The “bloody brilliant” sociologist’s unfinalized heresy: Resolving Michael Burawoy’s tensions to reconstruct the social sciences[1]

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Abstract

Through workplace ethnographies on three continents, as well as methodological and theoretical interventions, Burawoy transformed the social sciences. In his last years, he wrote extensively on race and colonialism. He also encouraged his students to apply the lessons of his earlier work to labor in education. These strands of his scholarship sat uneasily alongside one another, and he did not develop an explicit framework to resolve the apparent contradictions between, and within, them. The unfinalized tensions in Burawoy’s late work lay the groundwork for a reconstructed scientific practice.

Keywords: Marxism; Colonialism; Capitalism.

[1] A note from the Organising Committee and the Board of *Sociologia – Revista da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto*: This text is a revised version of the closing lecture of the 'Três Vivas a Burawoy!' event. This 'brief cycle of tributes to Michael Burawoy', initiated by Ana Cristina Santos, José Soeiro, Lígia Ferro and Luísa Veloso, took place in October and November 2025. The event aimed to highlight the relevance of the British sociologist's legacy, opening a space for collective debate around three central themes of his work: modes of knowledge and public sociology; a critical analysis of capitalism, work processes, and production policies; and the importance of working-class ethnography, revisits, and extended case studies. Organised by three leading Portuguese sociological institutions (CES, CIES-ISCTE and IS-UP) and supported by the Portuguese Sociological Association, the cycle sought to bring together different perspectives, experiences and readings. Held in three cities – Coimbra, Lisbon and Porto – it featured Ana Cristina Santos, Anália Torres, Carolina Fraga, Hermes Costa, Isabel Roque, Isabela dos Reis, João Teixeira Lopes, José Soeiro, Lígia Ferro, Luísa Veloso, Paula Abreu, Rafael Jesus, Romeu Carvalheira, Tiago Santos, Tomás Nery, Vasco Castro Pereira and Virgílio Borges Pereira. On 3 November 2025, Cihan Tuğal attended the final session at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto, having been invited by the university's Institute of Sociology.

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*A heresia inacabada do «*bloody brilliant*» sociólogo: Resolver as tensões de Michael Burawoy para reconstruir as ciências sociais*

Resumo

Através de etnografias laborais em três continentes, bem como de intervenções metodológicas e teóricas, Burawoy transformou as ciências sociais. Nos seus últimos anos, escreveu extensivamente sobre raça e colonialismo. Também incentivou os seus alunos a aplicar as lições das suas investigações anteriores ao trabalho na educação. Essas vertentes da sua pesquisa académica conjugam-se com dificuldade, e ele não desenvolveu uma estrutura explícita para resolver as contradições aparentes entre elas e dentro delas. As tensões não resolvidas no trabalho tardio de Burawoy lançam as bases para uma prática científica reconstruída.

Palavras-chave: Marxismo; Colonialismo; Capitalismo.

*L'hérésie inachevée du «*bloody brilliant*» sociologue: résoudre les tensions de Michael Burawoy pour reconstruire les sciences sociales*

Résumé

Grâce à des ethnographies laborales menées sur trois continents, ainsi qu'à des interventions méthodologiques et théoriques, Burawoy a transformé les sciences sociales. Au cours de ses dernières années, il a beaucoup écrit sur la race et le colonialisme. Il a également encouragé ses étudiants à appliquer les enseignements de ses travaux antérieurs au travail dans le secteur de l'éducation. Ces différents volets de ses recherches coexistaient difficilement, et il n'a pas développé de cadre explicite pour résoudre les contradictions apparentes entre eux et en leur sein. Les tensions non résolues dans les derniers travaux de Burawoy jetttent les bases pour une pratique scientifique reconstruite.

Mots-clés: Marxisme; Colonialisme; Capitalisme.

*La herejía inconclusa del «*bloody brilliant*» sociólogo: resolver las tensiones de Michael Burawoy para reconstruir las ciencias sociales.*

Resumen

Através de etnografías del lugar de trabajo en tres continentes, así como de intervenciones metodológicas y teóricas, Burawoy transformó las ciencias sociales. En sus últimos años, escribió extensamente sobre raza y colonialismo. También animó a sus alumnos a aplicar las lecciones de sus trabajos anteriores al trabajo en educación. Estas vertientes de su investigación coexistían de forma incómoda, y él no desarrolló un marco explícito para resolver las aparentes contradicciones entre ellas y dentro de ellas. Las tensiones no resueltas en la obra tardía de Burawoy sientan las bases para una práctica científica reconstruida.

Palabras clave: Marxismo; Colonialismo; Capitalismo.

As one of the most prominent sociologists of the last decades, Michael Burawoy shaped the way we think about social science, Marxism, and life itself [2]. He owed this impact not only to his legendary theoretical and methodological brilliance, but also to his willingness to discover brilliance in others throughout his participation in the lives of countless people on several continents. Burawoy's research, teaching, and public contributions provide cues regarding how the social sciences might be able to contribute to creating a better world through learning from the people we study. In this article, I will trace Burawoy's footsteps throughout his adult life to unpack this impact. I will also discuss the gaps and tensions in his theorization and how we could follow *his* method to resolve these.

Burawoy's interests pushed him to travel from the colonial world through advanced capitalism to state socialism … and then throughout the capitalist globe. These travels were deeply shaped by his theoretical proclivities, but also by a deep empathetic engagement with human suffering and his unbending hope for liberation: By a conviction that each person is special, and has the capacity to overcome adversity and contribute to human liberation.

Burawoy was a scholar, first and foremost. But he was also a worker, and in his practices of both, he never quite fit in. And despite *and through* never fitting in and being a heretic, he enabled others to rediscover the world and sowed the seeds of a deep transformation. In much of this article, I will write as if a scholarly path and a proletarian path are essentially distinct. And in most ways, they obviously are. Despite that, in the second half of the article, I will point out that Burawoy's theorization and cumulative fieldwork prepared the scene for a *generalized labor theory* of scholarly and non-scholarly existence.

I begin by summarizing Burawoy's first set of ethnographic studies and describing how his initial statement regarding a research programme captured the crosscutting themes of that field experience. I then discuss how multiple factors problematized his earlier research programme and opened the doors to not only a reformulated scientific programme but an entirely new way of approaching social theory. In the second half of his scholarly trajectory,

[2] Thanks to José Soeiro and other members of the audience for their questions during my presentation at the University of Porto, Zachary Levenson and Tyler Leeds for reading and commenting on the text, and Justin Germain and Leslie Salzinger for providing feedback.

Burawoy formulated his boldest theoretical statements. But as the following section shows, since he was so deeply committed to the study of practice, these abstractions were guided by his exploration of new empirical realms: knowledge, education, and intellectual work regimes. In the final two sections, I assert that a rethinking of the unresolved tensions within Burawoy's theory, in interaction with fresh empirical studies and praxis, will pave the way for a radically transformed social sciences.

The worker-scholar's travels from African mines to Eastern Europe's factories

Burawoy's first major research project was situated in the mines of post-colonial Zambia. He worked there in the Personnel Research Unit (PRU) of the Copper Industry Service Bureau as an office employee tasked with crafting job evaluation schemes, a position from which he sought to act as both a participant and observer of (what he would later call, following Marx and Braverman) the labor process. Out of this study emerged his MA thesis and his first book: *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines: From African Advancement to Zambianization*. Burawoy (1972) pointed out in this text that the color bar shifted, but did not disappear after independence. Whenever black workers were promoted, their white supervisors would be promoted further upward, resulting in administrative overload.

Echoing Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon (1968)[3], Burawoy explained this post-independence persistence of racial hierarchy based on class interests. The allegedly color-blind job evaluation schemes he helped build actually served to reinforce the color bar, along the interests of the young post-colonial capitalist state. They evaluated performance through crudely "mathematical" reasoning and were blind to social context (Burawoy 2021a, pp. 56-61). The post-independence reproduction of what we today call "racial capitalism" incited Burawoy to dig deeper into the hard-to-discern forces that render inequalities resilient.

[3] As discussed further below, Fanon deeply shaped Burawoy's thinking and teaching for decades. He further developed Fanon's point that that races, like classes, aren't monoliths. He also took from the *Wretched of the Earth* the point that the Black working class was itself stratified and fragmented.

His disillusionment with this attempt to have quick social impact put him on a path to seeking a PhD degree in the United States. His doctoral studies at the University of Chicago and the field work that accompanied them would culminate in his classical book *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (Burawoy, 1979). As a machine operator at agricultural and construction equipment company Allis-Chalmers in the 1970s, Burawoy participated in the games Chicago laborers played to make life enjoyable and bearable. Such games, concocted to pass time, ironically had the effect of making workers more productive because they had fun as they willfully submitted to capitalist discipline, which they augmented through their own playful acts.

Burawoy's ideas about the American factory were an expansion of Antonio Gramsci's (1971) analysis of Fordism. The Sardinian wrote in open awe of how the bosses of the New World built consent within capitalism's satanic mills. Burawoy's findings, and their Marxist-Gramscian interpretation, transformed the sociological study of work. When he began his career, industrial sociology was myopic. It focused on the firm at the expense of broader historical and structural forces. It refused to speak of the capitalist system as a whole as the general matrix in which the firm was shaped. He rattled industrial sociology by fusing Marxism and participant observation. But in a few years, the impact of this fusion went far beyond industrial sociology. Burawoy's work demonstrated that all macro-processes have micro-foundations and vice versa, that the quotidian and the structural are part of a singular process — an approach that transformed many sociologists' handling of macro-structures, micro-dynamics, and generalizing theory. The fusion of macro-structural analysis and subjective viewpoint was considered heresy until Burawoy, and those influenced by him, institutionalized it. But his heresy didn't stop there.

After writing his classical book on American capitalism, he traveled to the state socialist world to work in its factories. This step, counter-intuitively, resulted partially from his interactions with the staunchest of anti-Marxists. Rather than dismissing their harsh criticisms of his early work, he incorporated them – an incorporation that shaped his research trajectory. Robert Merton, one of the top sociologists of the 20th century, contended that Burawoy had not demonstrated his claims that the undemocratic nature of industrial bureaucracy in America

emanated from the capitalist nature of the economy, rather than industrialism as such. A defense of the Marxist critique of exploitation would require comparison with industrial bureaucracy in a non-capitalist society (Burawoy, 2009). Burawoy appropriated Merton's criticism and used it to fashion a heterodox Marxism based on his studies of labor in the state socialist world.

His first idea was to study the Solidarity movement in Poland. However, after the repression in 1981, he was forced to shift to Hungary. His work in that country's factories, as well as interactions with its scholars, reshaped his ideas about socialism, and also about *how* capitalism should be analyzed and criticized. For Burawoy, an honest, critical, empathetic, and realistic engagement with socialism was absent in much of the thinking on the Left and the Right, as he explained in a paper co-authored with Hungarian scholar János Lukács (Burawoy & Lukács, 1985):

> "Both orthodox Marxists and neo-classical economists are guilty of a methodological error: comparing an empirical reality of one society with an ideal type of another. Marxists have tended to undertake a critical analysis of capitalism through a usually implicit comparison with a speculative socialism – a society without classes in which individuals are reconciled with the collectivity through their self-conscious making of history. This ideal type is usually left unexamined and is therefore utopian. At the same time Marxists avoid examining actually-existing socialism… as a relevant contrast to capitalism. They have generally regarded such societies as in transition between capitalism and some "true" socialism…, a form of capitalism…, or a legacy of pre-capitalist "Asiatic" modes of production." (p. 723-724).

This salvo against Marxist orthodoxy[4] was not just heterodox, it was heretical. In making these claims, Burawoy upset and disturbed Marxists of all stripes during the last decade of state socialism. Figures like G. A. Cohen, who built a Marxist theory in dialogue with liberalism precisely by dismissing actually-existing socialism as well as unreconstructed Marxists who

[4] Notice that in the quoted passage Burawoy uses "orthodoxy" in a very broad manner, including arguments (such as Cliff's "state capitalism" accusation against the USSR) that would be considered "heterodox" by other measures.

ignored the horrors of state socialism, fell afoul of Burawoy's injunction to an exploration that would be both critical and realistic.

As importantly, Burawoy argued against *critical* traditional Marxists like Ernest Mandel and Tony Cliff, who maintained that the USSR and its satellites were either state capitalist or degenerate, i.e. not worthy of sympathetic and analytical consideration as case studies of socialism. As in the seminal *The Radiant Past*, his solo-authored and co-authored books and articles on socialism advanced the idea that these were cases of socialism, and the problems they faced were those of socialism with "bureaucratic-despotic" factory regimes (Burawoy & Lukács, 1992). Exemplifying a pattern he would repeat in the rest of his studies, he incorporated some core ideas from anti-Marxist thinkers but reconstructed them for Marxist purposes. He adapted neoclassical economist Kornai's thesis that "shortage" was the main tenet of state socialism. Burawoy believed that this could only be overcome through cooperative labor and democratic bargaining of factories with central authorities – his antidote to both Kornai and Stalinism. State socialist societies faced additional difficulties because they dealt with labor shortage through bureaucratic despotism or at best "bureaucratic bargaining," pushing themselves into underproduction.

Unlike "Western" or other critical Marxists, he dove into state socialist factories, sweated there as a blue-collar worker, and traced the promise of socialism in the practices of the laborers under these authoritarian states. He participated in these now-failed experiments not to serve as an apologist for state socialism, as did the rapidly shrinking number of uncritical Marxists during that fateful decade, but to look for the promise of the future *in the actual, concrete practices of concrete laborers themselves*, rather than in abstract socialist theory or a revolution forever-relegated to a distant horizon.

Burawoy's quest for a democratic transition from within state socialism culminated in frustration (Burawoy, 2009). Critical Marxists who argued that "socialist" bureaucrats were in fact building capitalism turned out, to his dismay, to be partially right. Nevertheless, as his books and articles demonstrated, the transition from state socialism to capitalism was not a foregone conclusion. And as importantly, the fulfillment of critical Marxists' prediction did not

salvage traditional Marxism in its entirety. As other heterodox Marxists in socialism studies also underline, bureaucratic tendencies similar to twentieth-century state socialist ones will most likely kick in during any attempt at socialist transformation. Marxists therefore need more analyses of social dynamics, including but not restricted to classical forms of class struggle, that can secure the gains of labor and democratically expand them under such circumstances.[5]

***Politics of Production*: The early research programme**

Burawoy crowned his studies of factory regimes under colonial, advanced capitalist, and state socialist cases with an ambitious theoretical statement, which can be seen as the condensed expression of the first two and a half decades of his scholarship (Burawoy, 1985). This breathtaking book was published in 1985 but shaped what he would do for yet another decade. Even though the book's explicit and central topic is factory regimes, *Politics of Production* harbored insights that he would carry forward into his 21st century scholarship too.

The book had two interrelated goals: 1) reasserting the role of the industrial proletariat in social change, without assigning it a messianic role, and 2) emphasizing the centrality of production without taking an economistic stance. In other words, it emphasized the ideological and political aspects of the productive process. Burawoy's criticism and reconstruction of Marx and Braverman were core to this project.

Marx's model of capitalist production *and especially of the labor process* (as developed in *Das Kapital, Volume 1*) is based on England. Unlike *Volume 2*'s theorization of reproduction and *Volume 3*'s arguments on the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, *Volume 1*'s statements on the labor process were untouched until Braverman (1974). Braverman's model transformed Marxism by arguing that the essence of monopoly capitalist production is the separation of execution and conception.

[5] For a recent discussion along these lines, see Zhang (2024).

Burawoy pointed out that Braverman's statements were timeless and did not take geography into account. Braverman could not capture how, and more importantly, *why* control is essential to the capitalist system; he idealized early, competitive capitalism and ignored the deskilling therein; and ultimately fell short of exploring the core contradictions of late, monopoly capitalism. The real core of the capitalist mode of production is the *securing and obscuring of* surplus appropriation, according to Burawoy. Overemphasizing the separation of execution and conception brought Braverman to a magical hope for this separation, whereas putting the emphasis on surplus appropriation draws attention to class struggles. In short, an adequately sociological outlook required us to revise Braverman's reconstruction of Marx, and pay more attention to the *ongoing* ideological and political struggles in factories, and how they paved the way for social change.

A comparative analysis allowed Burawoy to break away from the timelessness of existing sociology and of Marxism. He posited four major types of factory regimes: hegemonic; market despotic; bureaucratic despotic; self-management. He also pointed out that there were variations within some of these. However, rather than handling these factory regimes as separate ideal types, he developed a relational model in which these developed in response to each other. Bottlenecks of early market despotism (market chaos; overproduction; revolutionary class struggles) gave birth to hegemonic factory regimes in the West and bureaucratic despotism in the East. Hegemonic factory regimes produced their own contradictions and class struggles, as a response to which new forms of (export-oriented) despotism were born in the colonies, with their own class and class faction struggles. These developments ultimately undermined hegemony in the West, pushing most factories into hybrid (hegemonic-despotic) regimes.

Burawoy thereby reconstructed Braverman, who failed to theorize the historicity and specificity of the late American system and took it as the culmination of capitalism as such. Burawoy, by contrast, pointed out that all of these regimes are specific nodes within the *combined and uneven development* of the world economy. For instance, the specific factory regimes, even in socialism, were responses, in part, to the world market.

What followed was a repudiation of the messianic investment in the proletariat (understood in the economistic sense) *without* an abandonment of all investment of hope in class struggle. The working class was still central to social change in Burawoy's interpretation of the world, even though its struggles led neither to the downfall of capitalism nor to the triumph of a non-despotic socialism — another lesson absorbed from Fanon and reconstructed with late 20th century sociological language. Coupled with other social struggles and with factional conflicts within and among metropolitan and colonial bourgeoisies, proletarian struggles accounted for shifts from one factory regime to another in world-historical time.

But if class struggle was not over and done with nor paved the way for a non-despotic socialism on its own, what should be the scholar's next step? Here, there were many troubling, or even *existential* difficulties for Burawoy. After the end of the 1980s, he turned his attention to the Soviet Union and then to ex-Soviet Russia. Unintentionally, he ended up studying post-socialist paths to capitalism. Based on these empirical studies of the 1990s, Burawoy produced some of his best work (e.g. Burawoy, 2001; Burawoy & Krotov, 1992). Nevertheless, in stark contrast to his fieldwork in Africa, the United States, and Eastern Europe, he never wrote a book on Russia! How to explain this *quite uncharacteristic* move?

Burawoy tangentially discussed this issue in a few lines in his autobiography: "I looked for lineaments of a countermovement to the market [in Russia] but discovered only a new authoritarianism. … Although I saw Russia as the leading edge of a global descent into a neoliberal dystopia, I couldn't connect the dots to the rest of the world… The darkness of the moment outweighed any light of a better future" (Burawoy 2021a, p. 157). I have also heard, through informal channels, about some technical difficulties he was having with the data. However, in my interpretation, the issues went beyond these. The 1990s – including his fieldwork in Russia – were a major moment of soul-searching and self-reflexive reconstruction for Burawoy. The existential crisis and the intellectual crisis reinforced each other. He could no longer stick to the entirety of the research programme he laid out in *Politics of Production*. He wanted to retain the anti-capitalist and anti-despotic sensibilities that shaped it, but neither the conjuncture nor the longer-term processes (at least as understood within the confines of his existing research programme) justified his stubborn commitment to Marxism.

This soul-searching, along with several other factors, heralded his turn to questions of education and knowledge, and ultimately, also to post-colonialism and theories of race.

The agenda for 21st century Marxism

If Burawoy's "long 1990s" did not culminate in a book on Russia or the Soviet Union, it did produce two now-classic books co-written with his graduate students (Burawoy *et al*., 1991; Burawoy *et al.*, 2000). These were not only among his most important methodological interventions but also attested to his commitment to education and mentoring. In this section, I will explain how his practice as an educator and mentor went beyond reflecting his theoretical commitments. It helped him reconstruct sociology and Marxism and refurbished him with fresh hope after his dark 1990s.

If you go by surface appearances, in the early 2000s, Burawoy shifted in a more "subjectivist" direction than he would have approved in the 1970s and 1980s. He started to emphasize the transformative role of non-proletarian social movements. In his earlier studies, he seemed to be criticizing the so-called "Newer Left" regarding this stance (e.g. see *Politics of Production* (1985)). But this was only a convergence with them in appearance: a Gramscian reconstruction of Polanyi allowed him to study and interpret apparently non-proletarian social movements in a clearly socialist and materialist manner.

In a seminal article, Burawoy (2003) laid out what he perceived to be the three core postulates of classical Marxism: 1) classical Marxism overemphasized the capitalist economy's tendency to crash; 2) overinvested in the escalation of class struggle; and 3) assumed socialism would follow from the coupling of this crash and struggle. Gramsci and Polanyi, by contrast, noticed that advanced capitalism usually developed economic and civic mechanisms both for the appeasement of economic ills and for the containment of class struggle. Gramsci was better at analyzing the historical legacies of civil society, but Polanyi had a more global-theoretical theorization of its modern genesis. Polanyi also had a more explicit theorization of how the demise of liberal capitalism can lead to three distinct routes: socialism, social democracy, and

fascism. However, he failed to appreciate the persistence of capitalist hegemony in the "embedded markets" of postwar democracy.

Burawoy's Gramsci-Polanyi synthesis led to *the three core postulates of sociological Marxism*: 1) the capitalist economy is perpetually marked by occasional crises, but *capitalist society* and *state* develop the tools to regulate them; 2) class and other social struggles mostly help capitalism innovate and discover new ways of reforming capitalism, even though they do harbor potentials that could undermine it; 3) the path to socialism can be paved only through a coordinated long-term strategy of bringing disparate struggles together, not through class struggle or Polanyian "embedding" alone.

Burawoy also criticized the productivism of Marxism (including even that of Gramsci), which led theorists to neglect the realm of exchange and commodification as primary sites of social struggles, with strong potentials for socialism. We could argue, however, that he bent the stick too far in the "exchange" direction in this article, culminating in the argument that the productive sphere could no longer offer any space for organizing anti-capitalist struggles (2003, pp. 230-231). We still need a "production" foot of hegemonic struggles, which Burawoy appeared to grant in other pieces he penned in the following years. (E.g. notice his emphasis on the "abode of production" in his and his graduate-student co-authors' study of the university). You can't build ecosocialism, for instance, without a new approach to production, shouldered by a new working class. This and other loose strands require a broader reconstruction of the points made in this article for a fuller programme for 21st century Marxism.

In the last pages of the article, Burawoy also underlined the centrality of postcolonial criticism and gender. These pages show us the way forward: the integration of postcolonial theory; then, as his later work further emphasized, race theory; along with a reproductive-feminist theory into the Gramsci-Polanyi synthesis. *However*, these final remarks do *not* exhibit the "neatness" and parsimony of his "three postulates" and counter-postulates.

Nevertheless, he left many guidelines behind. For instance, when it comes to colonialism, postcolonialism, and race, Fanon informed his thinking from very early on. In his latest

writings (and also, very unfortunately unpublished public and teaching lectures) he sought ways to rethink the entire Black Marxist tradition for a retheorization of race. In a synthetic article on Du Bois and Fanon, Burawoy (2025a) discusses both thinkers' shift from a relatively (if unevenly) subjectivist phenomenology to a phenomenologically informed Marxism. Nevertheless, his discussion of the overlaps and differences between Fanon and Du Bois does not culminate in a coherent framework that accounts for Black experience. The text, just like Burawoy's writing in his last decade in general, appears to imply that a thorough deepening of Black Marxism would eventually lead to a sufficiently Marxist reconstruction of sociology's theorization of racial domination (see especially the third paragraph of the article's conclusion). Yet, this case is never made explicitly. For a viable reconstruction of Marxism on this front, we will need more sustained attempts from theorists working across disparate geographical and racial contexts[6]. A racial/ethnic counterpart of Burawoy's Gramsci-Polanyi article is awaiting its authors.

The couple of essays and articles he penned on Palestine also harbor some hints on where his thinking was headed. Burawoy's (2025b) final piece on the issue "prefigured," in his own words, the contribution he hoped to make. The essay argues that the different trajectories of settler colonialism in South Africa and Palestine – one ending in compromise, the other in a genocide – can be traced back to their material roots: This happened because the first is based primarily on labor exploitation, the latter land appropriation. South African capital's dependence on racialized exploitation gave the Blacks "structural power." Since Israeli capital's dependence on Palestinian labor declined over time, and especially after the early 1970s, the indigenous population became redundant from its standpoint. Burawoy was careful to point out that this material difference did not exhaust the contrast. He analyzed differences of international and local politics and movements, including the influence of the Right in both contexts, to further theorize the differentiation. We see the general Gramscian formula repeated for this particular case: exploitation-based "compromise" and

[6] Tyler Leeds, Zachary Levenson, and Marcel Paret are currently editing some of Burawoy's unfinished essays and articles on Du Bois, which might provide even more novel ways of thinking about the unresolved issues discussed here. Zachary Levenson and Marcel Paret are also working on reinterpreting his contributions regarding race and capitalism.

expropriation-based "irreconcilable conflict," Burawoy stated, are "*only potentialities* which, in combination with the balance of military forces, *set the terrain for political and ideological struggles*, which have international as well as national determinations and repercussions" (emphases mine).

Just like in the case of Black Marxism, Burawoy's superb comparative analysis laid the groundwork for an expanded Marxist theory of settler colonialism but did not result in generalizable postulates in the manner of his Gramsci-Polanyi article. True, one can see the traces of a Gramscian-Polanyian restructuring of the theory of colonialism and postcolonialism here: starting with labor and land, and then building up to associations and politics. But how would his ongoing dialogue with Du Bois shape the translation of these analytical insights into bold *theoretical* postulates? Michael had not yet provided a formula when he was taken from us by a reckless driver. Again, the well-rounded answer awaits future Burawoyians.

Knowledge production and labor

In this second phase of his scholarship, Burawoy focused most on education. Can we find more solid clues regarding a reconstructed Marxism there? In this sphere, his retheorization was more deeply intertwined with his own practice.

In lecture halls, office hours, and even one-on-one interactions with colleagues, Burawoy embodied the 3rd thesis on Feuerbach: Marx's insistence that it is essential to educate the educators themselves. He learned from everybody, everywhere. He would start many a conversation by saying, "I don't assume anything" or "I don't know anything, you need to tell me." Curiosity, hunger for knowledge, and sincerely treating every interaction as a source of possible new insights… These made him who he was. Even after he became a Berkeley professor, he took summer courses from graduate students! One of these courses would in fact lay the groundwork for his and his graduate students' ongoing interventions in methodological debates for decades to come.

Along with not being able to perform heavy manual labor after his fifties, his ongoing – actually, increasing – commitment to education was one of the reasons why Burawoy turned his lenses to the academia and intellectual labor. Unlike myself, he was not fascinated with post-structuralist thought. But he understood how Foucault (1977) extended one key point, the seeds of which were already in *Das Kapital* and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*: "prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons". Despite privileged academics' protection and deceptive isolation from broader capitalist forces, he provocatively asked his students if we (along with the intellectual and manual labor force that sustains our cherished research time) are living in the post-Fordist factory (or prison). When I arrived in Berkeley in the mid-2000s, I noticed that some of Burawoy's colleagues and students called the corridors of the Social Science Building "the mills." The wording might have been around before Burawoy, but his reconstructed Marxism helped me figure out what it really meant (beyond being a dark and depressing joke). Nevertheless, he called being a part of Berkeley Sociology his dream job, too. In all seriousness and irony, he most certainly meant both. He dedicated his last two-plus decades to transforming "the mills" from within, in solidarity with lecturers, students, and manual workers who had been waging the fight for a long time.

This wasn't only a local and specific fight. Sociological Marxism was committed to expanding and transforming the entirety of higher education, as one part of a broader anti-capitalist and anti-despotic struggle. Foucault (1980) famously glorified the specific intellectual (i.e. expertise-based professional) against the "universal" and "organic" intellectuals. Burawoy's research and life exemplify how Foucauldian "specific" struggles can be fought with a solid orientation to integrate them with a global anti-capitalist horizon, so sorely lacking in much of post-structuralism-inspired thought.

In his last decade and a half, Burawoy studied higher education, knowledge, and intellectual labor. He underlined the emancipatory potential of public education, which was increasingly colonized by privatization. Education reached higher numbers of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but in market-oriented United States, this also brought together with it administrative bloat and incredibly high salaries for top bureaucrats. Moreover, the economy

is in no shape to absorb the increasing number of college graduates. Burawoy argued that this gave birth to a ballooning "precariat," which led many of the explosive social movements of our era, such as Occupy Wall Street.

Core to Burawoy's reorientation in the second half of his professional life was an emergent, expanded theory of labor. With his students, he studied educational and more broadly intellectual labor as an essential, under-theorized part of the labor process. In the 2000s, he had a relatively more Habermasian angle on the potential and limits of education. He studied education and the social sciences as a core part of what this greatest inheritor of the Frankfurt School called the "public sphere" – a realm of interactive and creative human action which needs to be protected from colonization by markets and states. Even though this pedigree is often neglected, his development of the concept "public sociology" (Burawoy, 2005) was through a creative reinterpretation of Habermas[7]. But in his last decade, he and his students increasingly applied the lessons of his *earlier* research to the questions of education and, more broadly, intellectual labor (Burawoy *et al*., 2024). This collaborative work underlined that much of the exploitative processes identified in *Das Kapital* (and further theorized by Braverman) applied to intellectual labor itself. Nevertheless, argued these sociologists, autonomy and flexibilization – rather than the totalistic control theorized by Braverman – allowed intense exploitation of intellectual laborers. These "labor process"-related points are front and center in his collaborative publications with his students, and each of his student's own work, but Burawoy's solo-authored articles still put most emphasis on the commodification of knowledge (if now from a more Polanyian rather than Habermasian angle) rather than labor exploitation. This is yet another of the unresolved tensions of Burawoy's later work, and its resolution will mark one of the key frontiers in developing an expanded labor theory of social life.

[7] Bourdieu was a more explicit reference in his work on education and intellectuals (Burawoy, 2019). I am deliberately avoiding the topic of his relationship with Bourdieu and Bourdieusians in this essay, since that relationship is much more complex than usually noticed by Burawoy's interpreters, and my divergent interpretation (which is partially based on my contentious disagreements with him regarding Bourdieu in countless conversations) would require a meticulous unpacking of both authors' texts.

Even though these contributions are necessary steps towards an expanded theory of labor, Burawoy and his students have not (yet) linked the exploitation of intellectual labor to the broader exploitation (of manual labor, reproductive labor, nature) that surrounds and enables it. Exploited intellectual laborers, including those at the university, can come to their offices and work there each day thanks to the labor of (on average) less privileged individuals and groups who take care of them emotionally at home, clean their offices, take care of the logistics of labs and of administration, and cook their food. Nutrition and maintenance at and around Burawoy's own campus (UC Berkeley), for instance, run on the backs of racialized laborers who commute to this pleasant university town from less attractive corners of the Bay Area. Burawoy's students have been researching the links between this campus and other campuses and the educators' strikes there; and how all these strikes radicalized some educators, e.g. led them to join the Bernie campaign. These efforts will hopefully spur research on how the entire academic machine is located within broader (local and global) social and political economies.

Utopias, anti-utopias, and the educator as their embodiment

Another key to Burawoy's post-1980s self-transformation was his ongoing interactions and collaboration with his beloved friend Erik Olin Wright. Both were relatively closer to traditional Marxism in their earlier decades, despite their frequent criticism of it: they were relatively objectivist, put class in the center, and appeared to despise utopianism – as one can tell from the 1985 quotation above, where he and Lukács criticized Marxists' investment in an idealized version of socialism as "utopian."

Wright (2010) took the lead in transforming the established Marxist meaning of "utopia." In Wright' late writings, utopia came to mean not a non-existent country or social formation, but alternative egalitarian and democratic practices that were flowering within current, oppressive society despite all hurdles. He highlighted socialist and anarchist cooperatives, Wikipedia's free knowledge platform, and the idea of universal basic income as some examples; and argued that socialism of the future would be built through the growth of such

"real utopias" rather than through revolutionary mass action or top-down reform[8]. Burawoy (2021a) appreciated Wright's redefinition of "utopia," but – through his signature Gramscian optimist-pessimism – balanced his friend's new research programme with an emphasis on what he called "anti-utopias." In his final writings, he defined the latter as negative and limiting social structures, actions, and processes that prevent or distort the flowering of the highest human ideals (liberty, equality, and solidarity). He observed that utopias were always counter-balanced and frequently dissipated by anti-utopias, and it was social science's task to fully analyze both, rather than swinging too much in either direction.

For the mature Burawoy, public education was one of the primary "real utopia"s. His life came to be increasingly invested in broadening its sphere, especially as he lost hope in and practical connections with the industrial proletariat. As I discussed above, his redefined commitment to education went hand in hand with a full realization of the inequalities and exploitation that were also inevitably a part of the public university system (and constituted its anti-utopian dimensions) – and as I also argued, these two strands of his work co-existed in a tension that is not yet resolved. Nevertheless, his embrace of the real utopia of public education was neither abstract nor ungrounded. To the contrary, he sought to live his own life *as though* the emancipatory potential of public education could be realized through refashioning the educator's everyday practices. I could clearly see this as I interacted with Burawoy throughout the years and also witnessed others' interactions.

There were three stages to many people's (his students', mentees', and colleagues') journey with Michael. After he did extraordinary things for you, unexpectedly created time to deal with intellectual challenges you were facing, abundantly praised your essay, draft, or even some random thought of yours, you decided you must be smarter and more special than you ever thought!

Yet… second stage… in time you found out that he treated others in almost the same way. Any undergraduate student who attempted to seriously engage the texts he assigned, for

[8] For institutionalist and Marxist criticisms of this orientation, and Wright's (in my reading, escapist) riposte, see Fourcade *et al.* (2012).

instance, was showered with phrases like "bloody brilliant!" Well, not everybody can be *that* brilliant, no? You decided you are not that special after all.

But then… stage three… you came to understand that he *believed* every word he was saying. That this man had taken to heart Gramsci's dictum that *every* person is a philosopher. He most probably thought so instinctively before ever reading a single line from Gramsci.

One easily fell under the spell of his veneration of all those he crossed paths with[9]. The difficulty was (and still is, for those of us he left behind): what do you do with the realization that each interlocutor is potentially special, and it is partially on you if you cannot bring that out?[10]

There can't be a universal answer, and I never posed the question to him in this way (I wish I did!). Yet, his life trajectory gives an indication of how he dealt with the existential angst that could be caused by the challenge of treating each engaged person you encounter as "bloody brilliant": he went to the darkest depths of brutality and exploitation and built his faith in humanity from there. This was the "anti-utopian" dimension of his thought. With this reconceptualization of utopias and anti-utopias, and the researcher's and educator's role in analyzing *and* embodying them, what Burawoy had been doing ever since his first publications on the colonies came under a fresh light. He could keep faith in labor and humanity after all his disappointing excursions into colonialism, advanced capitalism, and state socialism not simply because of his legendary joviality, but due to his resolution to consistently expose all of his ideals to the test of anti-utopias; seek to discover new glitters of hope and signs of specialness in each engaged person he encountered; and reconstruct theory and sociology in their light.

[9] None of this should be read as saying that he had smooth relationships with his colleagues and mentees. Especially in his early years, he had a reputation of being harsh to his graduate students, possibly with the intention of bringing out the best in them. He once commented to me that serving as Director of Graduate Studies, then as Chair, in his later years made him "a better person," which was certainly an incomplete transformation, as it is for every one of us.

[10] Recognizing and bringing out specialness are not only cognitive and emotional processes but also processes of *labor*. The intensely involved, emotionally draining, and physically exhausting process of interactive education is analyzed in Germain (2024).

We can't know for sure that labor will ever be emancipated. Nor that the specialness in each of us will see the light of day. Yet, we can lead our lives as if both are within our collective capacity and individually contribute our best to both projects. That is our neo-Pascalian wager.

Labor: from the messiah to the articulator of autonomous struggles?

To carry Burawoy's Marxism into the late 21st century, we will need a fuller debate on the conceptual and empirical relationships between the proletariat and the precariat; between production in factories and fields, and service and knowledge production. Are the proletariat and the precariat overlapping segments of the population as Burawoy frequently implied, or do we lose analytical rigor if we do not conceptually distinguish them, as Guy Standing argues? What is the exact place of the precariat and the proletariat in leading social struggles? Some of Burawoy's latest writing further gives further clues as to how this debate could be enhanced. For instance, in his preface to the Chinese edition of *Politics of Production* (Burawoy, 2023)[11], he discussed how the many dissertations he supervised and the research projects he inspired, reformulated, expanded, and revised his earlier arguments about the labor process. In the same piece, Burawoy emphasized the ongoing centrality of the proletariat not only to social struggles, but to life as such, as can be seen in the case of "essential workers." Directed tellingly at a Chinese social science audience, the article finished with these hopeful lines and warnings:

> "Digitalization also gives us the imagination of an alternative world, a future world of collective self-regulation based on peer-to-peer collaboration in which essential work is distributed across the population to reduce the length of the working day. This may be the only way forward – a collective self-regulation, necessary to tackle the challenge of climate change in the age of pandemics. Of one thing we

[11] The English version of this preface is available at http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Prefaces,%20etc/Preface.Chinese%20Edition%20of%20PofP.pdf

> can be sure, the idea of such a socialism will never disappear before its capitalist stimulant disappears." (Burawoy, 2023, p. 8)

The tone might sound "naïvely 19th/20th century." But this ongoing commitment to labor and self-regulating socialism resulted from decades of disillusionments and reconstructions, as I emphasized above. My take on this illuminating passage is that the collective laborer *is* the agent of transformation. But this is what it is: an interpretation of a very complex, evolving, and *unfinished* body of thought, marked by deep *ambiguities*, frequently lurking under forceful and elegant analyses and postulates.

One should also note that audience matters. At a conference in Paris (l'ENS) in 2020 – the same year his preface to the Chinese edition was published –, Burawoy downplayed the centrality of the working class (Burawoy 2021b, pp. 127-128, 130). Did Burawoy have one Marxism for the West and another for the East?

The same ambiguity marks Burawoy's late thinking on the relationship of class struggle to other social struggles. Some of Burawoy's final essays might be misread as saying Black Marxism (and possibly other strands of Marxism too) can go their own way: unlike his Gramsci-Polanyi article, he appeared to be moving away from an integrated agenda that would necessarily reorganize all Marxist analysis around a few postulates. However, an article he published in the early 2010s (and then had translated to French in the early 2020s with minimal changes) clarifies his stance. Burawoy (2013; 2021c) forcefully asserts in this article that the Marxism of our times *has* to be global and all-encompassing *while fully taking into account regional and national variation*. This is distinct from 19th century Marxism, which developed mostly under the illusion of a false universality. But it is also different from the Western, Soviet, and Third World Marxisms of the 20th century, which either isolated themselves from each other or sought to vanquish the other Marxisms. What Burawoy calls third-wave Marxism, by contrast, has the potential of being universal *through integrating the particulars*. Take the example of Black Marxism: in my reading, his writings implied that it should neither be isolated nor obliterated. It should instead be a solid part of a global sociological Marxist project *while maintaining its autonomy*.

Also notice that, as discussed above, labor was *at the center of* his emergent analysis of the Palestinian question, but in this case mostly marked by its absence rather than by its centrality to production regimes or games at workplaces. Still, he mentioned that he saw the reintegration of the Palestinian working class back into the Israeli economy as the only way to stop total annihilation. Labor still held the key even in this "negative" case[12].

Assuming that Burawoy would live a healthy, productive life for at least another decade, I kept postponing the challenge I always wanted to pose to him. Despite all his dismissal of the idea of the proletariat as the universal liberator, didn't his *own theory* warrant the idea of a leading social agent that would articulate disparate social struggles? Why else would we need an integrated Marxism – except for intellectual satisfaction? And if yes, was this "leading" social agent to be certain factions of the world proletariat, or the precariat? We talked about many questions that revolved around this problem but never got to discuss the ultimate issue squarely.

Praxis, research, and Burawoy's unfinalized heresy

I therefore end my essay with an exploration of civic and political practice, which might shed light on how we should keep tackling this question. Marxism's call is ultimately about the proletariat's and other subaltern sectors' taking control of production and of life. Burawoy was a mainstay of strikes, demonstrations, and picket lines… but without ever any "left-communist" or anarchistic fallacies about their magical qualities. I will highlight in these last pages what strikes and demonstrations can and can't accomplish.

The unfinished reconstruction of Marxism I have been discussing throughout this piece has multiple implications for political and civic practice. Burawoy redefined what Manchester anthropologists called the extended case method: using instances of falsification[13] to refine,

[12] I do not imply here that he did not take struggles around land and dispossession seriously – several of his students including Julia Chuang, Zach Levenson, and Mike Levien focused on just that, and he was on board with their projects. My comment is only about how he still perceived labor to be central even in cases where it was apparently out of the picture.

[13] Burawoy upheld sociology as a science that seeks "falsifiable and generalizable explanations of empirical

revise, and expand research paradigms, rather than abandoning them. The same logic applies to organizational efforts: "failures" are not total defeats as long as they can be sublated to build more effective and popular working-class organizations.

Defeatism can lead to a dystopian future, which can be defined as the evaporation of the dialectic between utopia and anti-utopia. Burawoy (2021a) sharply differentiated dystopianism from his attention to anti-utopias. The study of anti-utopias is necessary for a realistic approach to social transformation. Dystopianism, by contrast, feeds despair rather than the will. Ever since the late 1970s, the world has been moving in this dystopian direction, and even more frighteningly so with the rise of eco-pessimism, the toxic sentiment that brackets out capitalism and holds that "modern civilization" is bound to destroy the earth[14] – a collective destruction that would not go down without endless wars and genocides. And hence, we normalize genocide.

Today, there is an apparent break with the hegemonic blocs of the last forty-five years, which imposed a mostly slow and surreptitious death on the earth and its peoples. Trump's America, continuous in content and *starkly ruptural* in form, embraces dystopia. Resistance abounds, but does not have a direction, and is loosely integrated by a desire to avoid the worst of Trumpism, Erdoğanism, and other instances of the far right. Even the will to evade defeatism, however, would be empty if not grounded in a solid orientation that reconnects the pieces and threads that Marx, Gramsci, Burawoy, and others attempted to weave together in their own ways, without reaching conclusive statements.

As much as research, public engagement, and campus and non-campus organization, teaching is another way to connect these fragmented, broken lines[15]. On February 4, the day after he passed, I told my mass undergraduate class about how I learned to teach on picket lines from Burawoy, and how that fit into his research trajectory and into my pedagogy. At the end of

phenomena" (1998, pp. 6, 11), but – unlike in positivist science – in his scientific practice falsification played the role of spurring reconstruction rather than burial of theories.

[14] See Moore (2015) for a criticism of this widespread apocalypticism.

[15] I owe the phrase "broken lines" to Matthieu Renault's essay (2015) on Sultan-Galiev. See https://viewpointmag.com/2015/03/23/the-idea-of-muslim-national-communism-on-mirsaid-sultan-galiev/

February, I took them to the joint strike of custodial and research workers, after a full hour on Max Weber's anti-Marxist theorization of class struggle and markets. I told them – even on the picket line! – that we will read more from Weber to critically interrogate the intentions, processes, and the health of the outcomes of class struggles.

Since February 2025, whenever I lose my spirit or the audience's attention in the middle of a lecture, I remind myself of the enthusiastic tone in which Michael spoke of the increasing number of first-generation and formerly incarcerated students on our campus. I pull myself together by channeling his distinctive jocular-Freirian lecturing style, and thereby attempt to pique the students' interest again. So far, it is working. Even when energetic sessions on the *1844 Manuscripts* and *On the Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* – always two student favorites! – are followed by radio silence during a thick lecture on Money-Commodity-Money chains, they come back to pound me with 25 minutes of tough questions on the intricacies of *Das Kapital* after yet another thick, one-and-a-half-hour lecture. Most of our students do not share my passion for the dark humor of Weber, but I can see in their probing eyes the eagerness to get what they can out of this arch-anti-utopian. *Their* "bloody brilliance" is shining through.

Nevertheless, even a Freirian uplifting of our students' brilliance will never be sufficient on its own. We witness the germs of a new world in the strikes and demonstrations that have been spreading throughout the world in the last fifteen years. Will we be able to equip our students (and broader publics) to engage in these struggles *critically*? Without critical engagement – and yes, it must be *critical* – we risk failing to understand the centrality of capitalist and statist forces that undermine creative human action, and we get stuck on conjunctural political excesses that we ultimately associate with evil personalities. If actions against these excesses and "evil"s keep on being mostly reactive, if they retain their distance to organizations informed by sociology and Marxism, they will also keep on feeding right-wing reaction without collecting the force to defeat it. Marxism and the social sciences themselves need to be reconstructed daily in the light of these actions and what they teach us about how the world works and how we can make it a better place. The way to critically and practically (re)read Burawoy is through connecting these broken lines – these fragmented struggles and

publics scattered throughout the world – by retheorizing the unfinalized parts of his conceptualization in light of new findings about the collective struggles of the subaltern.

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