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Public Sociology – a Concept for Labor Research

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Die DFG-KollegforscherInnengruppe „Landnahme, Beschleunigung, Aktivierung. Dynamik und (De-) Stabilisierung moderner Wachstumsgesellschaften“ – kurz: „Kolleg Postwachstumsgesellschaften“ – setzt an der soziologischen Diagnose multipler gesellschaftlicher Umbruchs- und Krisenphänomene an, die in ihrer Gesamtheit das überkommene Wachstumsregime moderner Gesellschaften in Frage stellen. Die strukturellen Dynamisierungsimperative der kapitalistischen Moderne stehen heute selbst zur Disposition: Die Steigerungslogik fortwährender Landnahmen, Beschleunigungen und Aktivierungen bringt weltweit historisch neuartige Gefährdungen der ökonomischen, ökologischen und sozialen Reproduktion hervor. Einen Gegenstand in Veränderung – die moderne Wachstumsgesellschaft – vor Augen, zielt das Kolleg auf die Entwicklung von wissenschaftlichen Arbeitsweisen und auf eine Praxis des kritischen Dialogs, mittels derer der übliche Rahmen hochgradig individualisierter oder aber projektförmig beschränkter Forschung überschritten werden kann. Fellows aus dem In- und Ausland suchen gemeinsam mit der Jenaer Kollegsgruppe nach einem Verständnis gegenwärtiger Transformationsprozesse, um soziologische Expertise in jene gesellschaftliche Frage einzubringen, die nicht nur die europäische Öffentlichkeit in den nächsten Jahren bewegen wird: Lassen sich moderne Gesellschaften auch anders stabilisieren als über wirtschaftliches Wachstum?

Klaus Dörre

Public Sociology – a Concept for Labor Research*

Zusammenfassung

Das Working Paper beschreibt am Beispiel der Arbeitssoziologie die Möglichkeiten des von Michael Burawoy entwickelten Konzepts einer Public Sociology. Der Autor schildert kurz seine ersten Erfahrungen mit dem Konzept bevor er unterschiedliche Formen der Wissensproduktion innerhalb der Soziologie diskutiert, um dann das Konzept der Public Sociology näher zu beschreiben. Schließlich illustriert er anhand eigener Forschungen zum Thema Prekarität die Stärken und Schwierigkeiten des Ansatzes und formuliert einige Schlussfolgerungen zum Verhältnis von Gewerkschaften und Sozialwissenschaften.

Abstract

Taking the sociology of work as an example, the working paper examines the concept of Public Sociology developed by Michael Burawoy. The author briefly describes his first experiences with the concept before discussing different forms of knowledge production in sociology and then elaborating on the concept of public sociology in greater detail. Drawing on his own research on precarity for illustration, the author points to the strengths and challenges inherent to the idea and draws some conclusions concerning the relationship between unions and the social sciences.

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For approximately ten years now, public sociology has been discussed in international sociological debates as an approach also offering the chance – at least, as I argue here – of learning from the relationship between academia and unions. The exposition of this idea is presented in four steps. To start with (1), I describe my initial contact with public sociology in practice, then present (2) three types of knowledge production in sociology in order to (3) describe a fourth type – public sociology – more precisely. In the next step, a case study is taken to illustrate just how effective this idea can be (4) before finally (5) drawing some conclusions on the relationship between unions and the social sciences.

1. An experience with public sociology

Originally, the idea of public sociology was developed by Michael Burawoy, an industrial sociologist and the current President of the International Sociological Association (ISA). I have to admit that for a long time I did not follow the debate initiated by Burawoy's ideas. However, during a visit to Johannesburg, I came into direct contact with the application of his theory. In early September 2012, I was a participant at an international colloquium on 'The Politics of Precarious Society: A comparative perspective on the Global South' at the University of the Witwatersrand/Johannesburg. The colloquium, organized by the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) represented by its director Karl von Holdt, focused specifically on the concept of a 'precarious society'. While the colloquium was taking place, the events at the Marikana platinum mine were reaching their tragic climax, and Karl von Holdt took this parallel development as an example to explain a 'precarious society'. At that time, around 5000 workers at the Marikana mine had come out on strike. On the last day of the colloquium, the South African Times newspaper ran the front-page headline: 'Miners declare war'. The striking miners, some armed, had presented the management with an ultimatum with their demands. Some days before, the police had opened fire on the miners with automatic weapons, killing 34 people – but those who died in that massacre were not the only ones killed. Over the previous weeks, ten people had already lost their lives, including two security guards and two police officers. Evidently, the strikers were also using violence, not only against security guards and police, but also targeting strike breakers and those miners wanting to continue working. William Stone, the strikers' spokesperson, left no doubt that, if necessary, the workers were also ready to use violence to push through their demands. Stone responded to the call to sign up to a peace agreement with the words: "Can you eat peace? Can you buy food and clothes with peace? What is this peace thing? We do not want peace and will not accept peace. We need our money before we make peace... we will continue to fight and die for our money. We are not afraid to die or to do what we need to do for our money."

While the official line initially attributed the strikes to a conflict between two competing trade unions and the police use of firearms as 'self-defense', the SWOP social scientists, including some who have been researching into the platinum and gold belt for years, presented a different picture. Against the background of falling platinum prices, they pointed out how the management's cost-cutting strategies further intensified a fragmentation of the labor force. Moreover, they continued, many of the miners were migrants who did not speak English, and were also segregated in terms of social space. In contrast, the

activists of the National Union of Miners (NUM), the dominant trade union, negotiated in English. Collective labor agreements were decentralized, concluded with and within the individual companies. Consequently, the social scientists reported, some mines paid a gross monthly wage of 4500 rand (slightly over 450 euros), while others paid 9000 rand a month – a situation encouraging mine workers to engage in decentralized ‘renegotiations’. Given that, to secure jobs, the NUM had linked elements of its wage agreements to management concessions, it was less flexible towards spontaneous strikes; this, in turn, offered an opportunity for smaller, more radical trade unions. Furthermore, they noted, increased social inequality under the ANC-led government had led to precarious groups no longer being represented politically and socially, and it was precisely this which promoted violent conflicts. In Karl von Holdt’s view, the readiness to use violence produces two different kinds of law in the everyday world of those living in precarity. He argues that during transformation processes new social rules need to be created and anchored in civil society. Such anchoring, though, does not succeed in societies experiencing extreme social inequality where precarious groups no longer see themselves as represented. Instead, this leads to the production of social spaces where particular groups regard themselves as justified in suspending the legislation in force and resorting to violence. According to Holdt, this in turn leads to a ‘habitus of defiance’ generating violent practices which are upheld despite the existence of democratic institutions.

In my view, irrespective of the various interpretations and evaluations of the events at the Marikana mine, this debate powerfully illustrates the force of public sociology. In Germany, public sociology is often reduced to the question of how sociology can successfully re-gain a public profile and audience. But for Michael Burawoy, who developed the idea of public sociology and was the colloquium’s patron and guiding spirit, it means very much more. He regards public sociology as capable of creating a new relationship between sociology and practices inducing social change. South African researchers, with their expertise on the work and life situation of the miners, have provided an excellent example of how this could work, contrasting the official picture of events at the Marikana mine with their differentiated sociological research, and so making the previously invisible visible. Their exclusive knowledge is the result of a close cooperation in a spirit of trust built up over many years with the unions, as well as with the miners themselves. And of course, the SWOP scholars and researchers were willing, there and then, to input their knowledge into a debate critical of the government. Even during the colloquium, scholars and activists were already discussing a joint declaration leaving no doubt that these events represented a historical turning point with dramatic consequences for the stability of democratic institutions in South Africa. With such commitment very much in evidence, it was no surprise to find Michael Burawoy referring to SWOP during an evaluation session as the ‘ideal type’ of institute that understands how to apply public sociology successfully.

Yet despite working so well in this example, it appears to be rather difficult to put public sociology into practice – as became obvious at an informal meeting of the South Africa Public Sociology group, taking place on the fringes of the colloquium. Numerous groups, above all those active in the global South, now organize seminars which can be followed around the world on digital media by students and other interested viewers. After three intensive days of the conference, the participants discussed far into the

night such questions as: What does it mean to involve activists without becoming a political actor oneself? How far does bias negatively impact scholarship? Should the seminars deal more with local topics, or exclusively address phenomenon that could have a global profile? And how can the idea of public sociology become a valuable tool for different local contexts?¹

2. Types of sociological knowledge

In essence, such questions are not really new. In Germany and Europe, they are located in discourse fields ranging from critical theory and sociology to action research, and have been discussed many times under different economic conditions and with different emphases. But what is particular about public sociology? Michael Burawoy himself has provided an answer to just this question in his discussion of a four-fold distinction in the production of sociological knowledge. In his view, *traditional sociology* (which he terms professional sociology) underscores the neutrality and value-free nature of sociological knowledge. This, he suggests, largely adopts an empirical and positivist approach, attempting more or less to develop types of theory and knowledge modelled on the natural sciences. The approach's strength lies in its strict adherence to the idea at the heart of scientific endeavor: the search for the truth – an aspiration excluding superficial value judgments. Research findings based on empirical evidence are established and presented independently of any applied context and partisan interests. Sociological – and social science – research should never fail to meet this postulate of value-free scholarly research.

However, the problem of a purely descriptive sociology is then that “all sociology can observe is power relations” (Boltanski 2010: 1). On the other hand, power and exploitation are veiled in societal relations; with the means available in standard sociology, it is impossible to uncover such mechanisms. The descriptive social sciences can observe their object of ‘society’ and analyze the most varied forms of power without needing to relate them to one another. In other words, traditional or standard sociology adopts a simple “exteriority” located in the ivory tower of pure science. From this “simple exteriority”, traditional sociology claims to maintain a distance towards its object. It reduces the complexity of its object to a point where it can be empirically investigated. Ultimately, though, traditional sociology must always fall short in its desire to emulate natural science theories since it is dealing with social actors within concealed power relations that remain closed to a purely descriptive sociology.

Hence, traditional sociology faces the challenge of seeking to ignore the tension necessarily inherent in any sociology aiming to critique social relations rather than just describe them. Yet as Luc Boltanski rightly notes, this tension is “ever present” (ibid. 16), and reveals itself in the “worthy” attempt – “necessarily doomed to fail” – of joining “the so-called positive sciences” (ibid. pp 15-16). In Boltanski's view, the external signs of this failure in emulating the natural sciences not only include an impersonal style of writing, citations reduced to an author's name, and the “mania for quantification, expressed in an ostentatious accumulation of figures and tables”, but also the “‘sharp’ controversies polarized over the

¹ A report on the colloquium was published in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie* (Dörre/Ludwig/Sparsam 2012).

latest argument thought to make the difference – something that avoids examining shared premises, which are often overshadowed” (ibid. p. 16).

A *practical sociology* – in Burawoy’s terms, ‘policy sociology’ – resolves the tension in the scholarly production of knowledge, social critique and the practice of social actors in a different way. This type of sociology is directed to the production of applied knowledge, and is shaped by the needs of the market and its clients. Within this framework, practical sociology aspires to improve the practice of those utilizing this knowledge, or at least to place that practice on a more professional foundation. Its strength lies in its proximity to social actors. Practical sociology deliberately leaves the ivory tower behind, seeking to produce consultancy expertise which is, in essence, justified by the context of its application. To that extent, in a certain sense practical sociology is the opposite of what traditional or standard sociology claims to be. Just to prevent misunderstandings: practical sociology, in as far as it builds on scientific means and methods, also embodies a fully legitimate type of knowledge production in the social sciences. For example, if one looks at the research departments of large companies and consulting agencies, there can be no doubt that they are producing databases with considerable knowledge value.

Practical sociology’s strengths certainly lie in the highly effective and applicable transfer of knowledge through more or less powerful social actors; at the same time, though, this is precisely the weakness of this type of knowledge. In practical sociology, the object of its research becomes a business activity, and this makes the knowledge dependent on the patron or the clients. Since this type of sociological knowledge production is not interested in a social critique or criticizing prevailing power relations, it does not need a holistic view of society. Instead, it is concerned with solving problems or at least enhancing the basis for decisions taken by societal problem solvers. Given this focus, it generally loses sight of the prevailing power relations so that good social practice appears to be nothing more than merely applying the ‘right’ recipes. Consequently, social criticism or a critique of the practices of the social actors who are the clients seems disruptive and inappropriate, and so practical sociology constantly runs the risk of serving as instrumental and instrumentalised knowledge for well-funded customers capable of applying practical solutions.

Critical sociology does not have this problem. This differs from traditional or standard sociology in seeking to provide an analytical framework to identify societal contradictions and distinguish them from mere disparities. As a theory of power, critical sociology always contains a meta-theory of society. However, once critical sociology, on its own account, makes pronouncements on the social order, it surrenders any claim to neutrality. In order to integrate the discontent and frustration of social actors, though, it is also dependent on a trade-off on the critique of everyday life with dominated groups, since the “... idea of a critical theory that is not backed by the experience of a collective, and which in some sense exists for its own sake – that is, for no one – is incoherent” (ibid. 5). Consequently, critical sociology also needs standard sociology. A theory critical of power relations has to build on the descriptive, empirical analysis provided by a hermeneutic of everyday knowledge, moving from a “simple” to a “complex exteriority” (ibid. 6). The “simple” exteriority corresponds with the exterritorial standpoint necessarily required by descriptive sociology to guarantee analytical distance to its object. In

contrast, “complex exteriority” is shaped by the fact that a sociology criticizing power relations always has to act on two levels: on the one hand, it depends on data to provide it with knowledge about the state of the social order, yet on the other, “to be critical, such a theory also needs to furnish itself ... with the means of passing a judgment on the value of the social order being described” (ibid 8). In essence, the tension between these constraints cannot be resolved. As a result, a social science’s potential is constantly established in a process of “forging” compromises (ibid. 10). The major sociological theories differ in their particular mode of dovetailing description and critique. Critical sociology often faces the basic problem that it absolutizes the “complex exteriority” which it adopts; it then frequently gives the impression to the dominated groups and social actors whose criticism of everyday life it remains dependent on that its critique is based on some abstract standard unable to be realized in practice. In this way, sociological critics can easily be characterized as eternal know-it-alls, and their critique then disregarded as relevant for the practices of social actors. *Public sociology*, the fourth type of knowledge production in the social sciences, adopts a particular approach to try and remedy this misunderstanding of knowledge production, social criticism and practices promoting social change.

3. Public Sociology – an answer to the end of the ivory tower

In essence, *public sociology* is nothing more than a new attempt to establish a basis for the interaction of both critical academic theory and the practices of social actors critical of prevailing power relations. What is new, though, is that it starts from the changes in the academic field. The competitively-driven *Landnahme* of colleges and universities (Dörre/Neis 2011), or in Michael Burawoy’s words “a third wave of marketization,” has irreversibly destroyed the ivory tower of pure science: “Even deeper, third-wave marketization invades the hidden abode of knowledge production, the university. The ivory tower – academic freedom and university autonomy – may have been a defense against second-wave marketization, but today its ramparts are falling to corporatization, privatization and profit considerations. From a public good, it becomes an economic good. We can no longer build a moat around the university, but instead we must venture out of the ivory tower, and join forces with other publics that face the tsunami,” (Burawoy 2008: 359). Cultural scholar Terry Eagleton has similarly expressed this idea: “As a centre of criticism, inquiry, reflection, and general and fundamental questions, the university is almost dead [...] These institutions are increasingly becoming an instrument of advanced capitalism. I am neither joking nor exaggerating when I say that in twenty years’ time the humanities may not exist at British universities any longer [...]” (Eagleton 2014: 12, originally published in German, translation AB).

The situation of the social sciences and the humanities may be slightly less precarious in Germany, yet the trend towards the ‘entrepreneurial university’ is also strikingly obvious here too – and it is this trend which has inspired the idea of a public sociology. However, although one talks of ‘public sociology’, one should not forget that this is a label embracing a collection of various research approaches and forms of knowledge production and transfer. Nonetheless, despite this heterogeneity, one can formulate six guiding principles of public sociology. The idea of public sociology inherently (a) questions the ‘entrepreneurial university’ as the basis for knowledge production in the social sciences and the field of

sociology. This leads to (b) the interest of sociologists and social scientists in forming alliances with social groups and actors resisting this 'process of competition'. From the scholarly perspective, these alliances are based on (c) the aim of using sociological instruments to make visible what is invisible or socially repressed. This best succeeds (d) through generating everyday knowledge – indeed, transformative knowledge – which researchers can only access if they are in a position to establish relationships of trust to dominated social groups and actors. Thus, research (e) has to be conducted in a close exchange with activists in social movements and social organizations; the findings are then transferred back to practitioners in a condensed form. They are prepared by scholars for civil society actors without the academics themselves taking sides. As a result, public sociology entails (f) creating privileged access for researchers to hidden bodies of knowledge and integrating the everyday criticism of prevailing power relations included in them in order to process them and provide them for an appropriate audience. This has a two-fold effect: sociological research becomes better and more interesting while, at the same time, through the scholarly analysis, everyday criticism gains a public voice, whose effectiveness increases with the quality of the underlying research.

4. Precarity research as public sociology

Initially, this all may sound rather abstract and idealistic. However, I would claim that, both elsewhere and in Germany as well, there are already signs of just such research, and I would like to illustrate this by taking the topics of precarity and casualization as an example.

4.1 Successful agenda setting

Even a good ten years ago in Germany, unlike in France, the casualization of labor and the precarity of living conditions were still an 'invisible' phenomenon needing to be made visible. With precarity still largely unknown in German social science as well as in the political sphere, sociologists used this notion to re-analyze and discuss the repressed 'social question' within the social sciences.² The case of subcontracted labor at the production facilities of a southern German automobile manufacturer, publicly pilloried at the time, had a formative influence on the work of the research group then based in Recklinghausen and later in Jena. This study, which could only be conducted thanks to a long-standing relationship with authorized representatives from the IG-Metall union, contained much that was investigated and proven in later larger studies. In a gradual process, and working closely with the practitioners, the group arrived at its first key result. Evidently, precarity was and is more than just a category for labor market research. The spread of precarious life and work conditions produces, and functions as, a power and control system which, since it also disciplines permanent employees, has changed the very nature of the labor society in its entirety. In this sense, precarity and the casualization of labor are concepts belonging to any sociology criticizing power relations.

² Numerous groups of researchers were involved in this process. Here, I would just like to mention as examples the IAQ studies into the low pay sector (Gerd Bosch) or the WSI research into the statutory minimum wage (Claus Schäfer). In the following, for purely pragmatic reasons, I focus on work of the Jena group.

In the meantime, there can be no doubt that Germany has also experienced the emergence of a precarious sector characterized by large wage differentials and low upward mobility. In this sector, rather than labor being sold for a halfway fair wage, repression is often exchanged for fear. Such a finding can neither be harmonized with neo-classical labor market theory nor with a simplistic insider-outsider rhetoric. The labor market's transformation into a competitive system does not make invisible jobs visible. Instead, as is shown in our long-term study of those on ALG II supplementary unemployment insurance benefits, large groups of people fall under the threshold of social respectability (Dörre/Scherschel/Booth et. al. 2013). In this way, a competitive regime is consolidated where permanent employees, those in precarious employment and the unemployed see themselves as exposed to constant appraisals and evaluations. Such tests are regarded as deciding whether individuals are taken on as permanent staff, manage to jump – as is rarely the case – from subcontracted work into the core workforce, or whether unemployment is interrupted by socially funded temporary employment. This system of permanent performance tests has little in common with the protected labor market in the heyday of Germany's social market economy. The precarization process, triggered by a complex bundle of causes, is not a temporary phenomenon. As a result, there is a need for research into how representing the political interests of social groups long sidelined in collective interest policies has become a question of survival for the capability of unions to act and for their organizational power.

Admittedly, from a rigid institutionalized perspective, the path dependency of union action appears to exclude the active variant of organizing and representing the interests of workers in precarious employment. Hence, it seemed even more surprising when, prior to the major crisis from 2008 to 2009, the German unions discovered the topic of precarity. It was no coincidence that unions such as Ver.di (United Services Union) and the NGG (Food, Beverages and Catering Union), with their awareness of precarious labor as an accepted norm in specific branches, called for a universal statutory minimum wage. IG Metall, the metalworkers' union, in turn looked at the strategic use of subcontracted labor to successfully drive forward the organization of temporary labor and conclude better agreements for workers in precarious employment. Overall, this reflected the successful interplay of theory and practice, of sociological research and policies supporting the interests of the trade unions. It seemed as if newly initiated research into precarity had succeeded in giving a public profile to the previously invisible precarious working and living conditions. The privileged access to the bodies of knowledge of those in fixed and precarious employment facilitated a precise description of the phenomenon. Even though descriptive, this research appeared critical per se since it brought to light what had been politically repressed. It was also thanks to these circumstances that a qualitative study with a relatively small sample size (Brinkmann et al. 2006) was able to challenge quantitative labor market research with its vast batteries of data. In this way, it was possible to set an agenda successfully.

Sociology also profited from trade unions taking up the issue of precarity, which gained a profile both as socially relevant and as a highly charged topic. Social criticism had returned to the public arena and had important social champions. This was certainly a major impetus towards both descriptive research into precarity and precarity research analyzing prevailing power relations, which has emerged in the

meantime – in Germany as well – as an important branch of empirical social research. However, it would be totally wrong to assume that the relationship between precarity research, society and trade union practice could be free of tensions.

4.2 Tensions: Exclusive solidarity and organizational learning

It is more realistic to assume a relationship with numerous points of tension between sociologists in the field of public sociology on the one hand and trade unionists on the other – as is evident in research into the casualization of labor. During the economic crisis of 2008 to 2009, trade unions were confronted with dramatic losses of orders, especially in the industrial export sector. To secure the core workforce, tens of thousands of subcontract workers and employees on limited contracts were laid off. Strong union support for those workers in precarious employment was only apparent in a few places. It seemed as if laying off those in precarious employment was the price which trade union stakeholders were prepared to pay to avoid severance schemes for and redundancies among the permanent employees. As our surveys of permanent employees have shown, this policy certainly reflected the core workforce's subjective leanings. In the crisis, the core workforces in the surveys demonstrated a clear solidarity, though preferably one within the limits of their business and their peers. Despite widespread criticism of management, they regarded their permanent jobs as a refuge of relative social stability and were prepared to accept the need for considerable flexibility to preserve them.

However, anyone exposed to constant appraisals and evaluative tests becomes slightly less patient of others. For example, in our survey, the majority of the 1442 workers and salaried staff in the production sector of a southern Germany automobile manufacturer believed that the use of subcontracted workers at the plant enabled the company to “react flexibly to the requirements of the market” (61.6% agreed). The statement that “subcontracted work is also used to generate competition inside companies” was supported by 41.8% of those surveyed (31% did not agree). An even larger proportion (42.9%) rejected the statement that subcontracted workers belong “to the corporate family as much as” the core workforce. Asking those in permanent employment for their views on the long-term unemployed produced a disturbing result. Although the majority rejected the Hartz IV social welfare legislation, 54% wanted to see more pressure put on the long-term unemployed, while 51 % agreed with the statement that a society that supports everyone is unable to survive in the long run. Our interpretation of these findings suggests that such views indicate a tendency to an exclusive solidarity which not only demarcates ‘upwards’, but also draws a clear dividing line to ‘others’ and ‘below’, to the unemployed and those in precarious employment (Dörre/Happ/Matuschek 2013).

At this point, though, the main concern is not the empirical findings and their interpretation – and no doubt one can certainly disagree about the latter – , but their relevance to the idea of public sociology. Needless to say, sociologists have to present and interpret their findings, even if this may lead to sharp criticism from the trade unions. At this juncture, however, one should note that the tendencies embedded in what is, in itself, a contradictory wage-earner mentality are not directly relevant as an indicator of real-life practices. The empirical findings do not say anything directly about, for example, company or union policies. To the best of our knowledge, the works council in the factory surveyed has

an excellent track record. In the crisis, the works council members took what they thought was the best possible course. The subcontracted and temporary workers, as well as young skilled workers, were laid off with the assurance they would be taken on again as soon as the economy recovered.

Hence, it is understandable that positing an exclusive solidarity in union practices met with serious criticism from some quarters, primarily directed to a hasty generalization of empirical observations.³ Many union members felt that our discussion misinterpreted their work, and they pointed to successful collective bargaining policies for subcontracted workers. In fact, after 2009 the unions did undergo a new phase of organizational learning – something we may not have allowed for sufficiently in our discussion of exclusive solidarity. The topic of precarization was rapidly back on the union agenda – for instance, in the form of labor agreements in the metal-working industry where supplementary payments were pushed through for subcontracted workers, or as a national statutory minimum wage, now introduced in Germany. These and other instances of pressure-group politics show just how this spur-of-the-moment leaning towards exclusive solidarity, which we also found in core workforces with well-established union structures in both in the former eastern and western Germany, is far from predetermined by fate. The way that the core workforces and groups in precarious employment relate to one another largely depends on the options for action offered by works councils and trade unions (see the contributions in Schmalz/Dörre 2013).

5. Some conclusions

In general, the example of precarity research has shown that elements of Michael Burawoy's 'public sociology' have long been a reality in Germany too.⁴ However, here we are dealing with a scholarly practice that has neither systematically considered its methodological basis yet, nor its basis in the sociology of knowledge. Since this also applies in particular to interaction with social actors outside academia, I would like, in conclusion, to argue for a project in the field of labor market research and labor policy to address just this issue. In such a project, sociologists, those working in the field and trade unionists would not only have an opportunity to learn from one another, but also systematically reflect on their cooperation, thus placing it on a new foundation. There are certainly enough topics for such a project. Let us take, for example, the European crisis – in effect, Germany's economic and political elites have achieved the relative stability of German capitalism by exporting uncertainties. What is presented within Germany as EU debt management actually entails subjecting majority populations in Greece, Portugal or Spain to precarization for a longer period. Ignoring this fact promotes a far more disastrous form of exclusive solidarity than that apparent in the marginalization of Hartz IV social welfare recipients.

³ The crisis management, we argued, helped industrial unions gain new social approval, and attracted new members. This was particularly successful among core workforces in export sectors. Since it proved impossible to push through similar measures in the more poorly organized service sectors with a high proportion of women workers (for instance, the Schlecker drugstore chain), this successful crisis management failed to correct the asymmetry of power on the labor market in favor of 'weaker interests'. If this tendency were to continue, we suggested in slightly exaggerated terms, it might well lead to a fragmentation of interest-led policies. In that case, unions would no longer be intermediary organizations representing the interests of all wage earners; they would become mediators of an exclusive solidarity for strongly represented groups.

⁴ Michael Burawoy made exactly this point during a visit to Jena in summer 2013.

The present dominant attempts in the Euro zone to use stringent austerity policies to stimulate economic growth, which in this economic area especially reinforces acute tensions between capitalism and democracy and represses the ecological dimension to the crisis, are aligned with the core structures of advanced capitalism.

In such a constellation, the ability to push through union labor policy in the medium term depends on developing a wage-earner solidarity that transcends national borders. The primary and key pre-requisite for such solidarity is the reciprocal knowledge of and mutual understanding for each other's situation. What then could be more suitable than using a public sociology methodology exemplarily in such a project? Our workforce survey also clearly indicates that the initial starting points already exist for just such a project among employees in German industrial enterprises. The criticism of capitalism is widespread in the everyday thinking of wage earners. The majority of workers throughout Germany subscribe to the view that "our economic system" cannot "survive in the long term". This criticism is sparked by the 'bigger, better, faster, more' mentality not only apparent in corporate performance policies, but found equally in schools, nursery schools, consumerism and many other areas of life.

A public sociology would need to explore whether such attitudes contain elements of an inclusive, overarching solidarity. Above all, though, it would need to join scholars and practitioners along transnational value chains in cross-border discussions. Such a project would offer opportunities for both scholars and trade unionists. It would have the largest discursive uses for the unions if the sociologists and social scientists were offered what is increasingly made impossible for them at universities – the chance to apply their traditional instruments and methods to conduct the best possible research. Such research would benefit society simply by being allowed to investigate relevant topics professionally, with commitment and in the requisite high quality.

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