

Interview

Manufacturing Consent: A Concern That Lasted 40 Years. Interview with Michael Burawoy¹

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Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* is a must-have book for all those, who, like me, study the so-called "Labour World," particularly what happens within factories. However, Michael Burawoy is much more than the author of that enlightening book.

Born in Manchester in a Jewish family of Russian origin, he has been trying to understand how consent is organized among the dominated for the last 40 years. That was the issue he dealt with in Zambia in 1968, during the post-colonial process, when he got a job in the copper industry and discovered the articulations between the factory regime and racial segregation. From that experience emerged *The Color of Class on the Copper Mines: From African Advancement to Zambianization* (1972).

In 1974, it prevailed again as a concern when, already having become a sociologist, he was employed as a metalworker worker on the outskirts of Chicago and conducted the ethnography that is the basis of *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process in the Monoplist Capitalism* (1982). This work allowed him to consolidate the idea that it is impossible to

understand what happens in the work place without establishing the relationship between that space and the political-economic context in which it is placed, giving rise to the concept of "Political Regime of Production" that would be deepened in the books *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes Under Capitalism and Socialism* (1985) and *The Radiant Past. Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism* (1994), based on a comparison between his experience as a worker in Chicago and his experience in Hungary in the 1980s, while this country was under the Soviet orbit.

And it was to explore that idea that he decided to do field work in a factory in Russia in the early 1990's, when the capitalist restoration began. But that same concern was what led him to adopt Marxism as his theoretical point of view and ethnography as his research method, developing a series of theoretical-methodological discussions that can be found in books such as *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition* (1997), or *Sociological Marxism* (2000), written with Eric Olin Wright. In short, Michael Burawoy is a *rara avis* of the American academy: a teacher who walks through classrooms openly calling for a rebuilding of Marxism, a researcher who holds a methodological battle to the death against

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inductivism and a sociologist who proposes to rethink the idea of the organic intellectual relating the sociology with anti-capitalist movements.

In March 2018, Burawoy was invited by Indiana University, Bloomington campus, to give a lecture entitled “Marxism engages Bourdieu.” I was there carrying out a research stay at the History Department. Chance caused that, for the first time, I had the possibility of personally listening to someone who had been inspiring for my own ethnographic work. From that first meeting, other subsequent meetings emerged, the result of which is this interview I conducted in his office at the Berkeley University.

Paula Varela: How did you get to enter as a metalworker in the Allied Corporation in Chicago?

Michael Burawoy: What essentially happened was that I was supposed to go back to England after doing my MFA in the University of Zambia. But I didn’t go to England but to the United States which I remembered to be very exciting during my stay there in 1967/1968. I can give a rationalization of why Chicago, but actually it was the one place that accepted me. So I took it and I landed there and, of course, nobody was really interested in Africa when I arrived because Africa was not going the way that they wanted and they had all sorts of explanations for this, about a whole cultural character, which was precisely the sort of theory I was very much opposed to. This was 1972, [Andre] Gunder Frank had already written his articles on development and underdevelopment (Gunder Frank 1966) based on his work on Latin America, which was quite big and had become quite influential in Africa as well as [Franz] Fanon who was trying to understand colonialism through a Marxist lens. This was just the opposite of the sort of argument being made in the United States about the sort of cultural unpreparedness of Africans.

So I thought, “Okay, now I would sort of take them on their own doorstep.” So I went and worked in a factory. Of course I had been interested in industrial sociology in Zambia, but there was now already a Marxist question when I did it: How to make sense of the actual lived experience of workers in a capitalist so-called factory? And, of course, this was an interesting time because this was a time of the renaissance of Marxism, particularly influenced by French Marxism,

French structuralism. And Chicago was not, of course, the heart of Marxism. It was quite the opposite.

But there was this Polish guy in the Political Science Department, Adam Przeworski that had just come back from Paris and was “full of Marxism.” I learned my Gramsci from him, a particular vision of Gramsci. And I suppose that led me to begin to think about “I’m an ethnographer, that’s what I have, that’s how I do the work and how to take these ideas to understand the nature of that working class in the US.” So I entered the factory in 1974. Chicago had this history of ethnography and there had been ethnographies of the workplace. But there were very few ethnographies at that time; the whole tradition had been somewhat abandoned. And I was quite hostile to that whole project of ethnography as it would have been in Chicago because they made a fetish of boundaries. They tried to enclose communities, whether it be through some sort of the railroads or some sort of part. Anyway, they were always trying to enclose that as if it were a village and they could enclose the village.

Now, the Manchester School, which was the anthropology I studied in Zambia, had already said in the 1950s: “Look, you can’t enclose the village, never mind a factory,” and they had asked, “How are we going to study industry with our ethnographic method?” And so they developed this idea of the *Extended Case Method*, which is what I subsequently developed, changing it. Because they were very inductive about it, they were often again materialist Marxists, they didn’t go around calling themselves Marxists, but actually their analysis was a sort of class analysis. Of course, the category class does not appear except, I should be fair, in this one famous book written by a fellow called William Kornblum, *Blue Collar Community* (1975), that did look at the ethnic divisions within this community of steel workers. But there was very little of this analysis and so I decided that I had to try to bring Marxism to the Chicago experience because there were no Marxists really around, except Adam Przeworski, who became very important in my intellectual development. But he thought I was crazy, because he had this macro vision of politics and he was interested in, basically, why socialists never really made it into power through electoral politics and the way electoral politics disorganizes the working class. So he couldn’t understand what I was

doing working in a factory. But anyway, I did it. And I took basically these French Marxists, I took Poulantzas, Althusser and Gramsci into the factory.

PV: It's not very usual the mix between Gramsci and Althusser in the way you did it.

MB: Well there are many connections between them. The most obvious connection is that Althusser was already talking about Ideological State Apparatuses and that was a sort of Gramsci idea to see the State as an ideological formation as one and the same political coercive one. And Gramsci was very focused, unlike many Marxists, on the lived experience of workers and peasants, and so he had a whole analysis of good sense and common sense. And Althusser had something similar: he talked about the importance of ideology understood not as a set of representations or ideas, but as a lived experience. And under capitalism that lived experience mystifies the existence of exploitation, the commodity's fetishism as another lived experience. So this is a very Althusserian view of ideology.

Now I think actually that the French structuralists, Poulantzas, Balibar, Althusser, they were all very Gramscian and they knew it and so they all attack Gramsci for being a historicist (you know, this idea that you have this stage-like theory of the development of class), but most of their ideas can be found in Gramsci in my view. What I'm saying now seems obvious to me and I guess I must have been influenced by Przeworski who also saw this close connection. But it's even closer than he presented it. I don't know if it's a French style, but basically, if you find somebody actually has similar ideas to yourself, then you attack them, rather than build on them, and that's what happened to Gramsci. They took his ideas and then attacked him. Later Bourdieu does something very similar. So I think there's a close connection between Gramsci's ideas about the State and the Marxism debated in France in the nineteen sixties and seventies.

But most of them don't do such empirical ethnographic work. That was something new in my work. Of course, there were people in England who did ethnographies within a Gramscian framework though they were less explicit about it. Somebody like Paul Willis whose studies in education had a very similar framework; he's very influenced by Gramscian ideas.

Stuart Hall is obviously another one very influenced by Gramsci. They wouldn't find it so strange that there will be ethnographies of communities or workplaces with a Gramscian framework. In France they probably would. And in the United States, for a different reason, they were too: because of this love of the Chicago school that is so inductive and this idea that you don't bring theory to the ethnography, this idea that Marxism probably wouldn't do much of an ethnography. That's not true, but it's usually exceptional to bring Marxism to ethnography.

It is interesting, the sociologists usually in France see the Chicago School as the most significant school of Sociology in the US and it is, I think, because of its Grounded Theory, this idea that you get truth by actually immersing yourself in the world. What is missed is a broader context within which that lived experience is shaped. So I was very much opposed to both: the anti-theorism of the Chicago School and the idea of enclosed communities. And I tried to sort of remedy that by the way I studied this factory, by putting theory at the centre of the analysis and also seeing it in the broader context of capitalism. I had done this study in Zambia, on the reproduction of the racial order within the copper mines, which also looked at the ways that blacks succeeded and replaced whites. And I had put that in the broader context of postcolonial Zambia, but it was less self-consciously theoretical. Now I became much more self-consciously theoretical and Marxism was the theory that I was trying to develop. Bringing these theories of the State into the factory, and sort of taking note of what Gramsci had said in the United States that hegemony is born in the factory. So those were the two prongs of that ethnography: to bring theory to bear directly and self-consciously to the empirical world, and to see that empirical world in its broader context.

PV: Do you think that Gramsci's idea that "the hegemony is born in the factory" is still right? Does this analysis remain correct in the current situation of the working classes?

MB: Well, I don't know if I thought it was even correct then. I mean, it was certainly correct for the monopoly sector of the economy at that time. These institutions that I talked about: the Internal State and the Internal

Labour Market, and the way these games are played, that was a characteristic of a particular sector of the economy where the trade unions were strong, where there was a sort of protected arena where you could effectively organized consent. At the competitive sector, which was much more precarious employment, it was much more difficult to organize consent and there you're more likely to get despotic work organizations. In the context of Africa that I've talked about, I wrote about political regime in the workplace; I called it Colonial Despotism. So, again, I was trying to be so specific about this factory in this moment. I was not saying that consent is organized in all factories everywhere, but actually somewhat uniquely in this advanced capitalism. I felt this would last for much longer than it did it. Actually, as soon as I studied it, it more or less disappeared in the 1980s. I think it's still important to study what the Political Regime in production is. But I think it's hard to sustain, in the way that I did in the seventies, that the factory is a central place for the organization of consent. The conditions are so different now at workplaces, so you might say that today, as I sometimes do, it's a privileged to be exploited. There are so few stable working class positions, wage labour positions, that actually workers tend to be much more quiescent, at least around them. And whether that's consent or whether it's a form of compliance, that's an interesting question. That is the story of today, right? The rise of a more precarious employment in ever greater areas of the economy, including the university.

So, I think that with this idea of hegemony born in the factory, Gramsci was talking about Fordism. I don't know what he was talking about really, but he did say that, so my role was to figure out what it meant and I think that he captured something about Fordism and he captured something significant about the United States, because Gramsci has always been historically specific. So he captured something about the US: that the absence of so called Feudalism really made a huge difference as to where consent and where class struggle will take place.

PV: You mentioned the relationship between theory and empirical work. That is a very tortuous relationship for the sociologists who carry out study cases, and even

more, for ethnographic approaches. Could you explain in which way you mix them in your work?

MB: I spent a lot of time over the last 40 years in this department [Sociology Department at Berkeley University] combating the idea that, somehow, ethnography is privileged because it has direct access to the facts and, somehow, that is the power of ethnography. I've always said that there are no facts as such. If I were to sit down now and describe this room in this interview, I could do it for the rest of my life. Only when I have some sort of focus, some sort of set of questions, some lens, I can actually begin to do it in a finite time. So we cannot avoid actually bringing some sort of lens to the empirical world that we study, and in fact, if we don't have a lens, then the whole world looked blurred. So this is what happens in reality that we all carry with us, implicitly or explicitly, a body of theory that helps us make sense of the world around us.

So that is my point of departure about the relationship of theory to input: you cannot comprehend, apprehend the empirical world, without some theoretical lens. My first step is to say: theory is the essence of understanding what is going on. So I've always argued against those who say that somehow you have to go to a field site and wipe all the theory out of your head and see the world. It's a project that is impossible, but it's not only impossible, it's wrong-headed in my view, when the idea is to recognize what is in your head rather than to eliminate what is in your head.

So, if that's the point of departure, that we all carry theory with us, the point is to build theory and to work on the shoulders of others, and to do what I call *reconstruct theory*. Because, what is theory? Theory is the accumulated knowledge amongst academics or non-academics that we sort of recognize as emergent, and it implicitly calls our attention to the fact that we are a community of scholars that work together to build this knowledge. Then, we should work with it and advance it rather than going into the field science to start all over again and reinvent the wheel. The idea is actually to work with what exists, so that is the idea of rebuilding theory. This idea has got a proven body of thinking in the history of science and in the philosophy of science associated first and foremost, I suppose with Khun, but then the person who's influenced me most probably was a fellow called Imre Lakatos and

the work in Research Programs. It's still not necessarily the most accepted way of thinking about science, but is the correct way in my view. In this Department there is a view that you can do ethnography that is not just inductive, that is, that you can bring history in ethnography together, if you have a body of theory that helps you do that. But when I arrived here, 40 years ago, everybody thought: how can you be a Marxist? Ethnographers cannot be Marxists, they do historical work and ethnographers do micro work. I think that nobody would say that to me today.

PV: Speaking about Lakatos, you've written a very particular text (Burawoy 1989) in which you make a comparison between Theda Skocpol's and León Trotsky's analyses of revolutionary processes as an expression of the way each other conceive the theoretical accumulation (Skocpol as an example of an Inductivist way of thinking the theoretical accumulation and Trotsky as an example of Lakatos' Research Programs way of thinking on the theoretical accumulation). When I first read it, it looked like really weird to me because it is so usual that scholars think about Trotsky from an epistemological point of view. Why did you choose the Trotsky's Permanent Revolution Theory as an example of Lakatos' point of view about how theory can be built and rebuilt?

MB: Well, the text is more about Skocpol than about Trotsky. Skocpol became a major figure in macro sociology in the eighties. And actually I had collaborated with her and she adopted a sort of Marxist mantle. She was a student of Barrington Moore who was a major figure who had already written the book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, published in 1965. It was a major breakthrough in the study of politics, nobody had done anything quite like this before, and it was really putting the United States in a much broader historical geographical context, comparing different roads to modernity, comparing actually the history of nine states. And he was a Soviet Union expert. Soviet Union was really what was going on in his head because he was trying to show that, actually, all the hostility to the Soviet Union, Cold War hostility, based on the fact that it was a totalitarian regime, did not take into account the historical context in which the Soviet

Union emerged. He was trying to show that, yes, there was violence in the creation of the Soviet Union, but there was also violence in the creation of the road to democracy. That's what's in his mind. So he was fighting a political battle, not justifying totalitarianism, but being much more critical of the west and of political sociology that by that time was sort of celebrating the wonders of the United States.

People like Seymour Martin Lipset and his "Political Man" (1960) is all about the wonders of liberal America. Of course, that all must be placed in the after nineteen sixties context. On that point, Barrington Moore became a major figure and Skocpol was a student of Barrington Moore. So I expected her to be a sort of Marxist. But when you look more carefully at the writings, they are basically a story about the State (the State was at the center of a lot of debates at the time in the 1960s), and she became identified with the view that the State should be seen as an autonomous platform, and be studied as such. And she became a sort of a more subtle critique of Marxism. So, I felt I had to take her on and what better person to take her on than Trotsky? Because it turns out that basically Skocpol had a very inductive theory: there are successful and unsuccessful revolutions and the successful ones are the Russian, the Chinese and the French, and the unsuccessful ones are the German, the Japanese and the English. So she does this sort of multiple regression in history, seeing what the conditions for a successful process are. And Trotsky also has the attempt to understand why the French Revolution is successful and the German is unsuccessful and the Russian is a sort of success. But Trotsky's central view is that you can't look at these independently, they are all part of an evolving global capitalist system. Skocpol completely suppresses that. So it seemed to me to be a very interesting debate between the two, I mean, from my point of view, though she of course wouldn't agree. I don't know if she actually read much of Trotsky, not much evidence that she had.

So I used that to actually think about the meaning of science, sociologist science and the meaning of theory. She represented this inductive approach I'd also been critical of in the context of ethnography. She did some comparative historical work which was indeed important, but missed the connections between these

revolutions and their overall context within which they placed, when Trotsky was incredibly sensitive to that. The Permanent Revolution Theory and the Uneven and Combined Theory show that sensitivity, and were, in my point of view, a rebuild of Marxist Theory. And what is interesting about Trotsky is that *The History of the Russian Revolution*, that book, is an ethnography of the Russian revolution. So he understood this link between the experience and the broader macro forces that are at work in a way that very few have. And of course I put it in the context of the development of Marxism, that Trotsky was a very crucial player in that, which was not necessarily a common view.

PV: How do you see the rebuilding of theory at this time? You used to talk about the crisis of University, on the one hand, and the opportunity for a rebuilding of Sociology Science, on the other hand, linked to the idea of a Public Sociology. But you differentiate your meaning of Public Sociology from Boudieu's one.

MB: Right, this “public sociology thing” is another strange thing. That came about because I went back to South Africa in 1991, and I found a sociology that in Argentina was probably normal and natural, but not in the United States; it was a sociology with which people were engaged. I mean sociologists were actually, not all of them, but many of them were engaged in the battle against the Apartheid Regime and as such they will do it. So as sociologists they were teaching at the same time as engaging politically and were developing quite a regional sociology. And I've just never seen a sociology like this, having spent so much time in the United States because I got used to this sort of very professional sociology, in which sociologists write things, even when it's about Skocpol and Trotsky, and perhaps one or two other people will read it, certainly nobody outside the academy will read it and you just take this as normal. It is a professional sociology in which we just exchange papers.

I remember when Cardoso was here in 1980 or 1981 he always laughed about the way that the American Sociology or American Academics operates: they make all these brave revolutionary statements, but, you know, nobody reads it so it doesn't matter. But where he comes from if you start making revolutionary statements, and of course he was talking about the

period of the dictatorship, then you might get into trouble.

So, in 1994 I became Chair of this Department and decided that we were a Public Sociology because this department of all departments in the United States have the most engaged sociologists, engaged in the world beyond the academy. So I decided I would push this idea of quote “Public Sociology” and my colleagues have since regretted this, but nevertheless, that's what happened. And the idea was to actually compare the Public Sociology in contrast with this Professional Sociology, and the inspiration originally come from South Africa. But then I thought “well, perhaps there are different types of Public Sociology.” So I took this Gramscian distinction, though I never really refer to Gramsci, between traditional and organic, to think about a Traditional Public Sociology and an Organic Public Sociology, and I think what most people were doing in my department here was a Traditional Public Sociology. They communicated through the media, through the books they wrote to the broader public beyond the academy.

But there was also an Organic Public Sociology which has an unmediated relationship between the sociologist or the academy, and the community. And of course that was the one that Gramsci also emphasized, but only on a collective level, not on an individual level. A Gramsci organic intellectual is one who can elaborate what he called the “good sense” of the working class. Here there is a kernel: the working class, by virtue of its collective transformation, they understand the world, the subordinate classes can understand the world. There is some good sense, there is infiltrated with the ideology but nevertheless there is a good sense. So there is something for intellectuals to do: they've got this good sense they can work with. In Bourdieu there's no good sense, there's only bad sense. The working class has only bad sense, they cannot understand the conditions of its own subjugation and therefore it's hopeless. Therefore intellectuals, in a sense, must themselves transform the world. Intellectuals, as I understand it, are the ones that are going to have a progressive presence. But not all the intellectuals, you can be sure about that.

Many of the intellectuals suffer what Marxists would call a “false consciousness”; they have been subject to scholastic fallacies, so it turns out that only very

few sociologists, particularly one's around Bourdieu, can really understand the world, perhaps only Bourdieu. But anyway, this idea that the intellectual is the transformative agent as opposed to the dominated, that's why I think that Gramsci would see Bourdieu as a traditional intellectual, critical of the world around, but that critique is in itself not challenging the actual totality. In fact, the traditional intellectual, by virtue of being critical, appears to be autonomous and can present a universal picture, whereas the organic intellectual is closely connected to some sort of class that will be transformative, a subordinate class that will be transformative.

So Gramsci would see Bourdieu as a traditional intellectual and himself as an organic intellectual. Bourdieu, on the other hand, would see Gramsci as a deluded believer in the myth of the organic intellectual and misguided in thinking that the working class have this emancipatory role. Empirically it's not altogether clear who is right, but politically one has one's propensities. Anyway, that's the big difference between the two that they do represent in a sense two different types of Public Sociology. But I think there's a lot more at stake and it all revolves around where truth comes from: for Gramsci, truth comes from the experience of the working class as it transforms nature; for Bourdieu, truth ultimately comes from the existence of intellectuals who engage in a field of competition and produce truth. And so they have a different vision of truth and that has enormous political implications.

PV: Regarding this idea of Organic Intellectual, I would like to know how you think about the relationship between Marxism and its political implications nowadays. You've made a sort of periodization of Marxism in the last 150 years: the Classic Marxism, the Russian Marxism, the Occidental Marxism, the Third World Marxism and, currently, you say that this is the moment of a "Sociological Marxism." But I cannot quite fathom what "Sociological Marxism" is, because the other Marxisms you talk about, are linked to different moments of the rise of class struggle (or defeats, as Perry Anderson says about "Occidental Marxism"). So, what organic class movement or class struggle is the Sociological Marxism linked to? Isn't the idea of a "Sociological Marxism" a sort of contradictions in terms?

MB: Very good. Yes, it's very contradictory what I'm saying. That's absolutely correct. Is this Sociological Marxism somehow organically connected? What does that mean? I would present it this way: it means to bring back the social to the centre. Marxism, in the first place, had emphasized the economy: somehow the economy would sow the seeds of its own destruction. The second position was a State-centred vision of socialism. So, what is left out is a Marxism that centres the social. And of course I draw on Polanyi and I draw on Gramsci to actually sort of stress the importance of a vision of socialism that is based on the collective self-organization of civil society, that's what the Sociological Marxism is.

PV: Where do you put Trotsky's Marxism in this classification?

MB: I would put Trotsky in the State socialism basically. It's tricky because his Marxism was not Soviet Marxism, but I think that Trotsky's vision of socialism was ultimately State driven, the working class is important and of course Trotsky changes his mind over time, but still I think his contribution is the recognition of the centrality of the State and doesn't do an elaborated analysis of the way the classes get shaped by civil society. Of course, after the [Russian] revolution, the only issue is how to figure out basically building hegemony from above. So his analysis of Russia post revolution, his critique of Stalin, his proposals for the Transitional Program, they're all very state driven. I think that's also implicit in his earlier writings, because he's not one who believes somehow that the economy will sow the seeds of its own destruction. You could argue that he has some sort of analysis of civil society, there's a very slender one. Gramsci puts that forward as the central feature of advanced capitalism. I don't think Trotsky sees civil society as being so crucial in demanding a whole different vision of revolution as Gramsci says is necessary.

Anyway, Sociological Marxism is the centering of the social and centering of so called civil society and its collective reorganization. But the point is a good one: of course that Sociological Marxism is rather an academic project and these other Marxisms, or many of them, are actually developed in close contact with a mobilized working class. So to talk about Sociological Marxism may be a sort of a contradiction in terms in the sense

that Marxism has to be somehow something developed in close connection with the dominated. But I would say that my friend Eric Olin Wright develops his ideas of real utopias and in a sense that is an expression of the Sociological Marxism and in principle it should be developed in close connection with those who are engaged in building alternative institutions to challenge capitalism, whether they be, I don't know, participatory budgeting or whether they'd be cooperatives, they have a potential to challenge capitalism, and one gets to know them and one can disseminate their ideas through actually engaging with people who are actually trying to build these alternative institutions. So if one takes his project seriously, it does bring Sociological Marxism into contact with those who are building alternative institutions. That's my defense, I guess.

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