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Michael Burawoy on Sociology and the Workplace

One of the most important sociologists teaching and researching today, Michael Burawoy has lived a most unusual life for an academic – he’s worked in various parts of the world, in copper mines and a furniture factory: he’s been a machine operator and a steel worker. His aim has been to critique capitalism and to understand the experience and behavior of workers – from observing them close-up.

David Edmonds: The topic we’re talking about today is sociology and the workplace. Can you sketch out a bit about your research.

Michael Burawoy: Yes. My life as an industrial sociologist, as I call myself, begins in 1968. I got involved in studying the Zambian copper industry, and from Zambia I took a job in South Chicago as an, well, unskilled but officially semi-skilled machine operator. And then I got interested in studying what it was like to be a machine operator, and then a steel worker in Hungary. And after that I went off to Russia and there I began working in a furniture factory. And then as often happened after my research, the country collapsed -- or the Soviet Union as it was then collapsed -- and I followed those workers I had been working with for the next 10 or 12 years.

David Edmonds: Let’s take those one at a time. Zambia -- what were you doing in the copper mines?

Michael Burawoy: Yeah, good question. I was there in Zambia from '68 to 1972. This was four years after independence and I took a job in the industry, in management, to see how the copper industry which was run by two big multinational corporations, was responding to the post-colonial government in Zambia. I was very lucky I got a position in the Personnel Research Unit and I had a master's degree from Cambridge. So I became an indispensable technician in the construction of a single wage structure integrating both the black and the white wage structures. So I began to be interested covertly - it was unethical project, you might argue - it was a project to understand what was happening to the color bar in post-colonial Zambia, the color-bar being the rule that governed the workplace in colonial Zambia and other parts of Africa whereby no white ever received any orders from any black, so what happened to the racial order in the copper industry in post-colonial Zambia.

David Edmonds: So you were sort of working there undercover. You were not there doing an official academic study?

Michael Burawoy: No, I definitely was not. I was there as a technician, it turned out, who became very useful to them. But in return I was able to find out all sorts of things about this covert project ...

David Edmonds: Which you wrote up?

Michael Burawoy: ... which I wrote up. And then there was an issue whether I should publish it or not. I mean I was outraged because, of course, my discovery was that the color bar was being maintained so that when Zambians were promoted into expatriate or white positions, the erstwhile white employee was promoted into a newly created position. So that maintained all sorts of organizational manipulations that retained the color-bar.

So that's what I wrote about and I tried to explain this in terms of the interests of the corporation and the companies, the interest of managers (white managers as they were then) the interests of the Zambian post-colonial state, the interests of the workers. The workers were not particularly interested in Zambian-ization and the creation of new *petite bourgeois* Zambian class. They were interested in improved working conditions or improved wages. White managers wanted to keep their jobs.

And the crucial player in all of this was the government. And the government felt "let sleeping dogs lie. We're making a lot of money after all." At that time, 95 percent of the foreign revenue came from the copper industry. So they thought, "OK, as long as Zambians are being promoted, we're not going to worry about the color-bar."

David Edmonds: And from Zambia to Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in the United States.

Michael Burawoy: Yes. Well, I went to United States to do my PhD because I thought that the sociology that I was being taught in Zambia where I got my first degree in socio-anthropology, the sociological theory about development came from the United States and was really not the sort of framework that I was particularly sympathetic to. We missed the sort of class analysis that I have been undertaking. So off I went to Chicago, to the heartland of conservative sociology, hoping to actually engage these sociologists about the character of what was called then the "Third World" and now we call "Global South."

But when I arrived at the Committee on New Nations as it was called, they had already disbanded. Nobody was interested in Africa. So I felt, "Well, I'd better take on this people in their own backyard." So I took a job in a South Chicago factory as a semi-skilled machine operator with a view to understanding the experience of workers on the shop floor but through a Marxist's perspective.

David Edmonds: And this time it was transparent that you were there as a researcher. You weren't trying to hide anything. They knew what you were doing.

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Michael Burawoy: Yes, that was exactly the case. I told management and I told my fellow workers. I was there to study the workplace and to understand their experiences. They, however, were not the slightest bit interested in why I was there: they saw me as trouble because I so endangered their life by my incompetence. And, indeed, in many occasions I could've actually killed myself or others.

David Edmonds: Were you interested in both class and race, as they overlapped there?

Michael Burawoy: That's an interesting question. I was interested in a number of issues. The main concern was something I discovered as soon as I arrived on the shop floor, namely, why were people working so hard? There doesn't seem to be a good reason. Industrial sociology had until that time always ask the question: Why are workers so lazy? Why do they restrict output? And I thought the opposite and, in fact, these people were working extraordinarily hard. Why were they delivering so much effort for so little reward?

So I developed an understanding of the way consent was organized on the shop floor. The book that emerged from this was called 'manufacturing consent.' And when I argued, vis-a-vis race, because I was always on shift, second shift, and probably half of the workers were actually African-American and half were actually white, I argued that race did not matter on the shop floor.

The way that work was organized, the way that politics was organized on the shop floor, the way the internal labor bargain was organized was to actually push aside race and to constitute individuals as industrial citizens with rights and obligations. Everybody was telling jokes, racial jokes, but the point about the racial joke was to say, "Look, race is not important here, but it is important outside."

David Edmonds: From southern Chicago to Eastern Europe, to Hungary and to Russia!

Michael Burawoy: Right. So the argument I was making was that there was what I called the hegemonic organization of work that was characteristic of advanced capitalism, particularly where trade unions were strong. The issue was not to coerce people to work hard but to organize their consent. So people argued against me saying, "No, Michael. You're wrong. This is not a function of capitalism. This is a function of industrialism." So I took that argument seriously and said, "OK, we must compare what was happening in South Chicago with a non-capitalist society."

So, at that time the Solidarity movement emerged in 1980-81 in Poland and many of us were transfixed by these working class movements. So I started learning Polish to get ready to go to Poland. But as academics are always behind the time, it takes them forever, by the time I was ready that was the end of the Solidarity movement. And so one of my friends, said, "OK,

Michael, why don't you come to Hungary?" He had been in exile for five or six years. He said, "Why don't you come back with me?"

So I went to Hungary and it was an amazing 10 days of my life. It was 1982. What was amazing was in Hungary, which, of course, was a socialist country then, the sociologists were interested in very similar things to myself – labor markets, organization of work – and I felt, well, this will be a great place to do research. This was a relatively open period in Hungary's history. And so until 1988-89 I got a series of jobs there, starting in a champagne factory, then a little textile factory in a rural area. In the summer of '84 I managed to get a job in a machine shop. So I was able to compare a machine shop in South Chicago and this place in Hungary.

The question was: How is work organized differently? What is the consciousness of workers?

David Edmonds: Were there similarities with Chicago?

Michael Burawoy: There were a lot of similarities. What was amazing about the comparison was the machinery was very similar and they were both machine shops organized on a piece rate payment system. But what was interesting is that in South Chicago there was a certain employment security, it was not easy to fire people, and – what was even more important – there was an income security. There was always a minimum wage that you were guaranteed no matter how little work you did whereas in Hungary the workers were paid literally according to the piece rate system. There was actually probably greater *job* security in Hungary than in South Chicago but it was much more *wage* insecurity, which led people to work actually harder. The mythology of the time was the one right that the socialist workers retain is the right not to work hard, but that was not my experience.

David Edmonds: And I understand that you worked in the steel industry in Hungary as well?

Michael Burawoy: That's exactly right, yes. I came very lucky. I dreamt of actually getting this job in the steel mill because on my way to the machine shop in Eger I always have to pass through [Miskolc](#), which was where the Lenin Steel Works was. And anyway, through a complicated set of relations I managed to get a job as a furnace man, which is at the heart of the steel enterprise. I dreamt of having this job because the steelworker is the prototypical socialist worker.

But one of the most interesting things I found was the ways in which the steelworker's consciousness was shaped by the workplace in opposition to the ruling ideology. The ruling ideology in state socialism was the claim that state socialism delivered a society that was egalitarian, that was just and efficient and the workers, just shook their heads: this is a society that is unjust, inequalitarian, and above all very inefficient.

So they would critique the dominant ideology of the party state and the local representatives of the party state for not delivering socialism, so there was what we call in sociology an "imminent

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critique," that the party state was not delivering on its promises. In a sense, the consciousness of the workers was socialist by virtue of the country not delivering socialism.

David Edmonds: And this you identified through conversations over lunch in the middle of the shift?

Michael Burawoy: Conversations, but also practices. One of the early days of my time in the steel mill was when the prime minister came. The prime minister was going to come and visit the steel mill and I was in the October Revolution Socialist Brigade. We had to do a Saturday shift, it's sort of an equivalent in socialism of taxation, and we had to paint the steel mill. I mean it's a ridiculous idea to paint the steel mill.

So I was working with my fellow workers but I couldn't find a new paint brush and they were painting the slag doors in green and yellow, totally absurd. I got hold of a paint brush and found some black paint. And so I started painting the shovels which is a very important tool of the furnace man, the essential tool, I painted them black. And the supervisor came out. "What the hell are you doing, Mishi (they called me)?" I said, "Well, I'm trying to build socialism." And everybody collapsed with laughter.

And the wit of the October Revolution Socialist Brigade said, "Mishi, Mishi, you are not building socialism. You are painting socialism and you are painting it black at that." This idea of painting socialism was not just something people talked about but it was actually in the practice; a whole set of rituals in which one sort of pretended socialism was this Nirvana on earth. At the same time workers realized that this was a ridiculous charade.

David Edmonds: So the final stop on our travel itinerary is Russia, or then the Soviet Union.

Michael Burawoy: Yes, I was in Hungary until 1988-89. And finally it dawned on me that this is coming to an end. There was a moment that I thought that this end might have been a transition from a state socialism to a democratic socialism, which I thought had been the imagination of the Solidarity movement itself. But it was a flicker of a possibility that rapidly disappears and the transition was clearly going to be from state socialism to some form of capitalism, and I was not interested in that transition.

So I thought I would try to make my move to Russia, which was at that time still the Soviet Union and it was about the only time it was conceivable that I could work as I work around the shop floor. So this was at the beginning of 1991. By August 1991, basically it was the failed counter-coup, Yeltsin on the tank, and by the end of '91 there was no Soviet Union.

But in those six, seven months I was able to, first of all, observe very closely a rubber factory in Moscow where there was a civil war taking place between those who were representing the old order of the Soviet Union and the planned economy on the one side, and the young Turks who were representing the market economy and the independence of Russia from the Soviet Union.

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I've never seen anything like it in my life. Daily warfare within management and it embraced all the workers in this very famous rubber factory. Then I moved far north into the Arctic Circle near the Republic of Komi, where I worked in a furniture factory as a semi-skilled operator. There I really saw the true socialist workplace. Hungary was relatively efficient. In fact, I often argued that the Hungarian factory was more efficient than the one in south Chicago. But in Russia it was a very different story. The shortages were really quite severe. So it meant there was a lot of shock work. For part of the month, there was no work. And then the last three or four days of the month you have to make up for the lost time.

David Edmonds: You've obviously had an amazing career. And fascinating experiences in different workplaces. When you go there, you're not going there looking at the workplace through neutral eyes, you're going there with a Marxist perspective aren't you. And I just wondered whether that affects what you see?

Michael Burawoy: Well, I am definitely going with a Marxist perspective and it definitely affects what I look for. But it doesn't necessarily affect what I actually see. In all these workplaces, I was often faced with lots of surprises. I was not expecting to find people working so hard in South Chicago. I was not expecting the reproduction of the color bar in Zambia. I certainly wasn't expecting the Hungarian workplace to be an efficient workplace.

So I have a perspective and I have certain expectations that come with that perspective. But very often those expectations are violated which leads me to reconstruct the theory and that's how the Marxist theory of the workplace proceeds through the ways in which it is shown to be at odds with reality, through the anomalies that challenge the framework.

David Edmonds: But it's never led you to question the framework itself?

Michael Burawoy: Now that's an interesting question. The most radical challenge to my Marxist framework came in the post-Soviet Russian experience when I was following these workers that I had been working with who then lost their jobs in a period of extraordinary decline through the 1990s. And there was no work. So the Marxist perspective I had developed which was production based really didn't give much insight into what was going on.

What was really the dynamics of post-Soviet Russia revolved around the marketplace, around market relations, relations of exchange, and not relations of production. So I had to really shift my framework and at that point I became very much entranced by the work of Karl Polanyi in a book called [*The Great Transformation*](#) which focuses much more on processes of commodification rather than production.

David Edmonds: Do you see your project, if that's not to grand a word for it, a being essentially a descriptive one or do you have a normative agenda? Do you want to change things, improve things for the workers?

Michael Burawoy: Yeah, I don't think there's any doubt about that. The Marxist framework that I come with is concerned with the experience that workers have of exploitation understood in the very technical sense of the product of the work being appropriated from the worker and the worker being left sometimes with a subsistence wage, sometimes less than a subsistence wage, sometimes with no wage at all.

In Russia they were working and they were not getting anything for it. You can't do sociology without having a normative framework. It's what drives all our theoretical frameworks whether they are Durkheimian, Weberian, or Marxist.

David Edmonds: You're not an activist though. So how would your work promote the change you'd like to see?

Michael Burawoy: No, I am not an activist. I definitely was not an activist, for example, in South Chicago. There, I was trying to build a Marxist theory that would displace sociology. In those days the resurgence of Marxism within sociology, within academia was aimed at the displacement of the reigning mainstream sociology. And I think we made, looking back on it, amazing headway. But the idea was very naïve. The idea was that somehow the displacement of reigning sociology would have itself consequences.

David Edmonds: You're very unusual in that you've totally immersed yourself in the workplace. Often it must have been strange for your fellow workers to have you there. Was the fact that you were observing what they were doing changing the nature of what they were doing?

Michael Burawoy: No way. The way I do ethnography, you call it "total immersion." It is total immersion but it is quite an interventionist mode of engagement. So I would go into the workplace and actually try to provoke crises, not huge ones but little ones.

When I was in South Chicago I would go around the workplace asking people "Why are you working so hard?" and they would get furious because they don't believe that they are working so hard - which is very, very clever on the part of management. And so they would get very, very annoyed and the responses were very interesting. And Hungary similarly, just my very foreign presence would be sort of a provocation, but that is not to say that I was actually shaping or reshaping in any way the workplace.

The workplace has an obduracy that was quite far beyond any of my interventions. I had no intention in my workplace studies to change anything. The disruptions I created were of a very small scale in character but very crucial to my understanding of the processes that I was observing. You need to shake a social system a little bit to understand really what holds it together.

David Edmonds: It sounds like you're describing the work of an ethnographer or an anthropologist. You call yourself a sociologist. To what extent do you see yourself as interdisciplinary, drawing on these other disciplines?

Michael Burawoy: Yeah, when I was trained as an anthropologist as well as a sociologist, I've always been committed to the ethnographic approach to doing research. Studying other people in their space and their time, I am quite open to drawing on different disciplines. I do this regularly whether it be anthropology, whether it's human geography, whether it's economics.

However, I am a sociological chauvinist. I do believe in the specificity of sociology as a discipline. I think this is particularly important in this era of what I call 'third wave marketization' and the people call neoliberalism. This is a period in which state and economy collaborate in an offensive against civil society and those institutions or organizations and social movements, they are not part of the market or part of the state. And I think the sociologist's standpoint is actually the standpoint of civil society. We study the economy, we study the state from the standpoint of its effects on civil society.

And in that sense sociology is very different from economics, which is interested in the promotion of the market, and different from political science, which is interested in the promotion of political order. Now let me say, it's very important, that I'm not denying that there are dissident economists, dissident political scientists, very important figures who are contesting the mainstream character of those disciplines. However, the central feature of sociology is indeed to contest the overextension of the markets and the overextension of the state and as such plays an incredibly important role today.

David Edmonds: Presumably that's where your work can go now, because you've been studying the industrial working classes. In the developed world, the industrial working classes are, if not quite an extinct species then an endangered species, and it could be said that your work belongs in the past.

Michael Burawoy: Yes, indeed, my work is done in the past. My friends would laugh at me when I would move from one apparently extinct industry to another. But many of the principles I developed and many of the ideas I developed and many of these methodologies I developed for those industries are applicable to contemporary workplaces. So, for example, the idea that one should not just look at the work process as a set of relations that produce things but also one should look at the work process as a place of politics, as a place of regulating relations. Relations in the workplace are regulated sometimes coercively, sometimes through organizing consent. And the idea of actually studying the workplace through ethnographic methods, through being there working alongside people, is also something that can be transmitted and is re-enacted in the contemporary workplace.