Public Sociology and the Future: the Possible, the Probable, and the Preferable*

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As a preface to his appeal for a public sociology, Michael Burawoy (2005: 4) quotes a passage by Walter Benjamin that pictures the "angel of history" with his face turned toward the past, where he sees a catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. Although the angel would like to stay and make whole what has been smashed, he is caught in a violent storm that "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward."

In this chapter, I ask you to imagine something different, not an angel but ordinary men and women. They are standing with their faces turned toward the future. They remember history, but they are focusing their thoughts on what is coming. Although they see potential catastrophes, they also see opportunities for a better world in which all people will have a good chance of living long lives of freedom and well-being. Like the angel of history, they, too, are irresistibly propelled into the future, but, using foresight, they navigate through time, avoiding many of the catastrophes and seizing the opportunities.

TWO MISSING LINKS IN PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY
Burawoy discusses the different, yet complementary and overlapping, sociologies—professional, policy, critical, and public—and explains why sociologists should devote some of their time to public sociology, to public dialogue about important issues. He shows how sharing sociological knowledge as it applies to understanding social problems and maintaining civil society in public discourse enhances democratic processes and contributes toward creating a better world. Moreover, he argues that there is no contradiction between being so publicly engaged and also remaining true to the standards of scientific knowledge. There "can be neither policy nor public sociology without a *professional sociology*" (Burawoy 2005: 10).

Although I support Burawoy's proposals, I see two features of public sociology—and of critical and policy sociology as well and, to a lesser extent, of professional sociology itself—that invite more explicit treatment and further discussion. Each, in my opinion, is essential to public sociology. The first is making reliable and valid assertions about the future.

Time, of course, is an inescapable dimension of life. We humans and our societies are on a journey through time, constantly moving on a one-way trip from out of the past in an ongoing present toward the future (Adam 1990, 1995). To act intelligently, people need to know, among other things, the alternative possibilities that exist for their future, the future consequences of their own and others' possible actions, the future probable behaviors of relevant other people and their consequences, and the probable outcomes of events and processes that may affect their future, many of which they cannot control.

Distinctively, public dialogues and decision-making concerning social issues are future-oriented. They have to do with what would, could, or might happen in the future, depending on varying circumstances and actions. Thus, to bring their expertise to bear on

public discourse, sociologists face the challenge of contingently translating sociological knowledge into the future (and often conditional and subjunctive) tense in reliable and valid ways.

The second basic feature of public sociology that requires more explicit treatment is making value judgments. Public dialogues are not only about what would, could, or might happen, they are also about what *should* happen in the future. Thus, although they are about possible and probable futures, such dialogues are also about preferable futures. For example, Burawoy (2005) endorses justice, equality, human rights, sustainability, and political freedom as being worthy goals, as part of a "better world." Many sociologists may agree with him. But how do we know what is a "better world" in any reliable, valid, and objective way?

Thus, the questions I try to answer here are: (1) how can sociologists *as social scientists* enter into public dialogues that deal with questions of what the future outcomes of actions, events, and processes could or will be, when the future is as yet nonexistence, thus nonevidential, and seemingly out of reach from methods of empirical social research?

And (2) how can sociologists *as social scientists* enter into public dialogues that often hinge on questions of what defines a good society and what values ought to be served, when conventional beliefs of social scientists (and many moral philosophers) are that such value judgments are subjective and cannot be objectively (i.e. scientifically) justified?

Fortunately, adequate answers exist to both of these questions. Let's begin with the future, not only because prediction is inherent in social behavior but also because it is a part of the scientific enterprise and has been long recognized as such by sociologists (Land and Schneider 1987).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

IMAGES, BELIEFS, AND ATTITUDES

There are several ways sociologists can—and have—studied the future. One way is to study people's images, beliefs, and attitudes about alternative futures—what they believe could, will, or ought to happen. For example, we can get clues about the coming future by using standard social research methods to study such things as people's present images of possible futures; their expectations of the most probable future; their preferences among specified alternative futures and the values on which people base them.

We can also study people's present or future intentions to act in particular ways, such as how they intend to vote, to invest, or to buy; their continuing obligations and commitments to others (revealing their probable future behavior); their histories, traditions, and past decisions about a given phenomenon (also as indicators of probable future behavior); and, of course, trend analysis of time series data projected into the future using differing assumptions.

And we can study longitudinally how these things change through time and the consequences for people's actual future as a result of their earlier images of the future, as John A. Clausen (1986) did in his study of two generations of people beginning in their adolescence and continuing throughout their life course.

POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Also, possibilities for the future are real and they exist in the present. For example, some things really are breakable now in the present, although they may never actually be broken. The range of such possibilities can be grasped by thinking of words ending in "ble," many of which define possibilities. Such words include drinkable, edible, expandable, fixable, impeachable, postponable, promotable, and soluble, among many others. Some things, of course, may not be possible and discovering what is or is not possible is an endeavor to which public sociologists can contribute.

Most of the time many people, including leaders, fail to perceive or to investigate the real possibilities that exist for their individual or collective lives. They would benefit from a jolt of futures thinking that encourages them to view present realities as a world filled with possibilities for the future and that motivates them to constantly search for new and different ways of seeing and doing. Thus, they would make visible what otherwise goes unseen, expanding choices and opening paths to new futures quite different from the past and present. For example, such a cognitive reframing of what is possible allowed Toyota to achieve both high quality and high productivity in the manufacture of automobiles, the key being creating a company culture that rewarded identifying and calling attention to problems rather than covering them up.

With respect to any given phenomenon, we can abandon convention and ask, what are the real present possibilities for its near, middle- and long-range future? Such thinking can expand the scope of public discourse by introducing innovative images of alternative futures of "what could be."

TRANSFORMING CAUSAL KNOWLEDGE

Sociologists, of course, are familiar with the transformation of causal knowledge into contingent predictions. We have long known that the logical structure of a scientific explanation is the same as that of a scientific prediction, except, of course, for one important difference, the temporal vantage point. If we know from past data that x causes y, we must make an inferential leap if we wish to say of some future case that x *will* cause y.

Both in science and in every day life, people make such inferential leaps all the time. To do so, obviously, is a useful tool that helps people make decisions and plan actions. All sociological knowledge, thus, can be restated as contingent predictions to contribute to public debates about what would happen if such-and-such actions were taken rather than some other actions.

For example, H. Wesley Perkins (2003) has discovered a cause of college students' drinking behavior. He finds that students overestimate the quantity of alcohol consumed by their peers and that such misperception is the strongest predictor of the amount of alcohol students consume. Further, he shows that intervention programs based on a "social norm" or "normative feedback" approach—that is, that correct their misperception by informing students what the actual campus drinking norm is—are successful in reducing levels of high-risk drinking among students, if the interventions are sufficiently intense, lengthy, and credible.

Thus, sociologists have cause-and-effect knowledge (from past data) to advise college administrators (about how to shape the future): If you effectively communicate an

accurate description of drinking norms on your campus to your students, then your students will be less likely to misuse alcohol.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PREDICTION AND CONTROL

Individuals and groups, of course, often try to choose and act to create their own futures. They *design* or plan the future. Even though they usually do so less formally and consciously, they are somewhat like an architect designing the blueprints for building some as yet nonexistent structure, such as a bridge or a school. Whether it is choosing to go to medical school, deciding in what cities the American Sociological Association will meet for the next five years, or adding a Bill of Rights in a constitution, people act to shape the future.

Although the future may not turn out as planned, such designs are good bases for forecasting because people intend that they will happen. Moreover, some planned projects involve such large commitments of resources that implications for shaping the future are built into them, whether it is a dam that will create a lake or a nuclear power plant that will produce radioactive waste. Such designs for the future provide both a basis for forecasting the future as well as a means of trying to control it.

In carrying out designs and plans, of course, administrators and public intellectuals must remain alert to the possibility of unanticipated and unintended consequences that are undesirable. Action to protect children from being burned by mandating fire retardant sleepwear and other clothing, for example, inadvertently put children at a new risk from cancer from chemicals in the fire retardant. Be prepared to monitor actions and to alter designs for future action as necessary. Shaping the future is an ongoing, continuous process.

SELF-ALTERING PROPHECIES

Additionally, in discourse concerning what the future might, could, or will be, sociologists can add the reflexive aspect of people's anticipations and actions by taking into account self-altering prophecies. Sociologists, of course, have long understood that predictions or forecasts can be self-fulfilling or self-negating. These are cases where the act of making a prediction itself becomes a causal factor influencing the accuracy of the prediction.

For example, a colleague shouts at you when you are crossing the street, "Watch out, that truck is going to hit you!" You jump out of the way and the truck misses you. Although your colleague's prediction turns out to be wrong (terminally false), it saved you from harm. It was presumptively true because the truck would have struck you if you had not jumped.

An example of a prediction that has a self-fulfilling component can be found in studying how well children do in school. Expectations of teachers partly explain the school performance of their students. Thus, a prediction of a student's academic success is one of the factors that may lead to that success. Both feedback loops and bandwagon effects are involved in self-altering prophecies.

Clearly, we must assess both a prediction's truth-value and its utility by more than whether or not it turns out to be true in the end. For predictions that turn out to be false may nonetheless be useful in guiding action because they are (or were) presumptively true.

METHODS OF FUTURES RESEARCH

Futures researchers use methods from many fields of learning and they have invented or adapted some techniques distinctively aimed at the exploration of alternative futures. Included are standard methods such as the extrapolation of time-series data, cohort-component methods that are especially useful in making population projections, sample survey data, content analysis, official governmental statistics, focus groups, and many others.

Gordon and Helmer (1964) developed the Delphi method, which is adapted from survey research methods but uses repetitive questioning of the same respondents after feedback to them from earlier questioning. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth* (1972), famously used simulation and modeling. Some futures researchers have used gaming, which is widely used by the military. Others have used participatory action research, which Whyte (1991) helped develop. Anthropologist-futurist Robert B. Textor has adapted the use of informants for "ethnographic futures research" and has used it for constructing alternative futures of entire countries (Textor et al. 1984).

Most important, perhaps, is the scenario, which is a—if not the—key futurist tool. A scenario, in this case a narrative about the future, can be generated from any of the above methods and many others.

In sum, despite some notable exceptions—e.g., population forecasts, some longitudinal studies, and some research on beliefs and attitudes—most sociological research tends to be past-oriented. The research process itself invites description, analysis, and interpretation of *the way things were*. Whether doing participant-observation, conducting sample surveys, analyzing census or other existing data, or whatever, by the time the data are collected and analyzed and the report written and published, the findings presented are usually about the past.

Yet, beyond economic and population forecasts and the rather narrow forecasting industry, a sociology of the future, however rudimentary, does exist (Bell 2003, 2004; Bell and Mau 1971). By focusing their research on images, beliefs, and attitudes about the future or the projection of time-series data; on possibilities for the future; on transforming causal knowledge into contingent predictions; on the design perspective, especially the relationship between prediction and control; or on self-altering prophecies; among other approaches, some sociologists have systematically studied the future. Sociologists can adapt nearly any method of social research to the study of possible and probable futures. Adding the results of such studies to public dialogues, sociologists could increase the knowledge base of decision-making and social action (Slaughter 2004).

But can we say the same for assertions about preferable futures, i.e. for propositions about what is a good or bad, a desirable or undesirable future? How can we as sociologists, for example, know objectively what is socially just, how much economic inequality is ethically defensible, and what rights and responsibilities are morally correct? Additionally, how can we persuade others that our judgments about what makes a better world are right?

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE GOOD

SOCIAL EVOLUTION AND HUMAN VALUES

Accurate evaluation itself may be among the most basic, yet least recognized, of human values. For to know what is truly good or bad for human well-being and to choose the good and not the bad courses of action are obviously essential for the future survival and flourishing of both individuals and groups. Thus, existing human values are neither arbitrary nor capricious. Rather, evolutionary processes of variation, selection, and retention are constantly at work shaping them.

They do so on several different levels. First, humans are biopsychological and social beings who have needs that must be met for air, water, food, sleep, and personal security, if they are going to survive. They also have needs that can be fully satisfied only by interaction with other humans, such as emotional support, companionship, affection, and sex.

Second, morality importantly functions to make social life possible, to permit and encourage people to live and work together (Baumeister 1991: 39). Through the cooperation and mutual regulation that it provides, morality promotes organized and coordinated human effort that contributes to survival and beyond that to thrival.

And third, the nature of the physical environment in which humans live helps shape human values. All people everywhere on Earth, regardless of differences of climate and topography, face some similar physical and chemical principles (e.g., time and space, gravity, the nature of air, fire, and water, and mundane things such as objects sharing length, weight, volume, and so forth). The natural world permits only so many solutions to similar problems.

Thus, it is understandable that different societies and religions have reached many similar judgments about which values are the right ones to live by and which are wrong.

UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES

Moreover, we know pretty well what human values are shared. For example, most of us today would find familiar such values as truth, wisdom, courage, patriotism, temperance, freedom, soberness, industriousness, equality of happiness for all people, social harmony, and usefulness, all of which were expressed by Plato before the birth of Christ. Also, equally familiar is the universal standard of morality proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century; it includes five primary virtues: temperance, fortitude, justice, prudence, and charity (MacIntyre 1984; Pieper 1966).

Among the efforts to put forward universal values, there are also those of social scientists, such as Pitirim A. Sorokin who, Jeffries (2005, 2006) reminds us, provides a foundation for a sociology of good and evil with his notion of an integral/idealistic culture and altruistic values such as self-sacrifice, helping others, compassion, friendliness, and kindness.

Also, Lasswell (1971, 1977) derives eight values from his conception of human dignity; they are shaping and sharing of power, enlightenment, wealth (sufficient but not enormous), well-being, skill, affection, respect, and rectitude. Campbell (1965) suggests industriousness, surplus production, abstinence from indulgence, loyalty, and respect for both authority and knowledge. Boulding (1985) constructs a "G Scale," to define and measure the good. It includes riches (wealth and economic welfare), justice, freedom, peace, and the quality of life (health, education and learning, among other things). And the World Order Models Project has proposed, documented, and analyzed a set of values

that can be widely accepted as goals for a model of a preferred world, giving more than 100 indicators to measure five global values: peace, economic well-being, ecological balance, social justice, and political participation (Sullivan 1991). Of course, what is defined as bad or evil is equally universal (Baumeister 1997; Bell 2000).

Many other studies confirm the conclusion that human societies everywhere share a core of common values. Further evidence of this fact can be seen in several worldwide affirmations of values, such as "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" of the United Nations and "Towards a Global Ethic" of the Parliament of World's Religions, which was attended by representatives of more than 100 of the world's religions in Chicago in 1993 (Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions 1993).

Yet we cannot conclude that existing values are necessarily the right or most beneficial set of values for human well-being and freedom. As Edgerton (1992) has demonstrated, some societies are sick. Their values and norms are not necessarily optimal even for their own survival. And, certainly, the evolution of values has not reached some perfect end-state. Thus, there remains a continuing need to test existing beliefs about what values are in fact most beneficial for creating a desirable future.

AN OBJECTIVE METHOD FOR MAKING VALUE JUDGMENTS: EPISTEMIC IMPLICATION

There are efforts to assess the validity of value assertions scientifically, efforts to move beyond the practical, but limited, methods such as commitment-deducibility (make a commitment to a source such as the Bible or the Quran and then deduce what is right or wrong from it) and means-ends (pick a goal and then objectively select effective means to achieve it). Such efforts also go beyond theories of ethics such as consequentialist, contractarianist, utilitarianist, and deontological. One such effort is that of philosopher Keekok Lee (1985) who has proposed what she calls *epistemic implication*.

EPISTEMIC IMPLICATION REQUIRES GIVING REASONS. As its name implies, "epistemic implication" is assessment by *implication*. One gives reasons to support an "ought" proposition and one subjects the reasons to rational and empirical tests, thus indirectly also testing the value statement. If the reasons are accepted, then by implication the value proposition they support is also accepted. If, to the contrary, the reasons are negated, then the moral "ought" proposition cannot be accepted—at least on the basis of the falsified reasons.

REASONS MUST MEET FIVE CRITERIA. But not all reasons are acceptable. Lee gives five criteria that each reason must meet before a reason can be accepted.

1. Reasons must be serious. A reason, or the evidence, presented must be serious, that is, it must be something more than a personal commitment, preference, desire, or want. It must be something more than a person's psychological state concerning the value assertion. Rather, it must be some public external feature of the situation referred to in the assertion and must be open to evaluation by independent observers by some kind of objective—intersubjective—process.

Take the *Assertion*: You ought to treat other people with respect.
Supported by the *Reason*: Because treating other people with respect increases your chances of being treated with respect yourself.

This is serious evidence because it refers to objective characteristics that can be falsified or confirmed. We are not now concerned with whether or not the evidence is

true, only that it meets the criterion of being serious, open to evaluation as to its truth or falsehood by the independent observation of others.

An example of a nonserious reason is to support the assertion by offering, "Because God told me." Independent observers cannot confirm or deny that God has spoken to the person or even whether or not there is a God. In any event, such a reason fails as serious evidence, because there is no naturalistic way to falsify such a statement, even if it is false.

2. Reasons must be referentially relevant. To be acceptable a reason must be referentially relevant, that is, the assertion and the reason for it must be about the same thing. They must share a subject term.

Take the *Assertion*: Criminals released from prison ought to receive severance
    pay plus a bonus for getting a job.
Supported by the *Reason*: Because 2 + 2 = 4.

Although the reason or evidence is true according to the arithmetic of real numbers, none of its terms is shared by the "ought" assertion. Thus, it is not referentially relevant and, thus, cannot serve as evidence.

If we supply a different reason, however, such as, "Because criminals released from prison who are so treated are less likely to commit new crimes than released criminals who are not so treated" (Rossi 1987), then we have evidence that is referentially relevant.

3. Reasons must be causally relevant. Additionally, the reason must bear on the value assertion in some causally relevant way.

For example, take the *Assertion*: People ought not to smoke tobacco.
Supported by the *Reason*: Because smoking increases their chances of dying of
    lung cancer.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that there is a causal connection between a person's smoking tobacco and increased chances of that person getting lung cancer, because a person's lungs are more or less exposed to the tobacco smoke and the chemicals that have been added in the production of cigarettes. Thus, causal relevance is clear.

Lee's method is based on the assumption of causality in the world and our ability to discern and confirm—or refute—causal relationships.

4. Reasons must be causally independent. Reasons must also be causally independent of the conclusion. A reason is not acceptable if it is produced by the conclusion itself.

For example, take a white supremacist assertion in the period of plantation slavery in the Americas that "Africans ought to be treated as socially inferior," the reason offered being that "Africans in fact *are* socially inferior" (Lee 1985: 135). Indeed, such a doctrine of racial inferiority was actually used to justify the slavery of Africans (Goveia 1956).

But the reason fails because it is not causally independent of the original assertion. That is, the value judgment contained in the original assertion may have caused the facts cited in the reason. Thus, if the whites' attitudes led them to treat Africans as socially inferior, then it is not surprising that on any number of objective criteria such as self-respect, occupation, education, wealth, and income on average Africans empirically might be shown to be "socially inferior," i.e. to be relatively less

well off than whites on each criterion. But such evidence is inadmissible as a reason in support of the value assertion because it is not causally independent of it. It is circular reasoning.

To the contrary, causal direction is established in the earlier example of smoking and lung cancer by time priority (smoking comes before cancer), by manipulative priority (you can't give a person the tobacco-smoking habit by giving him or her lung cancer), and by explanatory theory.

5. Reasons must be empirically true. Finally, there is the requirement to put the reason to an empirical test. If the reason meets the above four criteria, then the reason, if true, would support the assertion, while, if false, would refute it (Lee 1985: 99). Thus, after we have made a serious effort to refute the reason, if the reason remains unrefuted, then we tentatively accept the value proposition. The argument is that it is reasonable to believe in an unrefuted reason and not reasonable to believe in a refuted reason.

Let's take an assertion of a male chauvinist: "Women ought to obey men." He gives as a reason that "Women are less intelligent than men." This reason is serious and referentially relevant evidence. It may not be causally relevant, however, because more intelligent people may not advise people to do the morally right thing any more than less intelligent people. Thus, the evidence may fail by not being causally relevant.

But the proffered reason fails on another ground, too. It is empirically false. On average, men and women have about the same level of overall intelligence. They do not significantly differ. Thus, if the male chauvinist wants to argue objectively for women's subjection to men, he will have to find other grounds to do so (Lee 1985: 133).

The reason offered for the "ought" assertion in the example about the negative effects of smoking, however, is overwhelmingly supported by many different empirical studies, including the epidemiological evidence compiled in the U.S. Surgeon General's Report of 1989. That is, the hypothesis that smoking causes lung cancer has survived many efforts to falsify it.

In sum, Raz (1977: 210) insists that saying "X ought to do y" is logically the same as saying "There is a reason for x to do y." Following Lee's five criteria, we sociologists can propose and objectively test reasons given to support value assertions. Doing so, we can, by implication, support or refute the value propositions themselves. Also, we show others exactly how we arrived at a value judgment, because the method is explicit and reveals the underlying process of thinking. Anyone is welcome to follow the same procedures to check the results—to confirm or correct them.

MORAL JUDGMENTS AND THE FUTURE
Moral judgments have inherent ties to assertions about the future. This is most obvious when judging consequences, because they always occur in the future from the time some action is being contemplated. Thus, for "a consequentialist the future must matter" (Sumner 1987: 207). Judgments of the good on which people base their present decisions to act rest upon anticipations (Charnov 1987: 5).

Also, contractarianist, utilitarianist, deontological, and other theories of ethics often involve a futures perspective. Ethics imply standards of conduct, not just for the past and the present, but also for the future (Charnov 1987: 4).

Contracts, for example, are often agreements to fulfill certain stated reciprocal behaviors in the future. Utilitarianism tells us to act so as to create the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number of people. Clearly, utilitarians judge their possible alternative acts according to their future results (Harman 1977).

Deontological ethical theories, too, are linked to the future. These are theories that emphasize doing one's duty and giving respect to individuals. They are thought of as nonconsequentialist theories because they focus on the purposes for taking an action (i.e., one's intentions) rather than the results of the action. Take, for example, a formulation of Kant's (1958) categorical imperative: Act only according to the maxim that you want your action to become the basis of a universal law. The categorical imperative deals with the future not only because an intention itself is future-oriented, but also because it does deal with a particular consequence: i.e., that the moral principle underlying your behavior *will* become a universal law. Thus, by your acts you create the moral laws of the future (Tong 1986).

Moreover, ethical theories contain motivations for acting in particular ways. For example, "There is no real recognition that something is good or bad unless it embodies some degree of motivation to pursue or shun it, do or refrain from it" (Sprigge 1988: 150). Motivation involves goals desired but not yet achieved, whether those goals are happiness for the greatest number or universal moral laws. "Morality gives people reasons to do things" (Harman 1977: 91) and the goals for which things are done are always in the future.

Thus, moral principles themselves often embody an orientation toward the future. In the case of ethical prescriptions it is an image of some future good that you ought to want to achieve, while in the case of ethical proscriptions it is an image of some future abomination that you ought to want to avoid.

EXPLICITLY INCLUDE THE FUTURE IN EPISTEMIC IMPLICATION
Although ethical judgments, as we have seen, often have a futures component, ethical thinkers seldom make it explicit.   Yet the validity of an ethical judgment may depend crucially on the truth-value of the implicit futures content of the judgment. Thus, public sociologists ought to make that futures-thinking component of their value commitments explicit. We can do so in the case of epistemic implication by making minor revisions in Lee's procedures.

For example, we can expand Lee's statements of serious and causally relevant reasons as well as her definition of "empirical test" to include predictions as evidence. Thus, we can include assertions about the future, when specific grounds warrant them, as "evidence" to support or negate value premises, just as do facts about the past and present (Bell 1993, 2004).

To maintain the distinction between evidence in the strict sense, which is based on empirical observation of the past and present, and predictions, which refer to the as yet unobservable future, I call such reasons "predictive grounds." As an example, take a case given earlier and make clear that the reason is a prediction:

Take the *Assertion*: People ought not to smoke tobacco.
Supported by the *Predictive ground*: Because smoking probably *will* increase
their chances of dying of lung cancer *at some future time*.

For smokers who currently show no signs of cancer, that prediction, since it is based on past observations about other people, can only be "presumptively true." The best we can do is "warranted assertability" based on an inferential leap transforming past observation into a probability statement about the future.

But if smokers wait to stop smoking until the prediction is confirmed in their own particular cases by the observation that they have lung cancer, then the utility of the prediction for changing their behavior before it's too late has been lost. Acting on the prediction could save their lives.

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT ALL-THINGS-CONSIDERED "OUGHT" STATEMENTS
Everyday life situations, of course, often confront people with complexities that may overwhelm their capacity to make easy moral judgments. Most, if not all, of the moral codes we live by tend to be prima facie statements: "Tell the truth." "Be kind to others." "Be generous." "Be forgiving." "Be patient." "Do not kill." Standing alone, all such statements have exceptions under certain circumstances and sometimes they appear to contradict each other. For example, we cannot always tell the truth and be kind to others at the same time.

Yet the contradiction is more apparent than real, since prima facie statements do not say "Do this no matter what." Rather they say, "Generally, do this, unless you have a good reason not to do so" or "Generally, do not do this, unless you have a good reason to do so."

Considering all things, we weigh various reasons and judge outcomes against each other, including good versus good (being kind or telling the truth), perhaps deciding that in some particular case, for example, it would be better, all-things-considered, to be kind to a person rather than to tell the person a hurtful truth.

A BETTER FUTURE IS POSSIBLE
In answering Michael Burawoy's call for a public sociology—a sociology that, while using the tools of social science, engages in dialogue with the public about vital issues of the times with the aim of improving the public's well-being—I argue that two features of public sociology must be explored more fully for its successful development.

The first deals with the passing of time and the inescapable futures orientation involved in decision-making and social action. Always, the consequences of present action occur in the future. Always, more or less explicitly, public debate is about the future, whether it is the new-future of some presently contemplated act or the then-future of some act of the past. Always, the underlying question is, "What ought to be done (or have been done) to maintain, construct, or avoid some particular future outcome?"

One problem is that most people don't have reliable and valid methods to create or evaluate beliefs about the future, including the future consequences of their own and others' actions. Thus, I propose some principles of futures-thinking, for making and testing statements about what might, could, or will happen in the future, taking into account the contingencies of human action, principles that public sociologists can use to describe a fan of possible and contingently probable futures.

A second problem is knowing "What is preferable?" If public sociologists are concerned with the "betterment of society," then we must ask what is better? And how do we know? I propose epistemic implication as a method of objectively testing value

judgments. Using it, public sociologists can examine proposed images of the good society and objectively evaluate the moral claims on which they are based.

Like any good social research, systematic study and testing of propositions about the future and about the good require hard work. But the payoff for public discussion of current problems and what to do about them is great, because more rigorous, complex, and sound thinking is added to public discourse, including the caution that anyone's beliefs about the future and the good—no matter what or who the source or how strongly the beliefs are held—are to some extent uncertain, contingent, and corrigible.

I understand, of course, that politics can be dirty business and that many, if not most, sociologists may want to remain out of public debate for fear of making themselves vulnerable to attack. Claiming to be value-free, garbing oneself in the innocence of only reporting the facts, and demanding the immunity of the academy appear to be safe strategies, especially in today's world where powerful interests show no restraint in assassinating the character of the bearers of unwelcome messages.

And yet there is an attraction—if not an obligation—to elevate public discourse on the important issues of our time by bringing in more reason, evidence, logic, complexity and nuance, civility, humility, and, as I have stressed here, *reliable and valid futures thinking* and *objective value judging*. Public sociologists have commitments to truth and goodness, and to fairness and open-mindedness. Also, they must have moral courage.

Even in a world of special interests, corporate manipulations of the truth, corruptions of power, governmental deceptions, and mass-media thought control, perhaps—just perhaps, public sociologists could help ordinary people become consciously active and effective participants in shaping their own futures. Searching for alternative possibilities for the future, estimating probable future outcomes of different actions, and evaluating the desirability of the alternatives, people could imagine a better world that was truly possible and design the actions that would create it. So doing, they might build, not a sky-high "pile of debris" for the angel of history to see, but rather a future world in which all people on Earth would co-exist in peace, would enjoy freedom and good health, and would live long, self-directed, socially beneficial, loving and satisfying lives.

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