’s role today?

**There is no singular “role” for sociologists, any more than there is for intellectuals in general. Here is a slightly different way of posing the question: Do sociologists have an important role to play in the critique of society? The answer to that question is a simple, straightforward “yes”. Unless you believe either that social institutions are irrelevant to human well being or you believe that the existing institutions generate no harms in the lives of people, then there is a tremendously important role for sociologists in the critique of institutions. This should not, however, be viewed as some esoteric, highly controversial or fringe activity. No one says, for example, that there is anything special about a biological scientist studying human diseases with an eye to finding cures. The premise of research on diseases is that they undermine human flourishing, and thus we want to understand the causal processes involved and figure out how to neutralize them. A critical sociologist does this for social institutions that create harms.**

2. Your critical sociology differs from both commercial sociology and most academic researches pretending to be “value-free”. What distinguishes your concept of “emancipatory social science” from Burawoy’s “public sociology” or Bourdieu’s “engaged sociology”?

**No one is value free in a basic sense: the choice of topics and problems on which to work is shaped by values. But again, this is true for medical researchers as well. I choose topics and problems in terms of a commitment to the value of human flourishing and an egalitarian conception of social justice. I believe I can defend my views on these normative issues even if they are contested. These values determines the problems on which I work, but they do not determine the answers I generate. I am currently doing research on the social economy institutions of Quebec. I am studying this because I believe that they enhance egalitarian and democratic spaces within capitalist economies and I want to find out if this is the case. I do not want my values to influence my assessment of these institutions; I do not want to cherry pick my observations in order to “prove” the virtue of these institutional arrangements just because I would like them to have these positive effects. Perhaps they don’t. Perhaps their apparent positive affects (with respect to my values) are illusions. If so, I want to learn that. Therefore, there is a crucial sense in which my research is “value free:” I try my best to avoid wishful thinking and self-deception in my research – i.e. I try my best to avoid having my values interfere with the adequacy of my observations.**

**How is this related to public sociology and engaged sociology? It is certainly engaged: I see the production of knowledge as potentially contributing to transforming the world, not just describing it. It is congruent with public sociology but not equivalent to it: public sociology is defined by the nature of the audience – it is a “public” -- and the character of the dialogue between the sociologist and that public. My sociological practice includes professional sociology and critical sociology as well as public sociology.**

3. Do you see any perspectives of strengthening the Marxist tradition in social sciences? In what form? Which directions, questions and authors are of the most interest at this time?

**The prospects for a resurgence of Marxism within the social sciences depends as much on what happens in the world as it does on the specific intellectual currents within the academy. A great deal of contemporary discussion is deeply infused with Marxist ideas even if they have lost their connection to Marxism as a self-conscious theoretical framework. Globalization discussions, for example, are heavily inflected with Marxist ideas. The discussions of crisis and the incapacities of states, the power of finance capital, marginalization, etc. are all heavily indebted to Marxism. So in one sense Marxism is alive and well.**

**What has changed is the self-conscious identification of critical sociologists and others with Marxism as such. I am not sure how much this really matters. In some specific ways the constant tendency in the past for left academics to relate everything back to Marx and look for validation of their ideas in the work of Marx was a liability. It certainly fed in to a kind of intellectual practice that reinforced tendencies towards dogmatism rather than theoretical openness. In any case, what matters is whether there is serious anticapitalist thinking, class analysis, and a critique of the capitalist state.**

4. What practical conclusions can be derived from your class analysis today? Where can people who occupy "contradictory locations within class positions" find themselves in the current economic crisis and what possible class conflicts can it provoke?

**The main practical conclusion from my specific class analysis, I think, concerns the increasing precariousness and uncertain prospects for people in contradictory class locations. The integrative mechanisms which tied their interests to capital have weakened. "Middle class" jobs are declining relative to jobs at the top and at the bottom of the income distribution. So, the stability of the forms of class compromise anchored in contradictory locations has declined. On the other hand, at a political level, there does not seem to be emerging any coherent class politics of alternative – either an alternative for a new form of capitalist equilibrium, or (even less) a class politics of alternative. A crisis does not provoke coherent class conflict unless there is some sense of alternative being framed by class organizations and adopted as an agenda of struggle, and that has not happened. If anything there seems to be indications that people in contradictory class locations may be playing an increasingly reactionary, defensive role.**

5. Some researchers (such as Loïc Wacquant) consider the criminalization of social problems to be one of the distinguishing elements of the neoliberal system. Do you agree with this opinion? Do you think it is necessary to address these problems as well as alternatives to the penitentiary system in your "Real Utopias" project? Are there any questions sociologists need to pay special attention to in this context?

**Criminalization of social problems is certainly a face of neoliberalism – understood as the broad political and ideological attack on the affirmative state and the desirability of integrative class compromises. It is the natural response to the view the state should not interfere with the distributive effects of the market and that "free" markets are the optimal solution to problems of economic development. Repression is the natural response to the social dislocations and problems generated by such a fundamentalist faith in the market.**

6. In “The Politics of Punishment” (the translated excerpts of which we offer to our Ukrainian readers) you give a detailed description of the American society. Which aspects are still relevant today (30 years after its publication) and which have changed significantly?

**You know, I have not re-read *The Politics of Punishment* for probably 35 years, so I don’t remember exactly what I said then. But here is how I would synoptically characterize the changes in the US between 1973 when that book was published and today:**

- **The United States remains a pervasively capitalist society both in terms of its economic structure and its cultural characteristics. Since the 1970s there has been a retreat from what can be called an “affirmative state” – a state that plays a strongly active role in the creation of public goods and the regulating of the market. While the neoliberal fantasy of a liberated free market has not occurred, the state plays a less active role in directing and animating economic activity and counteracting its negative effects than it did in the early 1970s.**
- **Inequality has grown dramatically. The most dramatic change is inequality at the top – the ratio of average income in the top 1% of households to the median household income increased from 10:1 in 1979 to 15:1 in 1989 and 25:1 in 2000. In contrast the ratio of household income in the 95-99<sup>th</sup> percentiles (i.e. the four percentiles below the top 1%) to the median household income only increase from 3.2:1 in 1979 to 3.9:1 in 1989 and 4.4:1 in 2000. Inequality between the median and the bottom quintile has changed hardly at all. The conclusion is straightforward: the massive growth in inequality in the United States has been driven by massive increases in income and wealth at the very top of the economic structure.**
- **Poverty remains a persistent and deeply troubling issue in the United States. After a fairly dramatic reduction in poverty in the 1960s there has been more or less stagnation since the late 1970s. What is particularly shocking is the persistence of poverty among children in such a rich country.**
- **In terms of both racial and gender inequality, there has been uneven progress in this period. This is clearer for gender issues than for race, but even for race there has been significant reductions in some forms of inequality, especially in occupational distributions and educational attainment. A full inventory of the uneven progress on gender and racial inequality can be found in my forthcoming book with Joel Rogers *American Society: how it really works* (W.W. Norton: 2010). The manuscript is available online at: <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ContemporaryAmericanSoicety.htm>.**
- **There has been a significant shift in the political discourses in the public sphere around questions of poverty and inequality, from a discourse that at least partially recognized structural causes of poverty to one that places overwhelming emphasis on the problem of “personal responsibility” and cultural deficits.**
- **The rate of incarceration has skyrocketed since the 1970s reaching the highest levels in the world. This repressive response to crime complements the shift to an ideology of personal responsibility for one’s fate.**

7. Is it possible to compare the American context to other societies’ experience? For example, Loïc Wacquant believes that the American model of criminalization of poverty is now being exported to the whole world. Do you agree with this thesis? If yes, then why is it happening?

**The criminalization of poverty is a somewhat heavy-handed way of describing a more complex process. There is still in the US a contrast drawn between the “disreputable poor” and the “reputable poor”. The latter are constituted by hardworking families that take on second jobs, live frugal lives, control their children, etc. Their struggles are positively valorized and there is some**

public discussion about the importance of providing social supports for the “working poor” (as this category is also called). In fact for this category of the poor, government spending has indeed increased considerably in the form of something called the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides significant tax rebates to working people with families whose earnings remain below the poverty. This positive view of the respectable poor is combined with an intensification of the stigma and repressive reaction to people in extreme poverty, top the fully destitute, demoralized and marginalized segment of poverty. Their condition is indeed “criminalized” in certain ways in the form of laws again begging, sleeping in parks and on the streets, etc. I am not sure if it is helpful to call this complex configuration the criminalization of poverty. What has happened is that people are assumed to be responsible for their own conditions of life, and the hard-working reputable poor are those that take their fate into their own hands “responsibly” and are thus worthy of respect and support, while the disreputable poor should be repressed.

8. In “The Politics of Punishment” you are very persuasive when describing the mechanism of self-criticism meetings in China. Has the tradition in China changed during the prevalence of free-market economy? Furthermore, do you think it is possible to realize the mechanism of self-criticism meetings in the American civil society if the state’s role in conviction and punishment weakens?

I am sure that I (like many student radicals of the 1960s) had a very romanticized view of the criticism/self-criticism process in China during the Cultural Revolution. I saw this as a process of continual dialogue and deliberation over problems – critical problem-solving – but in fact much of this was a process of denunciation and enforced conformism to arbitrary standards. So I would not hold up the reality of self-criticism in China as any kind of model.

In any case, it certainly does seem to be the case that in China with the transition to a market economy the particular kind of strategy of social control embodied in the criticism/self-criticism process has disappeared and been replaced by more conventional forms of social control – police, prisons, etc. You ask whether in the US some kind of criticism/self-criticism process could somehow replace state repression as a form of social control. This seems pretty far-fetched given all of the other aspects of American social structure. What is really needed to replace “the state’s role in conviction and punishment” is revitalized community and social integration with meaningful prospects for useful work. I am not sure what role some version of self-criticism might play in this, but it certainly should be nothing like the Chinese processes of the cultural Revolution.

9. In “The Politics of Punishment” you emphasize the necessity of the general social transformation in order to produce changes in the penitentiary system. At the same time in the end of the book you say that even moderate changes of prison conditions are of an immediate interest to imprisoned. Couldn’t this narrowing of the problem conserve the problems of penitentiary system?

There is an always-present issue in proposals for reform that make life better for people: does improving the conditions of life of people simply make an oppressive system more tolerable and help perpetuate it? To answer this question we need to examine the counterfactuals to making moderate improvements. Here are two possibilities:

- (i). If everyone who currently works for moderate improvement were to abandon those efforts and work for fundamental transformations, then fundamental emancipatory transformations would occur more quickly because more people would be united struggling for them.

(ii) If conditions remain terrible (in all the ways that they are terrible – prisons, poverty, healthcare, etc.) then people in general will be angrier at the system and more willing to struggle for its radical transformation and this will increase the likelihood for such change to occur.

(iii) If activists refuse to struggle for moderate improvements that could be achieved, this will lead most people to see radical activists as irrelevant to their lives and conditions and make it less likely that they will be drawn to struggles for fundamental transformation.

There are undoubtedly other counterfactuals that could be considered. I think (i) and (ii) are implausible. (iii) is historically supported: revolutionaries who refuse to struggle for achievable ameliorative reforms in societies where such reforms are possible are marginalized. I think that the most plausible scenario for profound emancipatory transformation is a combination of what I now call *interstitial* and *symbiotic* strategies of transformation, both of which improve the lives of people in the world today, but try to do so in ways that are corrosive of existing power relations and open up spaces for further change in the future. This is discussed at length in part II of my book *Envisioning Real Utopias* (Verso: 2010)

10. Since the publication of your work, have there been any positive changes in the American penitentiary system that could be attributed to the prison movements?

**I have really not kept up with these issues, so I cannot give an informed comment. Mostly it seems to me that the conditions in U.S. prisons are much worse today than when I wrote: sentences are longer, overcrowding is greater, services for prisoners after release are worse, etc. Occasionally there have been vicotires—as in the California court case that forced the state to improve health services to prisoners. But mostly it seems to me things have gotten worse.**

11. What role should the question of penitentiary system have in the global anticapitalist movement agenda?

**Of course this should be a central theme because of the ways hyper-incarceration constitutes such a destructive response to economic inequality and social decay. I think the issue should be both on the alternative ways in which we can respond to the problem of social disorder and crime in the world as it exists – prisons vs treatment vs half-way houses vs probation vs energetic job programs, etc. – but also, crucially, on the necessity of transforming the social structures within which prisons play such an important role.**

12. USSR was known for repressions, concentration camps, tortures and ill treatment of prisoners. Today's Russia has the highest numbers of imprisoned citizens in proportion to the entire population, giving way only to the US. Ukraine is in the Europe's top three. Liberal human rights activists consider this on-going criminalization of many spheres of public life to be remnants of the Soviet past. They propagate the establishment of the rule of law in accordance with the Western example. Is this explanation satisfactory? Would the pressure of international community, monitoring of human rights violations in prisons, decriminalization of insignificant crimes and protest activity be helpful? What positive changes can be reached through moderate reforms, and where more radical social changes are necessary?

**The fact that the US & Russia are vying for the top spot on the incarceration rates tables indicates that the “rule of law” is not a sufficient solution to this problem. The US does have a pretty good rule of law, even though of course there are abuses, false imprisonments and arrests, etc. The**

failure of the rule of law, however, is not the reason why we have such monstrous prison rates. It is a failure of public policy and democratic deliberation over the direction of development of the society. Now, I of course believe that human rights organizations should press repressive regimes on being less arbitrary and vicious in their use of repression. But this should not be viewed as a substitute for creating a society in which repression plays a much less pervasive role.

13. Today non-governmental organizations, governments and international structures often speak about “fighting poverty”. What are the most optimistic examples of resolving social problems? What activity would you consider harmful, disregarding the “fighting the poverty” rhetoric?

The worst forms of fighting poverty revolve around programs that treat the central problem as people needing to take “personal responsibility” for their lives. Programs that treat the problem of poverty as mainly a problem of deficits in the attributes of poor people and then try to remedy those deficits seem the most harmful, particularly when the focus is on cultural deficits.

Programs which empower poor people in various ways, which give them real resources and power to act, especially when these resources are given in collective forms, seem to me to be the most positive. One of the reasons I am a strong supporter of unconditional basic income (UBI) – especially if it is pegged at a fairly high level – is that this is empowering: a UBI enable people to act, to do things, to join together and combine labor and resources for collective projects. I like community-based anti-poverty projects that give poor people direct access and control over real resources and decisions rather than programs which are controlled by elites.

Some anti-poverty initiatives are quite ambiguous in terms of the contrast between personal responsibility programs and real empowerment programs. Probably the main rhetoric of anti-poverty in the US centers on skills and education. This is how Obama frames the problem of poverty: we must improve the skills of the poor so that they can fill the good paying jobs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Low skills or education are seen as a deficit of poor people, and if we eliminate the deficit then – supposedly – this will eliminate poverty. Once the poor have better education, then they can properly take responsibility for their fate, the reasoning goes. I, of course, believe that improving skills and education is a good thing, and inequalities in the quality of education available to poor children is itself an injustice. But I don’t think that this is adequate as an anti-poverty agenda. The actual creation of well-paying jobs needs to be a collective responsibility and in rich countries like the US such jobs need to be available to people regardless of their education. For this to happen in a durable way requires changes in power relations.