Comparing Ethical Naturalism and “Public Sociology”

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Published online: 18 October 2013
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Gorski's essay is a brilliantly lucid analysis of a hugely important topic for sociology—and one, frankly, about which many American sociologists are often confused or ignorant. Gorski's piece should be required reading for all sociologists, in my view. We in sociology often ignore and get our thinking wrong about these profound issues to our own discipline's detriment and embarrassment. I am convinced that the problems Gorski uncovers and the solutions he proposes are immensely insightful and massively important for getting our heads straight about the very identity, purpose, and value of sociology as an enterprise. Full disclosure: my own theoretical project in sociology entails exactly the kind of criticism of our received tradition concerning facts-and-values that Gorski levels, and he advocates just the kind of ethical naturalism that he describes.¹

Rather than simply piling on praise for what is also my own general theoretical approach, however, I will in what follows address a question of clarification that Gorski's essay prompts. Namely, *does Gorski's ethical naturalism validate and promote the particular kind of overtly normative and activist “public sociology” that some of sociology's discipline's leaders have recently championed (and others have criticized)?*² In recent years, the American Sociological Association (ASA) has organized a number of “activist” conference programs—including “Real Utopias: Emancipatory Projects, Institutional Designs, and Possible Futures”, “Public Sociologies”, and “Great Divides: Transgressing Boundaries”—and has promulgated various policy resolutions and filed an *amicus curiae* with the

U.S. Supreme Court on a contentious legal issue. Most of sociology is, we must acknowledge, driven and guided by deep moral and political commitments embraced by sociologists, which, as Gorski has suggested, govern our interests, concepts, explanations, theory, publishing, and teaching.³ And much of those moral and political commitments are conveyed to the various audiences that many “public” sociologists would like to influence. *Is this “public sociology” the kind of outcome that would be produced by more sociologists taking Gorski's “ethical naturalism” seriously?*

The question is worth addressing for multiple reasons. If the answer is “no”, then *advocates* of “public sociology” ought to make sure not to mistake Gorski's position as support for their own cause, but should have to engage it as a distinct and possibly challenging position. Also, if the answer to my question posed is “no”, then *skeptics* of “public sociology” ought not to reject Gorski's position on the misunderstanding that it is simply another version of “public sociology”—they too should have to engage ethical naturalism as a distinct position that challenges their own views. On the other hand, *if* Gorski's “ethical naturalism” and “public sociology” are essentially differently expressed versions of the same basic position, then we probably ought to make the theoretical connections between them more explicit, in order to enrich and develop the broader approach they champion. In any case, finally, the important value of *coherent* intellectual thought should compel us to sort out precisely how such distinct yet seemingly similar claims may be related or not to each other—the intellectual exercise and better sense of the big picture will be good for us.

That said, I think the answer to the question that I have posed is this: *it depends, but, as it is commonly practiced, no, I do not think “real existing public sociology” is not what*

¹ Christian Smith, 2011a, *What is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Smith, forthcoming, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; also see Smith, 2003, *Moral, Believing Animals*, New York: Oxford University Press.

² The key statements and documents in this debate are all easily accessible online, so I will not reference them in detail here.

³ More full disclosure: I have described some of my own publications as “offering a kind of ‘critical public sociology’” (Smith, 2011b, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adult Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 6) and contributed a chapter on “Taking Sociology to Real-World Religious Communities” to the public-sociology edited volume, *Sociologists in Action: Sociology, Social Change, and Social Justice* (Kathleen Korgan, Jonathan White, and Shelley White, eds., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, p. 261–266).

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Gorski is advocating by “ethical naturalism”. I wish I could offer a more definitively simple “yes” or “no” for an answer, but the complexities of the issues involved, the problematic ways that these matters are often framed, and the importance of certain nuances require some ambiguity in my answer.

First, let us examine the “it depends” part of my answer, which qualifies any absolute answer of “no” that we might be tempted to give. Friends of Gorski’s ethical naturalism and the discipline’s “public-sociology” crowd share a number of beliefs. They together reject the idea that sociology can be objective, neutral, or value-free. They all understand social science as inevitably serving some larger, pre-scientific normative, moral, and political ends. They together commend the more “honest” approach of sociology putting its normative cards on the table, rather than trying to hide them beneath a cloak of alleged scientific detachment. And they commonly understand sociology to be about promoting human wellbeing. On all of those counts, we find a comity between Gorski’s view and “public sociology” that suggests possibilities for the latter operating as an expression of the former. Those who oppose “public sociology” simply for its being “too normative” should therefore also logically have problems with Gorski’s proposal—although I think they are wrong on this matter and are obliged to answer his smart critique of their belief in (allegedly) unbiased objectivity.

My answer, “it depends”, also recognizes a contingency that turns on what exactly one means by “public sociology”. If by that we simply mean seeking to communicate sociological findings to audiences outside of academia, to share the fruits of our sociological research with others beyond our colleagues in specialized fields who know how to read scholarly journals, then, yes, I think we can say that “public sociology” at least in part legitimately carries out the agenda that Gorski has set before us. And if by “public sociology” we mean that sociologists should view one of their professional responsibilities to be actively informing public debates by providing valid and reliable information, understanding, and explanations of matters of public concern that affect human wellbeing, then, again, yes, it expresses the sort of thing that I read Gorski to be advocating. Both I think share commitments to these views of how sociology ought rightly to be engaging the world beyond academia.

But that may be where the similarities between the two end, for certain crucial features of Gorski’s ethical naturalism also distinguish it from real, existing “public sociology”. So I now shift to examine the “as-commonly-practiced-no-I do-not-think-so” part of my answer above. For starters, Gorski’s position is much more philosophically informed, complex, and critical than most of “public sociology” as normally theorized and practiced. The rationale animating the latter often amounts to little more than insisting on the moral and disciplinary goods of sociology engaging “the public” with its knowledge in order to help make the world a better place.

Gorski takes us much deeper and with much greater insight into the key philosophical issues that have structured and governed the dominant approaches to “facts and values” in sociology. In his account, going all the way back to Aristotle, we learn of the deep intellectual roots of the problematic fact/value divorce that contemporary sociology has inherited (against which “public sociology” has been a significant reaction attempting a needed correction). We are therefore by Gorski better educated in a way that helps us frame a more adequate response than the latter typically has, in my view.

By contrast to Gorski, much of the theory behind the sociological “knowledge” that “public sociology” often seeks to impart to people beyond academia consists of a moderately strong social constructionism that de-naturalizes the social world and thus prepares it for transformation. When smartly done, the right kind of social constructionism offers an important element of public education in the sociological perspective. Unfortunately, that is often not smartly done, in my view. In fact, as Gorski suggests, not only does the kind of cognitive-cultural-moral relativism that social constructionism seems to validate logically cut the moral legs out from under any project seeking to “improve the world” or “promote human wellbeing”, it also undermines the essential realist insight of any good version of Marxism that human social life operates according to particular, real causal mechanisms that are not mentally invented or variably culturally (in)determinate but are governed by the objective nature of the material-institutional world as it really exists and operates. The very theoretical rationale underwriting much of “public sociology” thus actually contains usually unacknowledged but nonetheless serious tensions, if not outright self-defeating contradictions.⁴

In other ways, ethical naturalism and “public sociology” also stand worlds apart. The former, for instance, embraces Aristotle’s emphasis on learning the virtues as the precondition for the possibility of living a good life—a view which itself assumes *natural* goods (and bads) existing in the universe; the reality of *standards* of excellence governing important human activities to which practitioners are accountable; the need to *submit* in modeling oneself on older, more accomplished practitioners of those activities; and the centrality of *self-discipline* in learning the right kind of balance, exercising self-control, and forming the proper habits in life. These themes are conspicuously absent from and alien to, to put it mildly, most of mainstream American (especially “public”) sociology—except perhaps as illustrating what are believed to be cases of oppression, domination, and exploitation.

If anything, the animating themes of most of public sociology’s moral vision reflect quite different concerns: liberalism’s autonomous individualism, which frees everyone to pursue their own personal desires as long as they do not prevent others from doing the same; the deep distrust of

⁴ See Smith 2011a, pp. 119–205.

traditional communities and practices as probable sources of constraint and oppression; and the obligation (per identity-politics and the therapeutic-culture) to boldly assert (rather than laboriously discipline) all that is subjectively “authentic”, spontaneous, alternative, desirous, and transgressive. While ethical naturalism implores us to learn and to pursue natural, telic, human goods, however difficult they are to attain, much of “public sociology” instead promotes individual emancipation, self-definition, absolute equality, and the right to the social acceptance and affirmation of any and every lifestyle choice that anyone might choose to make. In such ways, the two views are quite distinct. But these underlying theoretical matters are only the beginning of the important differences between ethical naturalism and “public sociology”, as I see it.

Gorski’s ethical naturalism also offers—in contrast to “public sociology”—a morally coherent and intellectually defensible way that social science can *contribute* appropriately to the *political* life of human societies yet *without* social science itself becoming *politicized*. His account shows us that, how, and why social science can *never be separated from politics*, but also that, how, and why social science itself also ought *never to be politicized*. The distinction here is absolutely crucial, yet my observation of mainstream sociologists across three decades tells me that many sociologists fail to grasp and maintain it. Framed by ethical naturalism, sociological knowledge is rightly recognized as a public good that needs to be communicated to and put at the disposal of all persons, so that they, as active participants in their shared political life, can engage in the best-informed, reality-based deliberations and so hopefully make the best, reality-based political decisions possible. Good sociological knowledge reveals “gaps” between the way reality really is and operates versus many common beliefs about reality that are often erroneous. Therefore, *simply to conduct good sociology* is itself inherently and inescapably to engage in a *critical* social science (in the sense of “critical theory”) of the kind that necessarily has public significance with real moral implications. Merely by describing and explaining (as well as we are able) the way things really are, we (at least implicitly) criticize other different accounts that describe and explain reality less accurately and truthfully. In this way, sociology is *necessarily* morally relevant, committed, and critically engaged—we simply cannot tell the truth about reality and have it be otherwise, whenever the truth happens to diverge from popular misunderstandings of it.

However, according to ethical naturalism, it is also most definitely *not* the job of sociology as a social-scientific discipline *itself* to become politicized—that is, to become dominated by one or another particular political ideology, to commit its collective professional voice to one particular pattern of partisan positions, to allow its scholarly interests, paradigms, assumptions, categories, explanations, and interpretations to be dominated by one political perspective in a way that

governs “what sociology knows” that is conveyed to “the public”. Doing so puts at risk, first, the essential moral commitment of sociology to truth-telling; second, sociology’s capacity to see reality from enough different perspectives to understand it well; and, third, public trust in sociology as a legitimate source of truthful knowledge about social life. Sociology as a social-scientific discipline must fastidiously avoid being politicized, even as it simultaneously commits itself to serving the common good as that is worked out by the public through the institutions of political life.

This issue closely relates to another difference between Gorski’s ethical naturalism and real, existing “public sociology”, as I see it. That concerns the genuine diversity, pluralism, openness, and readiness to learn that is essential in the former and I think typically lacking in the latter. Gorski correctly notes that “the composition of the academic community will...influence the production of facts” and suggests that “this is probably the best argument for the diversification of university faculties along both demographic and ideological lines”. The purpose of sociology in ethical naturalism in Gorski’s account is *to learn the truth about reality as well as we are able* through empirical investigation and reasoned theoretical reflection in ways that can help inform public deliberations, practices, and policy-making toward the enhancing of human flourishing. And, by Gorski’s own account, since the pursuit of such truth in our complex and sometimes opaque reality—the facts about which often under-determine their theoretical interpretation—we are always best served in the long run by diverse communities of social scientists taking different approaches to grasping the truth and refining our shared understanding of it by engaging in sustained, mutually accountable, civil arguments about what is true (by our best accounts) about what is real and how it works. In short, given the fallibility of social-scientific knowledge, it is through a provisional *pluralism of investigative and explanatory perspectives*, a readiness to engage conflicting views in an agonistic process of common truth-seeking, and ongoing fruitful argumentation that sociologists and “the public” will best learn the truth about reality in the long run—including about what leads to human flourishing.

“Public sociology”, however, is, if anything, marked by a conspicuous absence of such internal diversity and pluralism (despite the plural “Public Sociologies” in the title of the 2004 ASA national meeting). Nearly everyone who is attracted to “public sociology” appears to me committed to one basic outlook on reality: a liberal, progressive, leftist view.⁵ Much of the interest of real, existing “public sociology”, in fact, appears to me to consist in acting as something like the criminal investigation unit of the left wing of the Democratic Party. In this way, “public sociology” is admittedly not actually that much different from the rest of American sociology,

⁵ See Mathieu Deflem, 2013, “The Structural Transformation of Sociology”, *Society*, 50: 156–166, among many other insightful critiques.

which, with few exceptions, is parochially homogeneous in its ideological commitments, at least among those who are dominant in the discipline—even to the point of actively marginalizing and occasionally persecuting the few who do not conform to its doxa. This dominant composition and attitude reflects the *a priori* conviction by most (“public”) sociologists that their “progressive” ideology is obviously and definitely *correct*, to the point that even history itself stands on its righteous side—and, therefore, anyone who disagrees (“conservatives”, “reactionaries”, “right-wingers”, “red-state Americans”) must either be plain ignorant, irrationally “phobic” in some pathological way, or cognitively biased by some distorting, narrow interest, such as private ownership in too much capital.

By contrast, Gorski’s approach, which is grounded not on the ideology of American progressivism but instead on the philosophy-of-science of critical realism⁶ (not that the two are *necessarily* incompatible), strongly commends the intellectual virtue of *epistemic humility*, fosters an appreciation of reality’s immense complexity, and is disposed to distrust any one-size-fits-all ideology, representing any side of the political spectrum, into which reality is forced to fit. In style, disposition, and “personality”, therefore, Gorski’s ethical naturalism—for all of its strong normative commitments and robust political concern to help promote human wellbeing—is, by my lights, too open, fallibilist, cautious, pragmatic, and reality-driven to fit the standard “public sociology” approach.

Stated differently, while “public sociology” typically devotes itself to promoting a particular political program and policy agenda, Gorski’s ethical naturalism is finally only committed normatively to promoting human flourishing—however that may actually be achieved and whether or not it fits neatly into one or another ideological doctrine. “Public sociology” (and much of sociology beyond) generally tends to presume (as if infallibly) that it *already knows* what will produce human

flourishing—it has already made up its mind—and so proceeds as if it simply needs to deploy the authority of sociology (such as it is) to promote its particular commitments and agendas among the public. (This, of course, has been the tendency plaguing most politically self-assured movements throughout history, although specific examples of which would no doubt sharpen the point too painfully.) Ethical naturalism, by comparison, is more humble, tentative, pragmatic, and pluralistic in its approach to knowledge, appreciating that the complexities that characterize reality and the limits on humanity’s capacity to comprehend, explain, and control reality force us to try to learn from a variety of perspectives, including those that may not fit our natural inclinations.

Ethical naturalism compels us not to surround ourselves only with like-minded believers who affirm our current world-views, but to actively seek out different viewpoints, to genuinely listen to assorted voices, and to be available and accountable to provide to skeptics convincing, reasoned justifications for our own views—all on the assumption that we may actually learn something of truth about some important aspect of reality from genuine others. And that, if we are sociologically serious about our own social institutions, means that sociology needs to learn to tolerate, if not actually appreciate (but in any case definitely not to marginalize and persecute) colleagues who take different perspectives on what social life is made of, how it works, and what kinds of practices and institutions actually produce human flourishing. That, of course, is hard to do. But the proper conduct of sociology and its relevance to the public, moral, and political world requires nothing less.

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⁶ See <http://www3.nd.edu/~csmith22/criticalrealism.htm>.