The Public Sociology of Religion

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This article defines and calls attention to the public sociology of religion as a robust stream of scholarship with potential to increase the sociology of religion subfield's relevance and impact in sociology and society. The public sociology of religion creates reflexive dialogue between sociologists and diverse publics, informs normative perspectives on public problems involving religion, and investigates the place and practice of religion in civil society. I discuss my dissertation research—a national, multisite ethnography of new evangelical strategies for engaging the public and the poor in Portland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Boston—as a case study in the public sociology of religion, considering the enactment and normative valence of new evangelical approaches to participation, presence, and power in American public life. I conclude with some final observations concerning how a robust public sociology of religion addresses perceived problems of marginality, isolation, and theoretical sterility within the subfield.

Key words: civil society/public sphere; Evangelical Protestantism; democracy; race and ethnicity; ethnography; pluralism.

Sociologists of religion have spilled much ink in recent years reflecting on the current state of the field while looking to chart a new course. Much of this ink has had a strong critical edge, lamenting the marginality (Smith et al. 2013), isolation (Cadge et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2013), provincialism (Bender et al. 2012; Guhin 2014; Kniss 2014), theoretical sterility (Guhin 2014), and general malaise (Konieczny et al. 2012; Smith 2008) of the sociology of religion subfield. Whether one agrees with the critics or takes a more sanguine view (Wuthnow 2014), there is no question that the sociology of religion has undergone profound changes in recent years. After dominating the field for decades, strong forms of secularization theory have been abandoned (Berger 1999; Edgell 2012; Gorski and Altinordu 2008; Habermas 2008; Smith 2008), replaced by contested new theories of religious vitality under conditions of religious competition (Finke and

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Stark 1988; Warner 1993), secular modernity (Smith 2008), and postsecularism (Dillon 2010; Habermas 2008). Recognizing religion was here to stay and that the debate over secularization theory had become a degenerating research program (Lakatos 1978), scholars of religion took the hint and got on with the business of investigating the various manifestations, uses, and effects of religion in the late modern era (Smilde and May 2010).

In particular, religious scholars found new intellectual energy in the study of everyday practices of lived religion in its various contexts and forms (Ammerman 2006; Bender 2003; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Riesebrodt 2010). However, the lived religion and emerging "strong program" in the sociology of religion have come under fire for failing to attend to questions of power and religion's role in legitimating structures of inequality (Cadge et al. 2011; Edgell 2012; Konieczny et al. 2012; Smilde and May 2010). Related programmatic statements have called for a de- and re-centering of religious scholarship away from dominant geographic and religious locations, contexts, and identities and toward more marginalized, peripheral, and edge contexts, locations, and practices (Bender et al. 2012; Kniss 2014). My goal in this essay is to call attention to a robust but oft-overlooked stream of scholarship in the sociology of religion with potential to enhance the impact and relevance of the subfield with respect to both the discipline of sociology and society at large: namely, the public sociology of religion.

My argument proceeds as follows. In the next section, I articulate a general definition of the public sociology of religion and explore its lineage and linkages to recent work in the sociology of religion and to larger discussions within the discipline. In the third section of the paper, I discuss my ongoing dissertation research—a national, multisite ethnographic study of new evangelical strategies for engaging the public and the poor in Portland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Boston—as a case study in the public sociology of religion. I conclude with some final observations concerning how a robust and outward-looking public sociology of religion might help resolve perceived problems of isolation and theoretical sterility within the subfield.

THE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

What is the public sociology of religion? The public sociology of religion is characterized by one or more of the following three features: it (1) creates reflexive dialogue between sociologists and diverse publics concerning matters of public interest involving religion, (2) uses the tools and products of sociological inquiry to inform normative arguments and evaluations of public problems involving religion, and (3) investigates the place and practice of religion in civil society as its primary subject matter. The more each of these criteria are met, the more paradigmatic and likely a study is to contribute to knowledge outside the subfield. I address these three characteristics of the public sociology of religion in order.

In his 2004 Presidential Address at the American Sociological Association annual meeting, Michael Burawoy made a widely debated argument for a public sociology that leverages the methodological, institutional, and symbolic strengths of mainstream "professional sociology" in order to increase the public presence, relevance, and impact of sociological scholarship in pursuit of a "better world" (Burawoy 2005:24–25). Whereas policy sociology suggests appropriate means for solving pregiven public problems and critical sociology challenges underlying assumptions and blinds spots within mainstream professional sociology, public sociology brings sociology into a conversation with diverse publics in order to facilitate the mutual education of both parties concerning matters of public importance (Burawoy 2005).

"Traditional" public sociologists produce articles and books that "are read beyond the academy, and they become the vehicle of public discussion about the nature of U.S. society—the nature of its values, the gap between its promise and its reality, its malaise, its tendencies" (Burawoy 2005:8–9). "Organic" public sociologists, on the other hand, work in "close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counterpublic . . . a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations" (Burawoy 2005:7–8). Relevant to the public sociology of religion, James Davison Hunter's (1991) *Culture Wars* is an example of the former category while Richard L. Wood's (2002) *Faith in Action* is an example of the latter.

In addition to creating reflexive dialogue between sociologists and diverse publics concerning matters of public interest involving religion, the public sociology of religion uses the tools and products of sociological inquiry to inform normative deliberation on religion-related public problems (Dewey1988 [1927]). In this sense, the public sociology of religion hearkens back to the early days of American sociology in which ethically motivated social reform and sociological research were inextricably bound together.[1] In fact, the public sociology of religion has even deeper roots reaching back to the founding of the discipline. Marx and Durkheim were both ethical naturalists of a sort and assumed that sociological inquiry, as a "moral science" (Durkheim), had the potential (and responsibility) to contribute to our understanding of the nature of "human flourishing" and the social conditions under which it might best be achieved or blocked (Gorski 2013:543–44).[2] In other words, the public sociology of religion rejects strong versions the fact/value dichotomy as advanced by Comte, Weber, and positivist philosophies of science and ethics (Gorski 2013; Putnam 2002; Weber 1949).

The public sociology of religion thus shares with critical sociology and public sociology writ large a normative orientation in which the empirical and theoretical

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[1]Burawoy (2005):19 and Emirbayer and Desmond (2015):24. In the American context, of course, early sociology's normative orientation had a distinctly religious character, being rooted as it was in varieties of ethical Protestantism (e.g., Smith et al. 2013:905).

[2]This is not to say that Marx and Durkheim shared similar moral visions worthy of uncritical praise, just that they each incorporated normative concerns into their work and drew normative conclusions from their scholarship.

tools of sociological research inform ethical reflection and judgment on matters of public significance (Burawoy 2005; Thacher 2006; Wright 2010:10–20). While the public sociology of religion may contribute to ethical deliberation on public problems, like public sociology itself it has "no intrinsic normative valence, other than the commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology. It can as well support Christian Fundamentalism as it can Liberation Sociology or Communitarianism" (Burawoy 2005:8–9). The public sociology of religion is thus characterized by a commitment to incorporating sociological knowledge into normative deliberations on matters of public importance involving religion, rather than by commitment to a particular moral orientation or preset political agenda.[3]

Third, the public sociology of religion takes as its primary subject matter the role of religion in public life, with a specific focus on the place and practice of religion in civil society. Why civil society? First and foremost, it is because civil society is the starting point and central (though not exclusive) domain of sociological investigation writ large (Burawoy 2005:24). An emphasis on civil society links up the public sociology of religion to the core of the discipline, which in turn increases relevance, reduces isolation, and facilitates theoretical cross-pollination between the sociology of religion subfield and the discipline at large (Guhin 2014; Smith et al. 2013; Wuthnow 2014). Second and related, despite being itself a deeply stratified and contested arena, civil society is arguably the "best possible terrain for the defense of humanity" against the "twin forces . . . [of] both state despotism and market tyranny" (Burawoy 2005:24, 25). In this way, the public sociology of religion's emphasis on civil society is also an expression of its normative orientation and commitment to facilitating reflexive dialogue with diverse publics as a means to define and defend the expansion of human flourishing and positive freedom against various forms of domination.[4] Third and finally, if the past 40 years of global sociopolitical upheavals have taught us anything, it is religion's mediating influence on the critical role a robust civil society plays in defending human rights and deepening democracy across the globe (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Habermas 2006; Smith 2008; Wright 2010).[5]

Perhaps the most common type of public sociology of religion involves work that satisfies criterion one above by engaging religious publics concerning matters of special importance to them, whether that be studies of the religious lives of emerging adults (Smith et al. 2011), studies of religious congregations (Becker 1999), or studies of tithing and religious giving (Smith et al. 2008). Smith and Emerson's *Divided by Faith* (2000) inaugurated a burgeoning race and

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[3]In this way, the public sociology of religion makes room for both critical theory and more mainstream approaches to the sociology of morality. Such an approach makes no a priori assumptions about the intrinsic normative valence of "religion" as such.

[4]Including forms of domination that exist within civil society itself (e.g., Burawoy 2005:24).

[5]The importance of religion in shaping the strength and character of democratic civil society is, of course, not a new insight (e.g., Tocqueville 1966 [1835/1840]).

religion literature over the past 15 years, much of which is oriented to helping specific religious publics understand and respond to the challenges of racial inequality and racial integration within religious organizations (DeYoung et al. 2003; Edwards 2008; Edwards et al. 2013; Emerson and Woo 2006; Marti 2012). While important and valuable to particular religious communities, this work typically is more interested in addressing concerns of specific religious publics rather than contributing to larger theoretical, empirical, and normative discussions outside the subfield. As such, and with some exceptions (e.g., Smith and Emerson 2000), this genre of public sociology of religion is unlikely to address perceived problems of isolation or theoretical sterility within the sociology of religion (e.g., Edwards et al. 2013).

More paradigmatic examples of the public sociology of religion center explicitly on religion's role in the public life of democratic civil society (Lichterman and Potts 2009; Smith 2000; Wuthnow 2005).[6] Much of this research has focused on grassroots democracy and faith-based community organizing, a sector whose promise and prominence has risen steadily in both academic and public consciousness in recent years (Stout 2010; Warren 2001; Wood and Fulton 2015). Other work has examined the possibilities and limits of religion's role in expanding the quantity and/or quality of social capital and its relation to democracy (e.g., Foley et al. 2001; Lichterman 2005; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Skocpol 2000; Smidt 2003). Welfare reform and the charitable choice provision sparked a wave of policy-oriented public sociology of religion (e.g., Bartkowski and Regis 2003; Chaves 1999; Wuthnow 2004), while more recent discussions of immigration and immigration reform have also made their mark in the field (Ecklund 2008; Yukich 2013). In its engagement with diverse religious and non-religious publics, its often explicitly normative orientation, and its focus on the place and practice of religion in democratic civil society, it is here we find the most paradigmatic expressions of the public of sociology of religion.

A CASE STUDY IN THE PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

My in-progress dissertation exemplifies all three components of the public sociology of religion and points to its promise as one antidote to perceived problems of isolation and theoretical sterility within the sociology of religion subfield. First, by thickly describing embedded and embodied practices and discourse of new evangelical strategies of engaging the public and the poor, and by linking them to central problems in democratic theory, my dissertation opens accessible pathways for mutual dialogue and critique among sociologists, evangelicals, and the American public concerning the relationship between evangelical

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[6]This brief review of the literature focuses on the practice of religion in U.S. civil society because that is the topic of my dissertation, not because the U.S. case can or should be thought of as paradigmatic (e.g., Cadge et al. 2011).

Christianity and ethical democracy in America.[7] Second, the case study incorporates an explicit and carefully considered normative component into its methodological and analytic foundation, interrogating the enactment and normative valence of new evangelical strategies of *participation*, *presence*, and *power* in public life.[8] Third, the case study investigates new evangelical strategies of engaging the public and the poor in democratic civil society, the modal site of sociological investigation and the "defense of the social" (Burawoy 2005:24).

In the classical American pragmatist tradition of Jane Addams and John Dewey, to speak of ethical democracy is to speak of a "thick" conception of democracy concerned as much with ethical dispositions and relations between citizens in civil society as it is with legal and political structures (Addams 2002 [1902]:7–8; Dewey 1988 [1939]). More recent inquiries into the ideals and conditions of ethical democracy expand on this tradition in highlighting ethical democracy's dependence on mutual recognition and a just distribution of resources, its commitment to stakeholder principles of political power which hold the state accountable to citizens, and its promise of protection for individuals and minority groups against arbitrary domination and exclusion from the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Fraser 1995; Stout 2010; Wood and Fulton 2015; Wright 2010). The American pragmatist tradition reminds us that ethical democracy cannot flourish without an "underlying democratic culture" in which citizens cultivate skills and habits conducive to ethical democratic practice in public life (Wood and Fulton 2015:13).

What is the relationship between evangelical Christianity and ethical democracy in America? One could hardly pose a more polarizing question. In an age of great public and scholarly concern over rising inequality, declining social capital, and widespread political marginalization and disengagement, religious communities count among the greatest wellsprings of civic voluntarism, social capital, and political engagement in the United States, and evangelicals are arguably America's most vibrant and politically engaged religious tradition (Putnam 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Smith et al. 1998). Evangelical church and nonprofit organizations are today involved in a vast array of public projects and social service programs aimed at helping marginalized and disadvantaged people both inside and outside their own congregations and religious tradition (Smith et al. 1998; Steensland and Goff 2014).

Yet evangelicals and their historic forbearers have also fought to preserve white Protestant cultural hegemony in America through various forms of religious,

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[7]The concept of ethical democracy is developed further in my larger dissertation project and in Wood and Fulton (2015:13) and Wood (2002).

[8]While substantive analysis, space considerations, and an interest in surprising findings have led me to emphasize some of the more "positive" elements of my cases here, the larger dissertation project has a strong critical component as well (Cadge et al. 2011): including analyses of obdurate neighborhood racial tensions and distrust, repeated failures of white male evangelical social reflexivity (Lichterman 2005) with respect to race/class/gender power differentials, and a failed community development project that "set race relations back ten years," among others.

racial, and political discrimination. Catholics, Jews, immigrants, blacks, socialists, feminists, and gays have all found themselves targets of conservative Protestant distrust and hostility at various points throughout American history (Brint and Schroedel 2009; Lichtman 2008). Furthermore, white evangelicals' individualist approach to economic and social problems often reproduces—rather than reduces—the racial, economic, and social inequalities which threaten ethical democracy in America (Smith and Emerson 2000). Recent years have witnessed a major surge in progressive evangelical social activism around issues of poverty, inequality, education, healthcare, environmentalism, criminal justice, and human rights (Markofski 2015; Steensland and Goff 2014)—yet most studies report a rather dismal record regarding white American evangelicals' capacity to address poverty, inequality, and difference (Lichterman et al. 2009; Smith and Emerson 2000). These studies, however, focus almost exclusively on conservative evangelicals whilst ignoring the significant and growing minority of more progressively oriented streams within American evangelicalism (Brint and Schroedel 2009; Markofski 2015; Steensland and Goff 2014). Thus, our knowledge of the relationship between evangelical Christianity and ethical democracy in America remains ambiguous and incomplete.

Based on 12 months of full-time ethnographic fieldwork with faith-based community organizing, community development, and progressive political advocacy groups in Portland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Boston—including over 90 in-depth interviews with both evangelical and nonevangelical religious and civic leaders, community activists, political lobbyists, and neighborhood residents—my dissertation contributes to our social-scientific and normative understanding of the ideas, habits, and institutions with potential to promote ethical democracy in America, and of the possibilities and limits of evangelicalism's role in such efforts.

I selected Portland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Boston as research sites for several reasons. First, they are home to leading community organizing (Los Angeles and Boston), community development (Portland and Atlanta), and progressive political advocacy (Portland) efforts involving evangelicals in the United States. Second, the selection of these sites allowed for comparisons of new evangelical strategies for engaging the public and the poor within and across institutional types, as well as comparisons across different types of institutional and individual "bridging" relationships (Lichterman 2005; Wood 2002; Wuthnow 2003). Third, the relative lack of research on the "new evangelical social engagement" (Steensland and Goff 2014) and more progressively oriented evangelicals suggested the need for a broad, cross-regional analysis of new evangelical strategies of engaging the public and the poor rather than settling for a narrow focus on one or two organizations within a single city or region.

Participating intensively as a volunteer with multiple organizations in each city, I observed culture in action and interaction across a wide range of public and private settings (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2003): organizational staff meetings, legislative testimony, trainings, fundraisers, community events, public meetings, religious celebrations, informal gatherings, etc. I selected cases in

which I was able directly to observe and interview race/class/gender diverse evangelicals interacting with diverse social others across multiple group settings and institutional contexts—a crucial element of my research design given that the same religious actors may talk and act differently in different types of public settings (Lichterman 2012).

In the next section, I discuss three strategies of evangelical public action that exemplify modes of democratic civic engagement important to ethical democracy. I label these strategies of democratic civic engagement *participation*, *presence*, and *power*. Each strategy relates to a specific type of institutionalized public action observed in my dissertation fieldwork: public service, community development, and community organizing, respectively. The practice of these *democratic virtues* in civil society is a potential good; their absence is certain cause for concern. The normative valence of practices of *participation*, *presence*, and *power* determines whether they remain potential goods or attain full status as democratic virtues. I will consider these practices in order from most to least common—and least to most challenging—from the perspective of the specific religious public of note in my dissertation research: namely, American evangelicalism.

Participation

As Tocqueville reminds us, the most pernicious threat to the practice of democracy is perhaps also the simplest: the withdrawal of ordinary citizens from active participation in public life, often wrought by the attainment and anxious pursuit of physical prosperity, which tempts "each citizen to isolate himself from the mass and his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself" (1966 [1835/40]:506). Despite the existence of separationist tendencies among some conservative and Anabaptist varieties of evangelicalism, active participation in American public life has been an identifying characteristic of American evangelicalism (Smith et al. 1998). Still, the temptation to withdraw from public life is exacerbated among American evangelicals who, in addition to sharing with other Americans a tendency toward prosperity-focused individualism (Markofski 2015), have also developed a range of theological perspectives that encourage evangelicals to seek "purity from" the world through withdrawal from its corrupt and irredeemable political institutions (Hunter 2010). The posited general decline in American civic participation has been the topic of much public and academic debate in recent years (Putnam 2000), while evangelical backlash against the Christian Right has some observers worried about a return to mid-century evangelical quietism (Warner 2013).[9]

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[9]On the other hand, the growing number of "populist evangelicals" (Green 2014) who support faith-based political activism and policy intervention in both the social and economic arena suggests continued support for engaged public participation among American evangelicals.

Among evangelicals in Portland, however, frustration with Christian Right style political engagement has not manifested in a widespread withdrawal from public life, but rather in a new style of service-oriented public engagement that annually mobilizes 25,000 volunteers from 500 evangelical churches to participate in over 250 city-designated civic projects ranging from public school beautification and gang outreach to free medical clinics and services for the city's homeless population. Beyond its sheer magnitude and mobilizing breadth within the Portland evangelical community, this formal public partnership between city officials and evangelical leaders, organized by a locally based international evangelistic ministry under the name Serving the City, is notable for bringing together individuals and groups from opposite sides of the "culture war" divide, including members of the LGBTQ community and an openly gay mayor embroiled in scandal yet publicly supported by evangelical faith leaders. Despite generating "some interesting discussion behind the scenes" (Patrick, one of the lead organizer's of the partnership on the evangelical side), evangelical churches in the Portland area were nearly unanimous in their support for the partnership and their willingness to work with the mayor and LGBTQ community to "show that yeah, we disagree on some things, but we love each other. We don't hate each other."[10]

By all accounts, this public partnership between evangelicals and the city of Portland has exceeded expectations, generating several million dollars worth of financial donations and volunteer activity since its official launch over six years ago. But many city and public school officials were skeptical of the arrangement initially, and for good reason. One of the keys to the partnership is a strict agreement not to proselytize. In the words of one suspicious school principal with strong views on church–state separation who was ultimately won over by the initiative: "They are not in the hallways passing out tracts, they're not proselytizing, but they're simply asking, 'What do you need? And how can we help?'" (Harris 2011). Patrick agrees: "The reason this works . . . is that we've agreed to play by the rules," practicing public "service with no strings attached." If one considers the counterfactual case of evangelical nonparticipation in this particular context, the Portland evangelical community's demonstrated willingness to "play by the rules" of democratic civic engagement and work cooperatively with diverse religio-moral others to produce a range of public goods suggests that the enactment and normative valence of this mode of public participation advances the interests of ethical democracy, if but a little.

Presence

If *participation* is a baseline category of democratic virtue, the intentional practice of *presence* alongside diverse social others for the purpose of understanding and, when possible, collaboration is an even more challenging form of democratic

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[10]Patrick is a pseudonym, as are all other personal and organizational names in this paper.

civic engagement (Dillon 2010). And yet, if we pay attention to early American pragmatist champions of democracy, it is essential. "The democratic spirit," Jane Addams admonishes us, "implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy" (Addams 2002 [1902]:7). Under conditions of pervasive pluralism and inequality, ethical democracy requires that citizens actively cultivate imaginative and embodied habits of "mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another's burdens," lest "we grow contemptuous of our fellows . . . and not only tremendously circumscribe our range of life, but limit the scope of our [democratic] ethics" (Addams 2002 [1902]:7–8). While charity-driven voluntarism is ubiquitous in the contemporary evangelical field, dominant expressions of historic American evangelicalism have been far less likely to build bridges and stand side-by-side with disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups in solidary pursuit of economic and racial justice through structural transformations (Bean 2014; Lichterman et al. 2009; Smith and Emerson 2000).

But in a disadvantaged historically black neighborhood in Atlanta, a number of white evangelicals have been getting an immersive crash course in intersectional inequality through "strategic relocation"—the intentional practice of moving into disadvantaged urban contexts in order to learn from and participate with residents in projects of social empowerment and transformation. Nick, for example, left a high profile associate pastor position at a nationally prominent evangelical megachurch in the North to move to Atlanta with his family in 2007. "My understanding of systemic racial inequality, economic inequality has increased dramatically just based on living in this context," he told me, "seeing the effects of decisions that were made decades ago and how it's still all these years forward impacting the life of people now."

Working under the auspices of a venerable mixed race but majority white Christian community development corporation invited into the neighborhood by long-time residents, these families and individuals have put down deep roots: buying homes, sending their children to local public schools, participating in neighborhood association events, working in local businesses, and trying to be good neighbors. Along the way, they built a new café, family thrift store, bike shop, and co-working space employing neighborhood residents. They have also developed popular after school and summer programs for local youth, established a new multi-ethnic neighborhood church, and built or renovated over 70 neighborhood homes under various federal and private affordable home programs, opening new pathways to homeownership and cutting into the neighborhood's 25 percent stock of vacant properties.

In a neighborhood burned for generations by false promises, hit-and-run charity programs, and a long legacy of institutional racism, building trust across race and class lines is not easy. This is one reason why Alexei tells people "if you're not willing to stay at least fifteen years, just don't come." Alexei moved into the neighborhood with his young family in 2008, eventually starting a well-regarded neighborhood bike repair shop where local youth are mentored in the

art of fixing bikes, learning soft job skills, and earning work credits they use to purchase bikes for themselves. As a conspicuous minority in this overwhelmingly African American neighborhood, Alexei has learned to "feel race" in new ways, whether it be through neighborhood residents who "slow down and stare" when Alexei and his good friend Mike, an African American, talk in the street together with their children, or through the "frustrating" firsthand experience of receiving preferential treatment from police and city officials compared to his neighbors, or through the "very painful" experience of being publicly corrected for unintentionally "putting our neighborhood in a bad light" in a Facebook post. Alexei notes the challenge of building trust in a context where "before you even start talking, on your face, is the history of what white people have done to black people." "The encouragement in that," Alexei told me, recognizing the challenge of practicing ideal communication in contexts of extreme inequality, "is if you're not making constant mistakes, you're probably not trying hard enough."

The practice of *presence* with diverse social others through strategic relocation helped transform these white evangelicals' understanding of racial and economic inequality, social transformation, their faith, and the darker side of themselves: "Like Dr. Perkins says, you know, racism is an environmental issue. It's in the air, it gets on you. You've got to purposely clean yourself of it. And I've seen that's a continuous cleansing process where your own assumptions surprise you" (Alexei). It has also led them to abandon short-term, individualist, unidirectional "ministry to" or "service for" strategies of social engagement in favor of long-term, community-based, collaborative strategies built on reciprocal relationships across difference.[11]

Power

In *Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*, Jeffrey Stout follows Jane Addams in describing the "spirit of democracy" as "the disposition to care about liberty and justice for *all* and to act in ways that make this concern manifest" (2010:12). The practice of *presence* with diverse social others and the will to *participate* in democratic public life may well be, as Addams argues, the "foundation and guarantee of Democracy" (2002 [1902]:7, 11, 12), but these democratic virtues will remain impotent if those who practice them do not also find ways to build and project *power* in the stratified public arena. Here again, we find social theorists looking to civil society to ground ethical democracy: "Civil society is the site of a form of power with emancipatory potential—'social power'—rooted in the capacity of people to form associations" which expand democratic accountability over both state and market (Wright 2010:145). Still, while we may imagine an "ideal democratic public realm that fosters societal self-reflection

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[11]The practice of presence through "strategic relocation" is a hallmark of several prominent organizational networks involving American evangelicals including the Christian Community Development Association (ccda.org), the Parrish Collective (http://parishcollective.org/), and the new monasticism and early evangelical left (Markofski 2015), among many others.

and constructive conflict" (Wood 2002:131), it remains that "civil society is not some harmonious communalism," rather, it is "riven by segregations, dominations, and exploitations" (Burawoy 2005:24) that must be confronted and resisted through the exercise of power.

For contemporary American evangelicals, the idea of seeking and exercising power in the public realm is a difficult subject, fraught with ambivalence and tension. Many evangelicals have become disillusioned with idea of Christians exercising power in public life in light of the perceived overreaches of the Christian Right, seeing nothing more than a Nietzschean will to power in recent evangelical political engagement of all political persuasions (Hunter 2010). Others like Linda struggle to reconcile the idea of building and exercising power contentiously through democratic organizing with evangelical teachings on humility, peacemaking, and voluntary powerlessness in the manner of Christ. Linda is the evangelical director of a nonprofit organization in greater Los Angeles who got involved in a battle against the development of a new waste disposal facility in the poor Latino neighborhood where she worked. She attended a week of training in broad-based community organizing at the behest of Naomi, another white evangelical nonprofit leader, mother, and neighborhood resident who found herself leading the charge of "relational people power against organized money" represented by the out-of-town trash facility. Whether during organizer training events or heated personal confrontations with city officials and corporate executives of the trash facility, Linda and Naomi found themselves wrestling with internalized religious messages about humility and turning the other cheek while appropriating the organizer toolkit of self-interest, cold anger, public confrontation, and exercising power in the public arena (Warren 2001; Wood 2002).

Community organizing evangelicals negotiated these tensions in interesting ways, distinguishing between "relational power and unilateral power" (Luke, pastor) and the ends to which power is used: "It's not that Jesus wasn't powerful, it's the direction with which you're using what you have: a *power over* or a *power to* serve" (Naomi). They incorporated Christian notions of self-sacrifice and neighbor love exemplified by Christ and the Good Samaritan alongside the more traditional organizing motive of self-interest, which they interpreted through a "common good" lens akin to the Tocquevillian doctrine of enlightened self-interest (1966 [1835/1840]:526). In this way, community organizing evangelicals in greater Los Angeles sought to avoid the dual pathologies of mobilizing power for narrow sectarian interests without regard for moral and religious pluralism, on the one hand, and passivity or opposition to exercising power in the democratic public arena, on the other.

CONCLUSION

My dissertation focuses on exceptional cases (Ermakoff 2014) of evangelical public engagement: cases in which evangelicals are engaged in unusual and potentially promising efforts to promote ethical democracy in America. Empirically,

studying these exceptional cases advances sociological knowledge by focusing attention on varieties of evangelical public engagement which, until very recently, have been widely overlooked in the social-scientific literature (Markofski 2015:16–18). Exceptional cases take on added epistemic significance in light of the public sociology of religion's normative orientation, in that they call attention to new social phenomena previously overlooked due to their failure to comport with normative classificatory schemes (such as the equation of evangelicalism with conservatism) (Ermakoff 2014:1). If they are sufficiently robust and well specified, exceptional cases may then also serve as paradigmatic examples of new classes of objects (such as new evangelical strategies of democratic civic engagement) which, for both normative and analytical reasons, we may be particularly interested in (Ermakoff 2014:18; Thacher 2006).

For advocates of ethical democracy, new evangelical strategies of *participation*, *presence*, and *power* in American public life carry great significance in pointing to new evangelical practices and cultural understandings with potential to enhance ethical democracy in America. My dissertation shows white evangelicals abandoning "color-blind" and individualist interpretations of racial inequality for more critically reflexive views that support structural diagnoses and solutions to racial inequity. We see evangelicals abandoning uncritical support of the market and laissez-faire capitalism in favor of various forms of economic redistribution. We see them abandoning inflammatory rhetoric and strident opposition to the "gay agenda" in favor of reciprocal dialogue and real consideration of the democratic case for LGBTQ rights. Perhaps most importantly, we see these new evangelical practices and perspectives *emerging from learning processes within evangelical communities and contexts themselves* rather than being imposed on them by outside forces (Habermas 2006). In this way, my dissertation exemplifies the public sociology of religion by analyzing new evangelical strategies of engaging the public and the poor from the normative perspective of ethical democracy (criterion two) without thereby silencing evangelicals' own voice and contributions to the discussion of ethical democracy in America (criterion 1).

Despite its considerable strengths, the exceptional case method is not without limitations. The groups and organizations I selected for my dissertation fieldwork do not constitute "average" or "typical" expressions of American evangelicalism. Generalizing from these cases to other varieties of American evangelicalism thus requires extreme caution (Markofski 2015). However, neither are these cases singular outliers (Steensland and Goff 2014). By studying these cases, we significantly expand our understanding of the full range of evangelical public engagement and of the possibilities and limits of evangelical contributions to ethical democracy in America.

Finally, this case study points to the public sociology of religion's potential for increasing theoretical and conceptual cross-pollination between the sociology of religion subfield and the discipline at large. By focusing our investigations on the place and practice of religion in public life, we inevitably find ourselves linking up the study of religion to race, class, and gender inequality; to the understanding of various forms of power, domination, and resistance in society; and to

the study of public problems carrying wide salience among academic and extra-academic publics alike—whether those publics find religious matters to be of intrinsic personal or intellectual interest or not. In the end, it is the enduring presence, dynamism, and public impact of religion in the real world that we study which guarantees a promising future for the public sociology of religion, and with it, for the sociology of religion writ large.

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