

**Putting Economic Sociology into Public Practice**  
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John Campbell wrote in the Fall 2003 issue of *Accounts* that the institutionalist tradition in economic sociology is that which “is in the best position to impact public discourse,” and suggests ways to build a public understanding of how economic activity is embedded in social structures and institutions. As young economic sociologists also partial to institutionalist analysis, we wholeheartedly agree that our subdiscipline should work to increase the public currency of these ideas. But it also struck us that so much of the discussion of public sociology in the run-up to ASA is about discourses, and we felt that our own experience as graduate students at the University of Wisconsin doing our dissertation work at a “think-do tank” called the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS)<sup>2</sup> has been deeply informed by another very public sort of economic sociology, where institutionalism again has much to contribute.

This, which we call “practical public sociology,” consists of taking our alternative explorations of economic phenomena, asking what they suggest real actors in the economy ought to *do* differently and then, when feasible, getting one’s hands a little dirty helping some of those actors do some of those things. For examples of such practical public sociology, we draw briefly on what we know first hand, which are examples of institution-building efforts with which COWS has been involved. These efforts are built around four theoretically grounded but relatively straightforward ideas: (1) firm strategies have impacts for many stakeholders, not just the firm-owners themselves; (2) firm strategies are influenced by the institutional surround; (3) given the right institutional surround, more firms will opt for so-called “high-road” strategies based on living wages, strong communities and environmental sustainability; (4) institution building is collective action by real actors in concrete social settings.

The COWS model is to move beyond just recognizing how economic action is embedded to looking for areas in which partnerships among economic actors – firms, unions, governments and other intermediaries – can change the costs and benefits of certain behavioral paths, and then to take some role in convincing the actors to form these partnerships. In some cases, this has led to COWS playing a central role in stimulating the formation of new labor market institutions in Wisconsin, first by doing initial feasibility studies to define a common problem that could be collectively solved and then by convening key actors to jointly discuss what might be done. This process led to the formation of The Jobs with a Future project to support training and skills upgrading in South Central Wisconsin through sectoral partnerships in manufacturing, health-care and finance and insurance industries that link employers, unions, technical colleges and county-run job centers. Likewise, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership based in Milwaukee engages employers and unions in collective strategies for workplace

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<sup>2</sup> Founded and directed by Professor Joel Rogers; the research director is Dr. Laura Dresser. COWS also seeks to affect public discourse, and we emphasize that these two sorts of public sociology are complementary.

modernization, skill upgrading and recruiting and retention policies. In other cases, the role has been facilitative, as with the Wisconsin Manufacturers' Development Consortium, which brought large global manufacturers into partnership with state actors to develop common standards and resources for upgrading regional supplier firms. Here, the impetus came from industry, but COWS was brought on board to help define the problem and to assess whether the solution – a joint training program – was effective in its resolution.<sup>3</sup>

We recognize that this sort of practical public sociology comes more easily to people already associated with well-funded research centers that allow a quick connection of theoretical ideas to practical application – and that not everyone can just start their own center. But there is a general lesson in our main point that this “other” sort of public economic sociology is out there, as the core of the approach is to aid economic actors to define problems in ways that allow for the identification of institutional solutions. This is something that can be– and is – regularly done by individual sociologists in collaboration with labor unions, community groups, and so on.

Finally, it is worth a word on how this relates to other conceptions of “public sociology” such as Burawoy’s (2004) recent efforts to draw analytic distinctions between public, policy, critical and professional sociologies. The majority of the work done by COWS is not what he calls policy sociology, as it is not fundamentally “ beholden to the limited concerns of a client, or even the broader concerns of a patron” (Burawoy et al. 2004: 104). The need to raise grant money is certainly a concern – good ideas have gone nowhere for the lack of it – but at the risk of sounding naïve we believe the research has for the most part been driven – rightly or wrongly – by a vision of a differently functioning economy. The sort of economic sociology we describe here is thus most similar to what Burawoy terms “grass-roots” public sociology, but with an emphasis on its practical rather than discursive aspects. It is also informed by a “critical” economic sociology (with roots in political economy) deeply skeptical of neoclassical assumptions and by a “professional” sociology that has shown market failures to be endemic and argued that equitable economic growth is more likely to be based on positive network externalities and “untraded interdependencies” (Storper 1997) than on such traditional tacks as market deregulation, subsidies and tax competition.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see: <http://www.cows.org>; Dresser and Rogers (2003); Whitford and Zeitlin (2004).

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