

## BARCAMPS AND PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY:

### A MEANINGFUL SYMBIOSIS?

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## 1. Public sociology according to Burawoy

The expectation to directly inform society through science and to put existing scientific expertise to work on one's own initiative for the benefit of society is probably more obvious in no other subject than in sociology, which after all deals with everything that encompasses society. After all, sociology is defined as the science of society (Müller 2017). Such an expectation was founded and nurtured over decades by intellectuals such as Émile Zola, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jürgen Habermas (Kroll and Reitz 2013).

It is not least against this background that Michael Burawoy (2005, 2015), as then president of the American Sociological Association, called for in his Presidential Address on the occasion of the 2004 annual meeting: that this discipline must become much more engaged and involved in public concerns, standing entirely in the tradition of a Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and many others whom Burawoy claimed for his mission as pioneers of a public sociology.

Burawoy derived the particular task of public sociology from a 4-field scheme that follows the idea of an intra-disciplinary division of labor and is based on two distinctions, which he in turn traced back to two questions: first, the question „Sociology for Whom?“ and second, the question „Sociology for What?“. For the first question he distinguishes between the „Academic Audience“ and the „Extra-Academic Audience“, for the second between the regular application and execution of science („normal science“), for which the goal horizon and purpose are considered as given and normal knowledge application („Instrumental Knowledge“) is practiced, on the one hand, and a reflection on the contingency of this very goal horizon („Reflexive Knowledge“) on the other hand. Within this four-field scheme, he locates „Public Sociology“ in the lower right field, which is determined by the two characteristics „Reflexive Knowledge“ and „Extra-Academic Audience“ (cf. fig. 1).

Figure 1: The Location of Public Sociology

	<b>Academic Audience</b>	<b>Extra-Academic Audience</b>
<b>Instrumental Knowledge</b>	Professional Sociology	Policy Sociology
<b>Reflexive Knowledge</b>	Critical Sociology	Public Sociology

Source: Own representation

In other words, public sociology is characterized by the fact that it brings sociological expertise and reflective capacity, which have previously been developed and acquired within the scientific community, into play for the benefit of civil society and uses them to its advantage - not coincidentally, specifically engaging with those problem situations that would otherwise remain unnoticed or would hardly be able to articulate themselves. There is thus a strong normative component associated with the claim of public sociology in Burawoy's sense (Aulenbacher et al. 2017).

It should come as little surprise that this conception not only met with approval from the outset, but also with opposition, whether because of the normative claim, or because the 4-field scheme was not quite convincing, especially because it was not sufficiently selective (Brady 2004; Tittle 2004; McLaughlin et al. 2005; Turner 2005). Whatever one may think of these criticisms, it remains worth discussing that sociology has a responsibility towards society, and that this raises the question of how and with what it can best fulfill this responsibility. In this context, it is by no means merely incidental to clarify which means are used to mediate between sociology and society. Alain Touraine (1976), for example, developed a special „méthode de l'intervention sociologique“ for this purpose, in which one consciously takes sides and takes a stand. One can see: The idea of a public sociology is by no means new.

The very question of suitable procedures and forms of mediation is momentous. Within the scientific community, for example, there is the triad of lecture, seminar and colloquium for imparting knowledge. But this does not mean that it is already decided how sociology communicates and opens itself to the public in the most effective way, how it addresses and involves them.

Without going through these possibilities of communication in detail here, the following is about a newer form of event in which the integration and participation of the audience are clearly in the foreground. Linked to this is the assumption that this event format could be particularly suited to supporting public sociology in its mission.

## 2. Participation raised to a principle: the event format 'Barcamp'.

The emergence of the 'Barcamp' event format is attributed to Internet pioneer Tim O'Reilly, who in 2003 began to personally invite the crème de la crème of developers, experts, trade journalists, programmers, start-up entrepreneurs and thought leaders of the Internet scene from San Francisco and Silicon Valley to his farm in the San Francisco Bay Area for two days of completely open discussions about the future of the Internet and related information and communication technologies. There was no predetermined agenda of any kind. Instead, everyone was able to spontaneously present their ideas, projects, and visions for discussion, and the participants then distributed themselves among the various sessions offered in a completely unconstrained manner, depending on their interests. The event was organized like a tent camp: People constantly squatted together, discussed together, ate together, sat around the campfire in the evenings, spent the night together on O'Reilly's property, many in tents, and spent some highly inspiring, creative, participatory, self-organized hours together (Hellmann 2012).

In 2005, this event form emancipated itself from its inventor, was opened up and democratized for everyone, and from then on spread worldwide at breakneck speed. As early as 2006, the first barcamps were also held in Germany (Hellmann 2007). Since then, barcamps have become a permanent fixture on the global Internet scene. But as if that were not enough, in recent years barcamps have also attracted a great deal of attention and recognition far away from the Internet scene, as the following graphic shows (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Selection of theme camp logos from recent years



Source: Own representation

In the meantime, it can even be said that barcamps have arrived in the middle of society. However, it is still a form of event that is particularly related to the discursive-creative culture of the Internet and its pioneers. Innovations and phenomena of the Web 2.0 era such as co-creation, crowdsourcing, interactive value, open innovation, peer production, prosuming, sharing economy, swarm intelligence, user-generated content, wealth of networks, wikinomics or wisdom of the crowd are all components of a successful barcamp and give this event form a noticeably unconventional touch. Not without reason are barcamps also called 'unconferences'.

Decisive for this unconventional touch is first and foremost the 'octolog' of the barcamp culture. The specific participation culture of barcamps is expressed in eight rules, which are based on the eight rules of the movie 'Fight Club' and whose observance seems to be advisable for the successful realization of a barcamp. The eight rules are: (1) Talk about the barcamp; (2) Blog about the barcamp; (3) If you want to present, briefly introduce yourself and your topic and write both on a presentation card (all cards are then attached to a single session board); (4) Introduce yourself with only three keywords (make yourself known, but don't take yourself too seriously); (5) There are as many presentations at one time as there are presentation rooms; (6) There are no pre-arranged presentations and no „tourists“ (who just listen and contribute nothing). In short: „No spectators, only participants!“; (7) Presentations last as long as they have to – or until they overlap with the following presentation slot; (8) It would be good if you would hold your own session right at your first Barcamp participation (dare, even if it is difficult at first).

If we then look at the canon of values that provides a general framework for barcamps, several interconnected guiding ideas are worth mentioning, such as diversity, egalitarianism, informality, inclusivity, creativity, participation, and self-organization (Eberhardt and Hellmann 2015).

- Creativity: Barcamps are explicitly designed to enable and promote creativity. Inhibition thresholds of what can be said are lowered as much as possible in order to be able to present the most diverse ideas and perspectives uninhibitedly.

- Diversity: In order to generate a creative-participative atmosphere, a certain diversity of participants is needed. It must be ensured that the widespread tendency toward conformity and mutual adaptation does not come into play too much. Different

assessments of ideas and projects require different skills and perspectives.

- Egalitarianism: Interaction during a bar camp should be as ahierarchical as possible; differences in rank are temporarily suspended; participants meet at eye level. Basically, everyone can say anything and talk to anyone. There is a consistent use of „duzt“.

- Informality: Barcamps favor a very personal, direct tone, a direct approach to each other and talking to each other in order to promote the flow of impressions and ideas, but also criticism and problem awareness, which are indispensable for creativity and joint learning. Thus, barcamps are sometimes referred to as ongoing „coffee breaks,“ „field camps,“ or „class meetings.“

- Inclusivity: Furthermore, it is important for the implementation of barcamps that in principle everyone has access, everyone may feel invited, and that it is as low-threshold an offer as possible for active participation.

- Participation: A motto of barcamps is „No spectators, only participants! In principle, everyone can participate, and this always implies active engagement, if possible through own statements, contributions, sessions, topic suggestions.

- Self-organization: At the beginning of barcamps it is always pointed out: „You are the barcamp! The framework is provided, but the content and session dynamics have to be brought in by the participants right at the beginning or during a barcamp, so they are not predefined, agreed upon or taken responsibility for by the barcamp organizers.

Furthermore, it can be assumed that in addition to the original barcamps, which are open to all possible topics, i.e. which do not impose any thematic restrictions, there are now also theme camps, which have a much narrower focus in terms of subject matter and are often related to specific professions, political initiatives or leisure activities, as well as corporate camps, which are held in-house by individual organizations (companies, associations, etc.) (Feldmann and Hellmann 2016). In this context, barcamps can be used for a variety of occasions, such as brainstorming, change management, creativity processes, cultural change, market research, mediation, networking, open innovation projects, recruitment, or socializing (Hellmann 2016). The practical implementation of barcamps will not be discussed in detail here (see Feldmann and Hellmann 2016 for more information).

### 3. „No Spectators, Only Participants“: How Barcamps could optimize Public Sociology.

Leaving aside the critical points that have been held against the Burawoy initiative „Public Sociology“ for years, and concentrating on the question of the accessibility of civil society and the communicability of sociological expertise to it, two aspects in particular are likely to pose particular challenges: Inclusion threshold and information asymmetry. By inclusion threshold is meant that the involvement of civil society in the context of science is certainly not self-evident and all too easy, since science in particular – this leads immediately to the aspect of information asymmetry – can be characterized by the fact that the gap between scientific experts and non-scientific laypersons can hardly be greater in a comparison of functional systems (cf. Luhmann 1981). In this respect, the particularly urgent question arises as to what measures Public Sociology can take in order to overcome this structurally conditioned information asymmetry, which on the one hand is highly functional for every discipline, because only in this way can specific expert knowledge be professionally accumulated, but on the other hand precisely for this reason poses problems of accessibility and communicability, without becoming unproductive or even dysfunctional.

This is exactly where barcamps come into play. This event format is characterized by the fact that, firstly, the entry threshold for participation in bar camps is extremely low, making inclusion extremely easy, and, secondly, the principle of participation means that the active involvement of the audience is part of the program, in that the initiative for finding topics, setting topics and dealing with topics in the individual sessions lies entirely on the side of the participants, i.e. the experts and laypeople alike. This does not automatically mean that the experts will express themselves in such a way that they are immediately understood. Moreover, it is by no means certain that the audience will make an effort to understand adequately, through concentration and the willingness to make the misunderstood public through a multitude of justified inquiries. This, too, is certainly a learning effect, and this should be accepted affirmatively-reflexively by both the experts and the participants (not every scientist is therefore suitable for the barcamp format, and likewise not every person interested in science). Nevertheless, due to its basic philosophy, which is essentially related to the participation of all, this format offers good prerequisites for helping public sociology to become more valid and effective.

What has proven to be extremely critical for the success of barcamp planning and implementation, and this should also apply to events that want to make sociology public and available to the public, is not only the moderation of the barcamp day itself (whereby a longer implementation period promises greater learning successes in the sense of a better internalization of the barcamp culture), but also the preparation of the barcamp and getting in the mood for it. It is of utmost importance, for example, to familiarize the clients, in this case the sociologists, as well as the other participants with the special event and procedure mode of barcamps at an early stage. If one starts to appeal to the direct responsibility of all participants for the success of a barcamp only on the day of the barcamp, when the introduction and the proposal round ('session pitch') are carried out, it is often too late. Rather, it should be ensured well in advance that all participants are informed as comprehensively as possible about what awaits them and what is essentially important: namely on themselves, on their commitment, their initiative, their willingness to continuously contribute, be it initially with as open-hearted as possible self-presentations during the introduction round, be it with attractive topic proposals during the session pitch or later then during each individual session through active participation and unbroken commitment. Ongoing activity is required and demanded; passivity, on the other hand, has not lost much at a barcamp. In this respect, the chance of success of barcamps, if they are to be used for public sociology, for example, depends essentially on how representatives of this sociological orientation deal with themselves self-critically and approach their future audience accordingly diplomatically, equipped with sufficient intercultural competence – just as this audience should be invited and prepared early on to deal with the special conditions of the possibility of (public) sociology. From the point of view of professional barcamp organizers, this is *conditio sine qua non* for the success of barcamps.

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