


## Sociology as a Vocation and a Collective Enterprise: Remembering Michael Burawoy

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### Abstract

Michael Burawoy has been one of the most influential contemporary sociologists. The author of a scholarly output developed over fifty years, Burawoy innovated in ways of theorizing, field research methods, and tackling the most varied objects of study: forms of consensus in labor processes, class and race relations, major political-economic transitions, and finally modes of knowledge production. This essay is both a tribute to his great scientific testimony and an essential portrait of his sociological style, which conceives scientific work as an authentic Weberian public vocation, strongly linked to reflexivity and pluralism in the way of theorizing, capable of revising its paradigms thanks to comparative empirical research in time and space. A scientific and critical enterprise that is capable of being global, enriched by a diversity of contexts and by dialogue with critiques, a sociology that, in order to account for the complexity of the real, has proposed itself on many occasions as a collective work.

**Keywords:** Michael Burawoy; public sociology; theorizing; critique; collective intellectual.

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## 1 Introduction

Prolific scholar, rigorous researcher, charismatic teacher, overwhelming scientific and cultural organizer, public intellectual: Michael Burawoy has been one of the most influential contemporary sociologists. The author of a scholarly output developed over fifty years, Burawoy innovated in ways of theorizing, field research methods, and tackling the most varied objects of study: forms of consensus in labor processes, class and race relations, major political-economic transitions, and finally modes of knowledge production.

Maintaining a direct link between theory and observation in the field, in recent decades he launched a movement of reflection on the practice of research called “public sociology”, one that both took on classic issues between theory and praxis and provided proposals for innovation that have been widely debated — to the extent that more than 20 symposia have discussed those proposals in countries around the world.

Remembering his contributions is as difficult as it is important. We could say that in Burawoy a dialectic is evident between a tendency toward persistence — especially in his constant confrontation with the Marxist tradition — and one toward innovation — in his integration of up-to-date paradigms and conceptual innovations for explaining real-world problems.

His way of understanding sociology as a scientific and public vocation is strongly linked to reflexivity and pluralism in the way of theorizing, capable of revising its paradigms thanks to comparative empirical research in time and space. A scientific and critical enterprise that is capable of being global, enriched by a diversity of contexts and by dialogue with critiques; a sociology that, in order to account for the complexity of the real, has proposed itself on many occasions as a collective work.

## 2 A Dialogic Style

Burawoy's sociology, as is often mentioned, starts from a Marxist perspective learned in a post-colonial transitional context such as Zambia, where his first empirical inquiry documents how class and race affect employment relations. From a variety of interests — related to social anthropology, labour studies and class analysis — Burawoy begins to develop a link between a way of theorizing and empirical research in a manner that is anything but linear. As a young British graduate he turns indeed to sociology from a background in mathematics and with an initial very “policy-oriented” outlook that he, in his own memories, calls naïve (Burawoy, 2021, p. viii). It is the Zambian moment that leads him toward a growing vision of sociology as a scientific tool that unveils power relations and problematizes real, existing conditions. His is almost a conversion that in addition to the renewal of a Marxist approach — never merely exegetical or dogmatic — is proposed in several passages as a testimony to a deep scientific vocation in the wake of the famous Weberian lesson (Weber, 1919).

The originality of his contribution lies in encountering the discipline and refining his tools in very different contexts — first Zambia, then the United States — and advancing an idea of sociology that explores real contexts and confronts their diversity in the field. This style underlies not only his contribution from within the International Sociological Association or the journal *Global Dialogue*, but his entire scholarship. Whether it was the major social transformations in Zambia, South Africa, the U.S., Hungary, or Russia, Burawoy had some constant research problems — processes of domination and the possibilities for emancipation, forms of coercion and strategies of resistance — that he was able to renew through rich empirical work

and conceptual sources, returning time and again to the places where he had been, rereading and revisiting his ideas as processes changed and debates evolved.

His was a style characterized by a deep theoretical knowledge developed throughout his biography through a constant use of the classics of sociology, reinterpreted and updated in light of the results of his field research.

This development is also explicit in the conclusions of the book *Public Sociology* (2021), one of his last works, released at the height of the pandemic, and that can be considered his summa:

Those who worship science for its own sake, who rely on data — big or small, quantitative or qualitative — also make important contributions — but all too often they lose sight of why sociology came into the world. I turned Alfred North Whitehead's claim that "a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost" on its head. Sociology is at risk of disappearing into a welter of positivism, a minor branch of economics or political science, if we lose sight of our founders. We will be left scattered among the fashions and the fads of the day (p. 210)

One of the most distinctive features of Burawoy's style has been indeed his sincere interest in dialogue and debate with positions often opposed to, or alternative to, his own. This can be seen in his proposal of unusual conversations — real and somewhat imagined — between seemingly different theorists — Skocpol and Trocki, Gramsci and Bourdieu, just to name a few — and relating theories and methods considered irreconcilable, such as, in the early 1970s, Marxism and ethnography.

In *Ethnography Unbound* (Burawoy et al., 1991) — one of several books written with his students — he illustrates how theory is always a tool open to revision in light of evidence that emerges in reality:

instead of proving a theory by corroboration or forsaking a theory because it faces falsification, our preferred approach is to improve theories by turning anomalies into exemplars. In a sense we take Popper to his logical conclusion. Instead of abandoning theory when it faces refutation, we try to "refute the refutation" by making our theory stronger (p. 12).

The very reading of Karl Popper's epistemology quoted here — that nothing could seem further from his approach — is emblematic of his style. It is precisely disagreement that gives rise to debate, and it is in addressing it in the right way that innovation arises. In this Popperian passage, it is clear how serious and close confrontation with a different position is dialectically productive, and it is precisely behind the contradiction that discovery lies.

This is due to a way of proposing a sociology in line with the most elaborate and modern points of the critical tradition, which tests paradigms in the light of empirical work, and which does not close itself off in a monopolistic "critique" of a few, restricted paradigms but, on the contrary, proposes new ones as a result of confrontation with other traditions.

Examples of his ability to discuss and assimilate styles and influences in new ways can be found in several passages of his work. His attempt to revitalize the ethnographic tradition of the Chicago school — at the very time when the university itself was becoming one of the main sites of analytical Marxism — occurs by using its methods to study the question of power and domination in American factories.<sup>1</sup> And so, his initial Marxism assimilated in a postcolonial

1. *Manufacturing Consent* (Burawoy, 1979) is Burawoy's first ethnographic analysis of labour processes at the Allied Corporation, a factory producing agricultural equipment. It is one of the rare cases of a re-visiting of a site already investigated by industrial sociologist Donald Roy almost thirty years earlier (Roy, 1959).

context is renewed by fully confronting that tradition and the analytical perspectives of Adam Przeworski.<sup>2</sup>

Even more recently, his indefatigable theoretical curiosity brought him to renew the sociological canon with the rediscovery of William E.B. Du Bois. Debating his contribution as a global social theorist of modernity means, for Burawoy, also warning against processes of uncritical canonization (Meghji et al., 2024).

Burawoy's way of doing sociology means, then, continually revisiting itself, not least and most importantly through what appear to be real conversations, as if there were no break between imaginary ones — with classic authors of the past — and the real ones conducted with current students, colleagues, and actors in the field. This style is well summarized in a book that gathered a series of lectures held at the University of Witwatersrand and where every chapter, dedicated to a key sociological problem, is introduced as a conversation with a key theorist (Burawoy & Von Holdt, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Theorizing: Between Reflexivity and Pluralism

In various passages in his texts, Burawoy mentions the importance of theorizing and elucidates its meaning. If in his words “without theory we are blind, we cannot see the world” (Burawoy, 2009), theoretical work is, however, never understood as a linear path. This way of viewing theorizing as a form of reflection open to revisions and surprising outcomes is also evoked in several biographical passages. Following Charles Wright Mills, biography and history are for Burawoy the two levels within which sociology moves, and also reflects the dilemmas, challenges, and uncertainties of both. And it is precisely from the reconstruction of scientific dilemmas that, often in autobiographical and reflexive form, Burawoy shows the evolution of his own theories and research problems, reinterpreted in light of the obstacles initially present.

The opening of *Public Sociology* (Burawoy, 2021) is symptomatic of his theoretical style, which is anything but monolithic, and starts with a quotation from Max Weber to illustrate the tension between the empirical world and one's normative orientation: “Man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible” (Weber, 1958, p. 128 [1919]).

From the classical German sociologist, Burawoy originally incorporates several categories, from political sociology and methodology, including the lessons on science and politics as *Beruf* — profession and vocation (Weber, 1919). But to the two classic Weberian lectures Burawoy also adds an original variation that does not resolve itself into a cold and disenchanted detachment. His sociology seeks observant and participatory immersion with investigated publics

2. Despite the fact that Burawoy's proposal is quite different and, in many respects, radically alternative, the intensity of his confrontation with analytical Marxism can be discerned in various aspects. First, Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* goes beyond Braverman's thesis by considering the role of the State in capitalist factory regimes, thus assimilating a key Gramscian dimension learned from Przeworski. Second, another crucial aspect is his constant dialogue with Erik Olin Wright, who has left, in addition to interesting joint essays, debates open to revisions that are anything but formal or reassuring, with some even hinting of disillusionment. Wright wrote a special dedication to Burawoy in his book *Class Counts* (Wright, 1997): “See what has become of revolutionary dialectics”, testifying to a partial abandonment of Marxist theses developed over a decade of research on class stratification (cited in Burawoy, 2020).
3. Every chapter is presented as an encounter between a social theorist and Bourdieu (Marx, Gramsci, Fanon, Freire, Beauvoir, Mills) and followed by Karl Von Holdt's essays. Interestingly, the book starts with a “Bourdieu meets Bourdieu” and ends with a “Burawoy meets Bourdieu”, a summa of Burawoy's conversational and reflexive style.

while also suggesting, in addition to the scientific contribution, a contribution to emancipatory transformation. This means first and foremost that participation cannot be decoupled from a deep scientific understanding of problems, just as the critical posture is never merely denunciation but, reinterpreting Marx's *Eleventh Thesis* on Feuerbach, it must first investigate contradictions in order to overcome them.

This is why, despite the persistence of dialogue with a Marxian toolbox, there is always a heterodox willingness in Burawoy to innovate and try to see new things by looking at even the most unusual intellectual contributions as it has been mentioned also by Ruth Milkman, one of his first students (Milkman, 2025).

Although he conceives the relation with theory as a sympathetic activity with the Marxist and ethnographic traditions, it does not mean that in the relation with real world problems these two traditions should avoid dialectical tensions. This point is made clear in several passages of his work — and particularly in his methodological summa, *The Extended Case Method* (Burawoy, 2009): “too often Marxism is trapped in the clouds, just as ethnography can be glued into the ground” (p. 8).

The originality and innovation of his research is indeed an effect of this perspective that privileges two levels of reflexivity: that of theory and that of the real actors who experience situations and contexts.

Again, the same concepts and theoretical approaches are addressed and debated often dialectically in the form of dialogues. As an example, to study revolutionary processes, the positive science of comparative sociologist Theda Skocpol is discussed together with Lev Trotsky, re-animated as a public ethnographer and, despite direct participation in events, reinterpreted as an exponent of a reflexive science (Burawoy, 2009).

Instead, the theory of domination in Bourdieu — revised thanks to the intercession of Loïc Wacquant — is brought into dialogue with that of Gramsci — which he had studied through the intellectual mediation of Adam Przeworski — in a dialectic that privileges a new way of looking at the relations between consent and emancipation, symbolic domination and resistance.

An approach that is visible even in the most direct interventions to current events, such as in the 2014 Presidential Address of the International Sociological Association, where a Polanyian reading of the waves of commodification of Neoliberalism starts by placing two authors such as Pope Francis and Thomas Piketty in dialogue in a very unusual way.<sup>4</sup>

In the open-ended character of his sociology, the position of the researcher who wants to account for real problems must be able to navigate the frictions of the social world — whether they are merely theoretical or political — and rather than seeking certainties, questioning anomalies, accounting for contradictions, and being open to the unexpected.

## 4 Research as a Collective Enterprise

If this way of doing sociology gives relevance to the challenges and pitfalls that characterize any authentic research experience, both in theoretical and empirical dilemmas on the field, contrary to the Weberian lesson — which excludes providing dimensions of hope — and beyond its methodological individualism, in Burawoy there is an important centrality given to a “com-

4. The first having published *Laudato Si'* — encyclical on the environmental crisis (Pope Francis, 2015) — the other a book on capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Piketty, 2013).

munity of meaning” in which to share problems and participate in knowledge production in the form of a collective enterprise.

Burawoy's is indeed an account of collective work comparable in some ways to Gramsci's understanding of the Italian Communist Party — the collective intellectual and the “Modern Prince” described in the *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971) — or even more so to Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the experience of research. For the French sociologist, the collective work of research was nothing but the most modern way of accounting for the complexity of contemporary problems, as much as the modern way of critiquing and intervening on them (Bourdieu, 2001). Thus, Michael Burawoy's way of doing sociology is also conceived and organized as a collective enterprise and work.

In two Berkeley seminars in particular, a specific feature of the way research is done emerges in close connection with the art of teaching. Burawoy reinterprets a Clausewitzian expression to communicate this idea: “Teaching is research through other means”.

If *Public Sociology* opens with a special dedication — “For all the students that taught me so much” (Burawoy, 2021) — both *Ethnography Unbound* (1991) and *Global Ethnographies* (2000) are the outcome of research developed from long conversations and debates, peer review and collective writing with students at UC Berkeley. His seminars are thus an authentic epistemic community that socializes not only questions, problems, and results, but also surprising — and in some cases, daunting — facts.

In the last phase, the reflexivity that Burawoy developed and theorized over decades in several workplaces all around the world leads him to investigate his own workplace, the university, the institution that, par excellence, should produce critical and authoritative knowledge. After defining in Gramscian terms the university as the new “Modern Prince”, struggling for autonomy from neoliberal commodification and marketization — a reinterpretation of Polanyi's work — Burawoy's latest work has been dedicated to “The Extractive University” project born in 2020, as a research collective investigating the growing logics of commodification and exploitation that invade knowledge workers today.

Work still ongoing despite the untimely tragic death of Michael Burawoy. An event that took away from the world of sociology a great interpreter of the present time and an indefatigable intellect who could still have done so much in terms of providing new tools for producing knowledge and for the critique of the world's distortions.

A sociologist that never gave up combining rigor in the analysis of the current state of the world with the liberating lenses of the sociological imagination, and that in reconstructing a critical theory of actually existing conditions, always taught how vocation must always attempt to productively reimagine itself with utopia, raising the bar of the possible.

Yet, those who knew him, from close friends or students down to those who enjoyed even a few exchanges, cannot but remember that deep gaze of sincere and earnest curiosity for the other. A posture inseparable from that passionate and impassioned smile of a man who not only makes his profession a way of life, a habit, but one who cares about dialogue and debate. One of the rare persons and scholars who, deeply committed to changing the world, was able to change the people that had the privilege to meet him and to debate with him.





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