

Global Issues

'False' Optimism: The Key to Historic Breakthroughs?

*A Response to Michael Burawoy's 'From Polanyi to Pollyanna:
The False Optimism of Global Labour Studies' (GLJ 1.2)*

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Michael Burawoy has been a foundational figure for the contemporary left in sociology. His method has shaped the thinking and the work of a generation of scholars. At numerous points he has taken strong stands on principle regardless of the risk to his career, most notably in exposing the American Sociological Association's (ASA) machinations to prevent a black candidate from becoming editor of the association's flagship journal. Burawoy's whistleblowing led the president of the association to threaten to expel Burawoy from the ASA. When Burawoy ran for president of the ASA he insisted that there be a political reason for the campaign and the presidency, that it not be (as it almost always is) simply an individual honor. From this he developed and promoted the concept of 'public sociology', a sociology that reaches out to and engages with a larger public, a concept that has opened vital debates within sociology and provided room for numerous scholars who wish to be politically engaged but fear the professional consequences of doing so (Burawoy 2007). Burawoy's presidency of the International Sociology Association will have a similar character, devoted not to his own career but rather to an attempt to make a significant political intervention.

One of Michael Burawoy's distinguishing characteristics is his generosity, his willingness to devote substantial amounts of time and attention to the work of not only his students, but of scholars working in related areas. His comments are serious and engaged, and therefore often critical, but consistently supportive, written from a sense of 'we are comrades in struggle and should treat each other as such'. Even those who strongly disagree with him are treated generously.

Which poses the question of why, in this piece, Burawoy has adopted a tone that is not just critical, but outright dismissive. Peter Evans 'clutches at straws. There's simply no there there' (p. 302). Gay Seidman 'follows the Nirvana Principle, according to which rejecting one solution *ipso facto* makes its alternative preferable' (p. 303). Edward Webster, Rob Lambert, and Andries Bezuidenhout offer 'a flight of fancy into labor internationalism and utopian society' (p. 305). And these people are Michael's *friends*, and he is writing about their award-winning books.

Something must have touched a nerve to produce this uncharacteristic response. I believe the 'something' is that these are people who actually do public sociology, when peculiarly enough Michael Burawoy does not. Throughout his life Burawoy has been overwhelmingly a professional sociologist, oriented and committed to the discipline. The concept of public sociology, developed and promoted in conjunction with his election as president of the ASA, was an exercise in what Burawoy's 2 by 2 schema calls critical sociology. Professional and critical sociology are similar in that both are addressed to an academic audience (see Burawoy 2007: 34). The concept of public

sociology was an important political intervention – in sociology, and perhaps in academic social science more broadly.

But for a person of such stature, such energy, such commitment, it is surprising how little Burawoy has been engaged with what his schema calls extra-academic audiences, either in policy work or public sociology (the other two categories in Burawoy's four-fold classification). A search in 'major world publications' indexed by Lexis-Nexis Academic turns his name up only three times – twice in reports on academic conventions and once in a 1994 report on Gallup Poll findings on Eastern Europe. A Lexis-Nexis search in a much broader group of U.S. newspapers brings up 16 entries, but almost all of these are news reports on academic conventions, reviews of Burawoy's books, or academic journal articles misclassified as newspaper articles. With the exception of an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a publication directed exclusively to an academic audience, Burawoy has apparently never published so much as a letter to the editor in any of the several hundred newspapers indexed by Lexis Nexis, never mind a more extended opinion piece. With one exception – chairing a panel put on by Berkeley students issuing a report about Berkeley workers – Burawoy has not been cited in connection with his engagement in social movements or political struggles of any kind. Gay Seidman appears more often, Eddie Webster dramatically more, and in connection with engagement in political struggles. Burawoy's world is the world of academic sociology, a world in which he takes principled political stands and provides important interventions. He does not, however, appear to engage significantly beyond academia – really, beyond sociology – so far as I know or can see from the available record. Where other Marxists believe that theory must be reconstituted in light of world historical events – the World War I collapse of socialist internationalism, the rise of peasant movements, or decolonization – Burawoy's thesis is 'that Marxism's regeneration now depends on the incorporation of ideas' from a single academic discipline, sociology (Burawoy 2003: 196).

This approach is then reflected in Burawoy's (2010) analysis of what is to be done. Actual struggles by workers do not live up to what is needed – they are too caught up in localism (p. 306, 303), they are unable to control the state (p. 303), they may be exploited but they don't experience it as such (p. 307). Instead of examining actual instances of 'embryonic global countermovement[s]' we should instead develop theoretical frameworks that 'dwell on the obstacles to contestation' (p. 307).

Given limited space, I'd emphasize two points in my response to Burawoy. First, we need better theory, of course we do, but the best theory comes out of an engagement in struggle, not out of re-reading academic work. Praxis is ahead of theory. The women's movement, not a re-reading of Mary Wollstonecraft, transformed our understanding of gender. The old-fashioned Marxist view is that praxis typically precedes theory, and that the task of intellectuals is to understand, analyze, and theorize existing praxis, and on that basis to suggest what the movement will need to do to make further advances. In this piece (and other work), Burawoy seems determined to create a dichotomy between exploitation versus commodification (p. 307 and throughout), when he would do much better to study existing struggles, which would show him that the most promising struggles are precisely about transcending this dichotomy. [In fact, Burawoy's attempt to reinforce a dichotomous boundary between exploitation and commodification is out of line with a great deal of dichotomy-destroying work in academic sociology!] Workers and unions fight against gender discrimination, for

immigrant rights, for improved health care (most notably in nurse staffing ratios). Many ‘commodification’ struggles can’t win without the strategic position, leverage, and resources that workers-unions bring to the table; many ‘exploitation’ struggles cannot win without broad public support based on taking up the larger issues of concern to the community. That’s true for janitors in the United States, steel workers in South Africa, and sweatshop workers worldwide, but it is true as well if we are to rescue and reconstitute universities – we need an alliance of the people who work there, fighting against the destruction of good jobs, fighting in solidarity with the students who study there (and the community members who wish they and their children could study there) and who are squeezed out by the rapidly escalating costs.

Second, Burawoy emphasizes the need for ‘an uncompromising pessimism’ (p. 312). On strictly academic grounds, a good case can be made for that, but a historical understanding shows such a pessimistic logic to be at odds with what is needed to make political breakthroughs. As Eve Weinbaum has argued, *every* successful social movement is preceded by a long string of failures, but ‘successful failures’ can provide the basis for the next step in the struggle. We remember the Montgomery bus boycott, but as Aldon Morris (1984) has shown, it was preceded by several other ‘unsuccessful’ and little-remembered bus boycotts. History was made because Montgomery African Americans in 1955 had a ‘false optimism’ that defied logic, putting commitment and a vision of a better world ahead of cold calculation. In some sense, every major advance in the struggle is taken in defiance of common sense and rational assessment. A ‘false’ optimism – or an optimism and commitment that appear irrational to an academic analyst – is a *necessary* part of the struggle for a better world. We should celebrate, not mock, those analysts who identify struggles that have not won yet, but which may provide the building blocks for future successes.

REFERENCES

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