

Book Review

Michael Burawoy (2009) *The Extended Case Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press. ISBN: 978-0-5202-5901-0

REVIEWED BY *Jacklyn Cock, University of the Witwatersrand*

Michael Burawoy, Professor of Sociology at the University of California-Berkeley, is not a conventional academic. His approach to research meant that he spent years doing manual labour, including two years as a furnaceman in the Lenin Steel Works in communist Hungary, almost a year as a machine operator in a Chicago engineering factory, a period in a personnel office in Kitwe, Zambia, working on a Hungarian state farm producing champagne, time as a machine operator in Hungary, and drilling holes in a small furniture factory in northern Russia.

None of these experiences were easy, yet it was not as an itinerant worker but as a professional sociologist that he undertook this work. His scholarly career has extended over four decades, conducting research by way of participant observation, a method that took him to the mines and factories and offices of four countries – Zambia, the United States, Hungary and Russia.

The outcome is an academic engagement with the four great transformations of the twentieth century; decolonization, the transition to organized capitalism, the Soviet transition to socialism, and the painful Soviet transition from socialism to capitalism. Apart from the sojourn in the personnel office in order to study ‘Zambianization’ in the mining industry, and a year in a Chicago engineering plant, these experiences were part of his ‘journey into the hidden abode of actually existing socialism’, as he writes in his book.

All this research has led to numerous journal articles and the publication of sociological classics such as *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines* (1973), based on his research in post-independence Zambia, *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), based on his work in a Chicago engineering firm in the seventies, *Global Ethnography* (2000), a book that takes the approach of understanding globalization from below to various countries, and most recently, *The Extended Case Method* (2009).

These research experiences underpin Burawoy’s commitment to scholarly engagement with a wider world outside the confines of the university, to his rejection of what the French sociologist and activist Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘scholastic enclosure’ or a remote and detached academic elitism. Burawoy has theorized this commitment to academia engaging with the real world in two forms: ‘the extended case method’ and as ‘public sociology’.

His theory of the extended case method essentially involves a dialogue between researchers and those they do research on that is respectful, sensitive and reflexive. Instead of university intellectuals imposing their understanding on people, they must be willing to extend their experiences into the lives of those they research. But this is not enough They

must be willing to spend time in homes, mines and factories, for extended periods of time. It is from this vantage point, from below, that processes of globalization can then be analyzed in a way that is often more rigorous than the shallow reports of so many policy wonks who do the canapé and conference circuit.

This grounded approach to research and theorizing has become hugely influential in social sciences globally. This influence will spread and deepen with his new book, which is based on six postulates:

- The necessity of theory. As Burawoy writes, 'We cannot see social reality without theory, just as we cannot see the physical world without our eyes'.
- Our location as part of the world we study;
- The importance of revealing the connections between micro and macro, or what C. Wright Mills called the 'sociological imagination';
- The university as a site of contestation and intellectual struggle;
- Challenging our causal claims and prediction. 'That is how we develop science, not by being right but by being wrong and obsessing about it';
- Forging connections between common sense and social science.

The last postulate relates to Burawoy's notion of 'public sociology.' Public sociology engages with diverse publics reaching beyond the university, to enter into ongoing dialogue with these publics about fundamental values.

This formulation was, in part, a reaction to the way in which public universities in the USA have responded to mounting attacks from the 'right' with 'market solutions – joint ventures with private corporations, advertising campaigns to attract students, fawning over private donors, commodifying education through distance learning and employing cheap, temporary professional labour, not to mention the armies of low-paid service workers', as Burawoy writes.

Universities in South Africa face similar challenges. With government budget cuts, they turn toward big corporations for funding and charge higher tuition fees. In this context the challenge is to serve the needs of the wider society, while maintaining academic freedom, adequate funding and political independence.

But these challenges were also sharp during the apartheid period, when Burawoy held South Africa up as a model of engagement between university-based intellectuals and popular struggles. He writes, 'Visiting South Africa in 1990 I was surprised to discover the close connection between sociology and the anti-apartheid struggle...While in the United States we were theorizing social movements, in South Africa sociologists were making social movements'.

Describing himself as 'a happy Marxist' Burawoy concludes in this new work, 'sociology is fast becoming a real utopia, providing a concrete imagination for an alternative world incompatible with capitalism.' *The Extended Case Method* is riveting reading, not only for sociologists but for everyone searching for that world.

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