

Editorial: Public sociology, trust and informal practices

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Editorial:

Public Sociology, Trust and Informal Practices

The first paper discusses the issue of 'public sociology' as it has evolved after Michael Burawoy's famous ASA presidential address published in 2005 (Burawoy, 2005). The topic has gone viral during this past decade: there are edited volumes gathering most eminent sociologists discussing public sociology and even a Handbook of public sociology (Jafries, 2009). The issue of public sociology is topical and central, when thinking about the discipline's future development and role in society, and it needs to be taken towards new directions. The author of the paper tries to do the latter through discussing Zygmunt Bauman's contribution in view of Burawoy's framework. The author points at important similarities and differences between Burawoy's and Bauman's positions. Several important differences are related to their different views of the public sphere either as aiming at consensus or as a forum of continuous contestation between different hegemonic projects. However, the author argues that their similarities outweigh their differences: both want sociology to foster social dialogue.

Two following articles focus on the issue of trust but on different levels in society. There is a general consensus among contemporary social scientists that social trust is important, for both social and political reasons (Luhman, 1979; Putnam, 2000). Social trust has been defined as a belief that others in society can be trusted. It has been considered as the glue that holds society together and facilitates cooperation between people. There are two broad schools of thought about trust (Newton, 2004). The first takes the view that trust is an individual property and that it is associated with individual characteristics. The second argues that social trust is a property of social systems. According to this view, the study of trust requires a top-down approach that focuses on the systemic or emergent properties of societies and their social and political institutions (Meulemann, 2008). The second article (Beilman & Lilleoja, 2015) is based on the assumption that the existence of community or country level social trust is crucial for generating individual level social trust. They analyse whether value similarity may foster social trust in society. As the authors indicate, the role of similar values in generating social trust has been tested before only in the context of social trust in institutions and persons related to a technology. The analysis is based on the European Social Survey. Results suggest that there is a stronger positive relationship between value similarity and social trust in Scandinavian countries, which have high social trust levels, while in countries with a low level of social trust, congruity of the personal value structure with the country level value structure tends to decrease the individuals' trustfulness.

The third article (Ojamäe & Paadam 2015) aims at conceptualising the issue of institutional trust upon the experience of urban housing renewal in Estonia. As to the institutional trust, it has been asserted that institutions can function as bases, carriers and objects of trust (Möllering, 2006). Based on the analysis of three qualitative studies conducted during the 2000s, the authors conclude that trust should be seen as an indispensable prerequisite for improving the quality of blocks in sustainable and future-oriented ways as well as for facilitating negotiations between flat-owners associations, local municipalities and market actors. They argue that the public sector is conceived to be a central actor in sustaining trust between actors who have no previous positive experience from collective residential strategies.

The fourth article (Williams, 2015) is an empirical investigation on the use of blat practices in Ukraine's healthcare system. The article aims to display how a social networking practice (practice of blat), can be transformed as a society undergoes transition from being a neutral or positive practice into a negative practice. The practice of blat, which reverts to 'the use of personal networks for

obtaining goods and services in short supply, or for circumventing formal procedures' (Ledneva, 2013, p 273) is shown to persist in post-Soviet societies but to have transformed. The author argues that the outcome will be to display the constant need to revisit the nature and meaning of specific practices, since an acceptable behaviour in a society can quickly become a very different and unacceptable behaviour as that society changes. The key argument of the paper is that blat should be re-theorized as the darker side of social capital.

The issue ends with two book reviews. In the first one, Skriptaite (2015) argues that Informality in Eastern Europe: Structures, Political Cultures and Social Practices edited by Christian Giordano, Nicolas Hayoz and Jens Herlth challenges the most common negative paradigms of informal practices in Eastern Europe. It shows that these practices are instrumental in many societies, and their prevalence has contextual rational reasons. The book includes chapters based on a comparative and theoretical perspective and on case studies from Central and South-Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space.

The second review is on Party System Formation in Kazakhstan by Rico Isaacs, and according to Kudaibergenova (2015) the book is an invaluable contribution to the study of Central Asian politics as well as the growing body of literature on formal and informal politics in post-Soviet states. It is an excellent start to improving our understanding of how neopatrimonial systems pervade despite uneven but existent political resistance. It provides a very detailed and coherent analysis of contemporary Kazakhstani political development. However, the absence of special ethnography on genuine party support in specific regions in Kazakhstan constrains the analysis of societal complexities on regional, class and ethnic levels.

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