# "The defense of sociology becomes the defense of society": An interview with Michael Burawoy

Michal Burawoy is Professor of Sociology at the University of California–Berkeley. He has studied industrial workplaces in different parts of the world – Zambia, USA in Chicago, Hungary and Russia. Recently he focuses on the academic workplace and development of public sociology. He held various academic positions, he was twice chair of the Sociology department at UC Berkeley and elected president of the American Sociological Association. In 2010 he has been elected the president of the International Sociological Association. He has published several books, including *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979) and *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition* (2009). He has also coauthored *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (1991) and *Global Ethnography: Forces, Connections and Imaginations in a Postmodern World* (2000).

**Zuzana Uhde**: You have become known for your studies in work ethnography. You studied industrial workplaces in the context of post colonialism in Zambia, advanced capitalism in Chicago and later in the context of state socialism in Hungary and Soviet Union. Let me start with the question about your backward reflection of your participant observation in these different places.

**Michael Burawoy**: My MA from the University of Zambia was a very thick document about student, essentially student politics in Zambia. But I had also another project which focused on studying workers in the copper industry. The copper industry is enormous industry in Zambia, counted for about 90% or 95% of the foreign revenue of Zambia, employed about 50 000 workers. I was studying how the new Zambian mining industry was responding to the preexisting racial order, what was called then the "color bar". Part of the study was also to study the way in which work was organized in post-colonialism in Zambia to see the legacies of colonialism in the workplace. And that was something you could only study by being inside because nobody wants to talk about racism and post-colonialism in Zambia. I could do that because I've gained access to the copper industry through the top management. So that's where I began my interest in industrial work while studying different workplaces in the copper industry. And I was particularly interested in the way that the racial configuration within different workplaces was changing. And more important was not changing. The color bar was being reproduced. When I published the work it was a great scandal. Probably this book about the reproduction of the racial order in the postcolonial Zambia was my major piece of public sociology.

In Zambia I became a Marxist because that was the only thing to be at that time there. It was searching capitalist country in some ways. Class was so pronounced in determining people's fate. The debate was all the time about socialism. But when I arrived to Chicago there was nobody in sociology department who had anything to do with Marxism at all, except for one Polish fellow called Adam Przeworski who just arrived in the beginning of my second year on political sciences department. He just saved my life. He brought the latest fashions of French Marxism from Paris – French structuralist Marxism. Basically I read for the first time not just Althusser and Balibar and Godelier but Gramsci who has never left me since. So my Marxism became much more sophisticated. But I wouldn't leave behind my interest in ethnography. I mean my interest in ethnography emerged in Zambia because I was taught in social anthropology by famous anthropologists there. So I continued my commitment to the idea that the only way to study the world was as an ethnographer. So I decided that what I needed to do was to study working class consciousness and one had to do that through working in the factory. So, in the sense, that was the Chicago school' ethnography but they gave up studying work places. There were some famous studies in the 1950' but nobody had really done anything since, except for William Kornblum, who studied factory community in South Chicago. So I finally got a job in a factory in a large multinational corporation in a machine shop, and I worked there for a year. And then I wrote my dissertation on my experiences there. It was published in 1979 as *Manufacturing consent*. I worked in the Gramscian and Marxist framework to explain the way the consent was organized in the production process itself. I was interested in reconstructing Marxist theory and appreciating that the working class in the United States of America consented to capitalism by virtue of its participation in production at the workplace. I argued that rather than class consciousness the organization and regulation of production produced consent to capitalism. This was a very bleak perspective. But it was consonant with much of the Marxism at the time I suppose because Marxism at the time was concerned with the question of reproduction of the capitalism. So it became a sort of functionalist analysis of capitalism – how is consent produced and how does capitalism reproduce itself.

One of the criticisms of the book argued that this will inevitably happen in any industrial context. So I thought that if I am going to make an argument about capitalism I have to compare it with something which is not capitalist. So I was trying to find a comparative study that would correspond to that South Chicago Machine shop. And then I discovered the book *A Worker in a Worker's State* by Miklós Haraszti, a Hungarian writer and a dissident who was forced in the middle 1970s to work in the factory called Redstar Tractor Factory outside Budapest, he was there as a worker in machine shop very similar to my own. The original title means piece-rates and he showed that basically piece-rates drove the worker. It is said that if there is one thing that the socialist workers have the right to it is the right to not to work hard. But this guy was working two machines. He was truly an appendage of the machine. From the perspective of the Chicago shop floor, running two machines is completely beyond my imagination. So I got interested and I wrote a piece comparinmg my experiences with Haraszti's. After Solidarity movement in Poland in the early 1980s I got more interested in state socialism because this would be the counterpart to my study on the capitalism to analyze if the consent is organized in production. My hypothesis was no, that's why we have solidarity. In 1982 I went to Hungary for couple days with my friend, Ivan Szelenyi, this was the first time I was actually in Eastern Europe and this was the most mind-blowing experience of my life because I expected everything to be very grey inside of the Iron Curtain, and Budapest in 1982 was like the Paris of the East. This was the consumer mecca for Eastern Europe.

My idea was that I would return to Hungary and I would get a job in some workplace, everybody laughed at the idea. Laughed at the idea of me trying to learn Hungarian, because they could see how incompetent I was, and laughed that I would ever get a job. I spent six or seven months in 1983 in Hungary and I finally learned some Hungarian. And then the following summer, which I guess would have been 1984, I got my first job in a socialist factory. Dream comes true, because no Westerner had ever done anything like this. Haraszti was really unique in the sense of somebody doing an ethnographic study of a socialist workplace. I mean sociologists in Eastern Europe Soviet block they did surveys, and they all thought doing ethnographies was not very scientific. I was really the first to be doing serious ethnography of the industrial workpkace.

I spent there 2 months and that's where I began to understand and appreciate the significance of the socialist workplace, and what was fascinating about that workplace is that they were more efficient than the South Chicago factory. The South Chicago factory was actually a very inefficient enterprise. The South Chicago enterprise looked like a stereotype of a socialist factory. Whereas the one in Hungary was efficient, why was it efficient? Because, well because under state planning system there's always a problem with shortages. The only way to adapt shortages is to have a very flexible labor process so you can actually adjust to different types of materials, machine breaking down, shortage of labor. And that's what I discovered one of the most interesting features of the socialist workplace, when it functioned well, was its flexibility. In the United States and Western Europe they were already talking about flexible specialization in the workplace. The real flexible specialization was actually taking place in socialist enterprises. But then the following year in 1985 I started working as a steel worker. It was my dream because basically the steel industry is the heart of socialist industry. It represents the true heroic worker. It was very complicated but in the end I got my job. They said that I would have to be followed around the enterprise with a nurse to look after me because they were terrified that something would happen to me, that I would be killed. A dead American sociologist on their hands would be a diplomatic scandal. In the end I could actually work on shifts, I actually became a member of the October Revolution Socialist Brigade! I worked there on and off for over a period of three years.

Out of this experience came the idea of the production of dissent. My argument was that in a socialist workplace in opposed to a capitalist one, dissent was produced, that is to say there was a spontaneous resistance to the domination of the party state. As a result of criticizing the dominant ideology they developed a socialist consciousness. And this was my argument. That it was through actually participating in the rituals that they became themselves socialist. I examined the rituals that existed on the shop floor, well in the steel mill, and the way that it engendered a critical consciousness of the working class, a critical consciousness that implicitly, not explicitly, implicitly embraced ideas of socialism. In a sense here is a system that generated dissent rather than consent. The essential argument was that there is this fundamental dissent that can from time to time break out into a social movement.

But I was wrong. I was working in Hungary all the way through the 1980s and I thought that they would embrace some form of democratic socialism in 1989. The alternative was that they were just cynical workers and they thought that socialism was completely bankrupt. I thought they would embrace something along the lines of the solidarity movement, something that could be imagined as democratic socialism. But the workers were hardly a participant in 1989 and the breakdown of state socialism, and they basically went along with the transition to capitalism. They thought that socialism was bankrupt. So they thought well capitalism *must* be better than socialism. So, I was wrong in seeing this commitment to a democratic system. When I discovered that Hungary was going to make this transition from state socialism to market capitalism I thought I'm having nothing to do with this. So, I went off to Russia where I stayed until 1991 when the whole Soviet Union began to disintegrate. Hungarian Socialism seemed to work but I could see the Soviet state socialism really didn't work. But

what happened in the 1990s in Russia was a disaster story of what I call "primitive disaccumulation". It was a story of an enormous social polarization. It was a very discouraging and disheartening story, so much so that I couldn't continue to do work ethnography for much longer. In fact I gave up in about 2002.

**Zuzana Uhde**: You have advanced the methodology of extended case method, theoretically driven approach through which you aim to interconnect micro and macro traditions within sociology as well as bridge the gap between social theory and empirical research. However, you recognized the difficulties within this approach, and more general in sociology, to think beyond the nation state which seems to be indispensable in the era of expanding transnational connections and globalized forces. What shall the global sociology look like according to you?

**Michael Burawoy**: That's a big question. Of course you need to have a theoretical framework that allows you to move from micro to the macro level. Theory for me is very important, and I don't believe you can do any sociology without some sort of theoretical preconceptions. I believe that the priority is theory, not any particular theory. In sociology we specialize in the production of theories which are necessary as a precursor to do research that is what enables me to link the micro and the macro. The whole point in doing the research is to reconstruct the theory because every research challenges the theory. You need the theory before it can be challenged. I'm an old fashion sociologist who is really stuck to the nation-state. I think sociologists have an enormous difficulty going beyond the nation-state. Even in the world system the unit of analysis of Wallerstein's work is the nation-state. So I think it's an ongoing dilemma and puzzle for sociologists to have to think about globalization. In a book *Global Ethnography* I did with students, we were discussing this endlessly for two or three years and found most of the theories very unsatisfactory. But we came up with three methodological ways of looking at globalization. One was to see globalization as global forces, forces that somehow are beyond the nation, that seem to impinge upon nations, and they can take the form of a global market or the World Trade Organization (WTO), IMF. These are the sorts of things that somehow exist beyond the nation-state and they affect people. It alleviates the effects and forces beyond the nation-state. So that's the idea of supra-national forces. Second was the idea of globalization as connections; as transnational connections which is more common. So here we talk about the flows of people, the flows of goods and commodities across national boundaries, migration systems, social movements, women's movements for example, across national boundaries. We even talked about labor movements across national boundaries which are very hard to sustain. But mostly it was about the flow of individuals or the things across national boundaries. And the third approach to globalization was to look to what extent do people actually think globally, to see globalization as a supra-national consciousness or a global consciousness. Of course increasingly certain sectors of the population do indeed do that. One of the problems is that many of the famous sociologists spend a lot of time on airplanes traveling around the world. And they think that the world is profoundly global but of course they are just projecting their own experiences called "airport sociology". People are stuck in their locality. There is the question about to what extent our consciousness has become global. That's how I think about that. There are a lot of theories of globalization. Giovanni Arrighi talks about the collapse of US and the role of China, David Harvey talks about neo-liberalism and how it sustains primitive accumulation or what he calls "accumulation through dispossession". It's important but when you're doing concrete studies it's not always clear what sense they make. I don't believe we have a good theory of globalization. And so that's for the next generation of sociologists I think. Sociology traditionally has always thought nationally. The question is can sociology think globally? I think it should. I make an effort. This problem is behind so many of the discussions. So it's implicit in many researches. But in the end they often retreat back to comparative studies between nations which is very different from studying globalization, comparative research is not the same.

**Zuzana Uhde**: Recently, you have become a defender of public sociology, organizing symposia and spreading the idea within academia. You describe public sociology as an engagement in a dialog with diverse publics at local, national, regional and global levels. As such, public sociology is more than the popularization of sociology; it is an integral element of the process of knowledge production. Could you outline here your understanding of public sociology?

**Michael Burawoy**: To explain public sociology, I need to explain the context. The sociology in the United States is hyper-professionalized, self-consciously developed to advancing research programs. As a result the work is often very narrowly focused, treating problems that appear to be sometimes trivial, sometimes irrelevant, and sometimes asking questions for which we don't need to do any sociology. So there are some pathological aspects to professional sociology. And I think many of us spend a lot of time criticizing professional sociology for the ways it constraints the imagination and for its isolation from the world. This is American sociology. If you look at the American Sociology Review or American Journal of Sociology you will find some interesting articles there but most of them will be rather removed from what would be intuitively understood to be interesting. I mean these are journals for fellow academics. But sociology shouldn't be just that. So I argue that it should also have a public format. So that's why I'm calling it public sociology, sociology that is engaged with publics

as opposed to fellow academics. It's not just a matter of popularizing sociology, that is to say making sociological analyses accessible to publics. But public sociology means making sociology accountable to publics, which is different. So it means there is a dialogue between the sociologist and the public. As opposed to a dialogue between a sociologist and other sociologists.

There are different types of dialogue. I talk about traditional public sociology and organic sociology. The organic public sociologist is a sociologist who has unmediated relationship to the public. For example when I go into my ethnography I am having a continual discussion with the people I study. That may or may not constitute them as a public. In Zambia it did, in Chicago it did not. Many sociologists actually, though they are not the majority, spend a lot of time working with neighborhood associations, or with trade unions, or with community groups, or religious organizations. In a sort of dialogic relationship. Then there is a traditional public sociology which basically is the idea of writing books, usually books or periodic articles, newspapers that are consumed right by your publics. There the sociologist hopefully generates debate amongst publics but the relationship between the sociologist and the publics is mediated by the television, the publication.

**Zuzana Uhde**: Do you see public sociology and professional sociology as complimentary or contradictory?

**Michael Burawoy**: I would say they are in a relationship of antagonistic interdependence. You cannot have any sociology without professional sociology. Otherwise there is no sociology. So public sociology does work with the ideas developed usually in the academic world about the character of society and different ways to think about the link between private problems and public issues, the relation between micro and macro level. That is the essence of the sociological project, it is in Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Habermas or Bourdieu, they're all working with this links. There can be no public sociology without professional sociology. However, I also believe that professional sociology is pretty bankrupt and sterile without public sociology. The infusion of continual engagement with publics into professional sociology is essential for vibrancy of sociology. We saw the ways in which U.S. sociology was transformed in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the social movements which brought into sociology whole new perspective and transformed it. Whether they were class or women's movement, whether they were race or civil right movement. Sociologists were unrecognizable in the 1980 and 1990s from what they were in the 1950 and 1960. I was a part of the movement trying to change sociology, but now looking back on it I can't believe how successful we were. Now of course there is a reaction back again to the 1950 and 1960s but that is another story. The point is that public sociology is a continual energy for professional sociology. They are interdependent but they are also antagonistic. Professional sociology is accountable to other sociologists. And other sociologists will use and quote scientific criteria to reevaluate their work. But public sociology is accountable to publics. So in fact we are dealing with a very tense relationship.

**Zuzana Uhde**: In your presidential address at the 2004 American Sociological Association meeting you defined two crucial questions which can guide internal self-reflection of social theorists and sociologists: Knowledge for whom? and Knowledge for what? With reference to the tradition of critical theory you suggested that different answers to these questions characterize two types of knowledge: instrumental knowledge and reflexive knowledge. At the same time you criticized the domination of instrumental knowledge over reflexive knowledge in the academic sphere. Could you explain your understanding of the relation between instrumental and reflexive knowledge in sociology materialized in the division of sociological labor between professional and policy sociology on the one hand and critical and public sociology on the other hand?

**Michael Burawoy**: Well I think one of the essential features of sociology is that we apply to sociologists as well as to the world beyond. I think we too often repress these two key questions; knowledge for whom and knowledge for what. Who are we talking to? And for what reason are we talking to people. I mean what we are doing sociology for and who do we address in the end. I offer two sets of answers to these questions. First, knowledge for whom? It seems pretty obvious and straight forward that we are either talking to ourselves or to other people. And second, there is the question of knowledge for what. Here I turn to Weber, and critical theory, in distinguishing between knowledge which is concerned with means for a given end, as opposed to knowledge which is concerned about ends and values themselves. Max Weber was worried that all our knowledge was becoming like an economics' concern with means that was driven by policy concerns. He was very insistent on the importance of having what he called 'value discussion' – that we should be discussing the basic values of a society which we live in. And the distinction between, what I call instrumental and reflexive knowledge, he would call it formal and substantive rationality, has threaded through the history of critical theory – from early Frankfurt school to Habermas. So there is a tradition of making this distinction. I think of professional sociology as an example of an academic audience concerned with instrumental knowledge. Because I think that as far as sociologists concerned with research, we're operating within research frameworks and we don't question the assumptions of those frameworks. We don't question the foundations of what we do. That would be self-destructive. You cannot play chess and question the rules of chess. You have to accept the rules to play chess. And policy sociologists are not concerned with puzzles but with

problems, problems defined by some client. In that sense it is instrumental, the client defines a problem and you find a solution or you legitimate the solution that has already been discovered. So that is the instrumental knowledge connecting policy and the professional sociology.

Whereas the reflexive knowledge that is suppressed very often in a place like the United States, means the discussion of the value foundations, of the theoretical postulates, of the methodological assumptions, of our research frameworks. So one of the prototypes of a critical sociologist is Charles Wright Mills, he was rather cavalier in the way he did it. Or much better example would be Alvin Gouldner who spent a lot of his life criticizing the foundations of sociology but as a sociologist. He sort of unveiled the value foundations of structural functionalism which was the foundation of sociology in the United States in the 1950s to 1960s. He wasn't speaking to the public, the man on the street, he was speaking to sociologists. Nobody who had not been a sociologist would be interested. But sociologists were very interested. Because he showed the fact that the parsonsian scheme was destined to die, to wither away because it was out of sync with the values of society. There were others like Robert Lynd, Pitirim Sorokin, there were a whole slew of critical sociologists in the United States and particularly in the United States because professional sociology was so well developed there so that naturally led to a critical sociology.

But then there is also the public dimension of the reflexive knowledge, the idea of sociologists discussing values, directions, goals of society with publics, with the extra academic audience. That's why I think there are these four types of sociology: policy, professional, public and critical. Basically I'm saying in the United States instrumental knowledge dominates reflexive knowledge. And so the project is to give some breathing room to critical and public sociology, that's in this country. In other countries it is important to let the professional sociology develop. There are many countries in the world where basically all sociology is in a sense 'public', they operate with very thin theories imported from other countries, particularly the West. And I think they should also develop their own professional sociology. In different contexts, I think it is important to emphasize different suppressed moments of this matrix.

**Zuzana Uhde**: Let me just challenge this a little bit more. You are saying professional sociology is about developing research programs. Then critical sociology is about developing critical insights and criticizing these research programs. But at one point this critical insight would develop in another research program.

**Michael Burawoy**: Absolutely, that is the case, Marxism you might say, or feminism, same thing. Marxism might start out as a critique of professional sociology and then becomes a research program itself. It moves from the bottom left to the top left. What is critical sociology today may be professional sociology tomorrow. Or the foundations for profession sociology. The point in doing critical sociology is in that it does have a feedback into professional sociology. That it does indeed lay the foundations from an alternative vision of sociology. Today, gender is a part of professional sociology, in different ways than in which we saw feminist sociology in the beginning of the 1960 and 1970s when it was critical of the existing professional sociology. Now today, gender – not feminism – has become part of every research program. That's a different way in which a critique is absorbed.

**Zuzana Uhde**: Here I would like to come back to your life experience. Your career was marked by the constant effort not to become complicit with mainstream professional sociology conserving rather than disrupting status quo of the existing order. The contemporary economic and financial crisis which delegitimizes the neoliberal ideology and sharpens social inequalities gives sociology the new impetus. You wrote that: "Now, the point is not to transform sociology but to transform the world." Could you explain your vision how sociology can became more influential and engage with the profound and disturbing global trends of our time given the relatively rigid rules of the academic career, favoring instrumental over reflexive knowledge? Or if I may paraphrase your formulation, what does it mean to be a sociologist in the world of market fundamentalism?

**Michael Burawoy**: Well there are many questions in this. I will answer this in two ways. You say that, "now the point is not to transform sociology but to transform the world". I think in my life I was devoted to transform sociology. Once I arrived in Berkeley, my project was focused along with others at that time on transforming sociology and that meant Marxism and we believe somehow that it would matter if we transformed sociology. We influenced a lot of students. But then you wonder what it was all about. Sociology may have changed a bit. So there is this place for Marxism. There were times when it seemed Marxist couldn't survive in the academy but it turned out it could and it was absorbed and co-opted. So that led me to this formulation. That is of course still not the case of feminism. People feel it really matters if you are willing to feminist projects. The power of feminism is that feminists really feel as if it really matters.

Now we have changed sociology, because clearly sociology is to the left of the world. Perhaps changing the world should be our project now. I remember in 2004 when I was president of the ASA one Alain Touraine came to the meetings and couldn't believe it and he said to me: "Michael, I don't know what has happened here I can only imagine that Bush is good for sociology, good for public sociology." Sociologists in the United States were becoming increasingly, in a sense, committed to projects that

were at odds with the way the United States and the world was going. And I think that was what the interest in public sociology is all about. The market fundamentalism indeed has driven the world in directions that are antithetical to sociological project. I think it is that neo-liberalism has encouraged and put pressure on some sociologists to enter the public domain because defending civil society is so central to the sociological idea. The defense of sociology becomes the defense of society. And that is none other than public sociology.

**Zuzana Uhde**: Thank you for your answers.