

Michael Burawoy on Sociology and the Workplace

Transcript

Key

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NW: This is Social Science Bites, with me, Nigel Warburton,

DE: And me David Edmonds.

NW: Social Science Bites is a series of interviews with leading social scientists made in association with Sage.

DE: One of the most important sociologists teaching and researching today, Michael Burawoy, has lived a most unusual life for an academic. He's worked in various parts of the world, in copper mines, and a furniture factory. He's been a machine operator and a steel worker.

His aim has been to critique capitalism and to understand the experience and behavior of workers from observing them close up.

Michael Burawoy, welcome to Social Science Bites.

MB: Great to be with you.

DE: The topic we're talking about today is sociology and the workplace. Perhaps you can sketch out a little bit about your research.

MB: Yes, my life as a industrial sociologist, as I call myself, begins in 1968. I got involved in studying the Zambian copper industry. I'm from Zambia. I took a job in South Chicago as a, well, unskilled but officially semi-skilled machine operator. And then I got interested in studying what it was like to be a machine operator and then a steel worker in Hungary.

And after that, I went off to Russia and there I began working in a furniture factory. And then, as often happened after my research, the country collapsed, or the Soviet Union as it was then, collapsed. And I followed those workers I had been working with for the next 10 or 12 years.

DE: Let's take those one at a time. Zambia, what were you doing in the copper mines?

MB: Yeah, good question. I was there in Zambia from '68 to 1972. And this was four years after independence. And I took a job in the industry, in management, to see how the copper industry was-- which was run by two big multinational corporations-- was responding to the post-colonial government in Zambia.

I was very lucky. I got a position in the personnel research unit. I had a math degree from Cambridge and so I became an indispensable technician in the construction of a single wage structure integrating both the black and the white wage structures. So I began to be interested, covertly, and, of course, it was an unethical project, you might argue, it was a project to understand what was happening to the color bar in post-colonial Zambia. The color bar being the rule that governed the workplace in colonial Zambia and other parts of Africa whereby no whites ever received any orders from any blacks. So what happened to the racial order of the copper industry in post-colonial Zambia?

DE: But you were sort of working there undercover. You weren't there doing an official academic study at that stage.

MB: No. I definitely was not. I was there as a technician and it turned out who became very useful to them. But in return, I was able to find out all sorts of things about this covert project.

DE: Which you wrote up.

MB: Which I wrote up. And then there was an issue of whether I should publish it or not. I mean I was outraged because, of course, my discovery was that the color bar was being maintained. So that when Zambians were promoted into expatriate or white positions, the erstwhile white employee was promoted into a newly created position. So that maintained all sorts of organizational manipulations that retained the color bar.

So that's what I wrote about. And I tried to explain this in terms of the interests of the corporation and within the companies, the interests of managers, white managers as they were then, the interests of the Zambian post-colonial state, the interests of the workers. The workers were not particularly interested in Zambianization and the creation of a sort of new petty bourgeois Zambian class. They were interested in improved working conditions or improved wages. White managers wanted to keep their jobs.

And the crucial player in all this was the government. And the government felt, um, let sleeping dogs lie, you know. We're making a lot of money. After all, at that time, 95% of the foreign revenue came from the copper industry. So they thought, OK, as long as Zambians are being promoted, we're not going to worry about the color bar.

DE: And from Zambia to Chicago, one of the most segregated cities in the United States.

MB: Yes. Well, I went to United States to do my PhD, because I thought that the sociology that I was being taught in Zambia, where I got my first degree in social anthropology, the sociological theory about development came from the United States and was really not the sort of framework that I was particularly sympathetic to. It missed the sort of class analysis that I'd been undertaking.

So off I went to Chicago to the heartland of conservative sociology hoping to actually engage these sociologists about the character of, what was called then the third world, and now we call the global south. But when I arrived, the Committee on New Nations, as it was called, had already disbanded. Nobody was interested in Africa.

So I thought, well, I better take on these people in their own backyard. So I took a job in a South Chicago factory as a semi-skilled machine operator with a view to understanding the experience of workers on the shop floor, but through a Marxist perspective.

DE: And this time it was transparent that you were there as a researcher. You weren't trying to hide anything. They knew what you were doing.

MB: Yes. That was exactly the case. I told management and I told my fellow workers I was there to study the workplace and to understand their experiences. They, however, were not in the slightest bit interested in why I was there. They saw me as trouble, because I so endangered their life by my incompetence. And, indeed, in many occasions, I could have actually killed myself or others.

DE: Were you interested in class and race as they overlapped there?

MB: That's an interesting question. I was interested in a number of issues. The main concern was something I discovered soon as I sort of arrived on the shop floor, namely why were people working so hard? There didn't seem to be a good reason.

Industrial sociology had until that time always asked the question why are workers so lazy? Why do they restrict outputs? And I thought the opposite. That, in fact, these people were working extraordinary hard. And why were they delivering so much effort for so little reward? So I developed an understanding of the way consent was organized on the shop floor. And the book that emerged from this was called actually *Manufacturing Consent*.

And when I argued vis-a-vis race-- because I was always on second shift and probably half the workers were actually African-American and half were actually white-- I argued that actually race did not matter on the shop floor. The way that worked was organized, the way that politics was organized on the shop floor, the way the internal labor market was organized was to actually push aside race and to constitute individuals as industrial citizens with rights and obligations. Everybody was telling jokes, racial jokes, but the point about the racial joke was to say, look, race is not important here, but it is important outside.

DE: From southern Chicago to Eastern Europe to Hungary and to Russia.

MB: Ah, right. See the argument I was making was that there was what I called a hegemonic organization of work that was characteristic of advanced capitalism. Particularly where trade unions were strong, the issue was not to coerce people to work hard, but to organize their consent.

So people argued against me saying, no, Michael. You're wrong. This is not a function of capitalism. This is a function of industrialism. So I took that argument seriously and said, OK, we must compare what was happening in South Chicago with a non-capitalist society. So at the time, solidarity movement emerged in 1980 and '81 in Poland. And many of us were transfixed by this working class movement.

And so I started learning Polish to get ready to go to Poland. But as academics

are always behind the time, it takes them forever. By the time I was ready, that was the end of the solidarity movement.

And so one of my friends [INAUDIBLE] said, OK, Michael, why don't you come to Hungary? He had been in exile for five or six years. I said, why don't you come back with me? So I went to Hungary. And it was an amazing 10 days of my life. It was 1982.

And what was amazing was in Hungary which, of course, was a socialist country then, the sociologists were interested in very similar things to myself-- labor markets, organization of work. And I thought, well, this will be a great place to do research. And this was a relatively open period in Hungary's history.

And so, until 1988, '89, I got a series of jobs there starting in the champagne factory, then a little textile factory in the rural areas. In the summer of '84, I managed to get a job in a machine shop. So I was able to compare machine shop in South Chicago and in this place, Eger in Hungary.

The question was how is work organized differently? What is the consciousness of workers?

DE: Where there similarities with Chicago?

MB: There were a lot of similarities. What was amazing about the comparison was that the machinery was very similar. And they were both machine shops organized on a piece rate payment system. But what was interesting is that in South Chicago, there was certain employment security. It was not easy to fire people. And what was even more important, there was an income security. There was always a minimum wage that you were guaranteed no matter how little work you did.

Whereas in Hungary, the workers were paid literally according to a piece rate

system. There was actually probably greater job security in Hungary than in South Chicago, but there was much more wage insecurity which led people to work actually harder. The mythology at the time was that the one right that the socialist worker has retained is the right not to work hard. But that was not my experience.

DE: And I understand you worked in the steel industry in Hungary, as well.

MB: That's exactly right, yes. There I was, again, very lucky. I dreamt of actually getting this job in the steel mill, because on my way to the machine shop in Eger, I always had to pass through Miskolc which was where the Lenin Steelworks was. And anyway, through a complicated set of relations, I managed to get a job as a furnace man, which is at the heart of the steel enterprise. I dreamed of having this job because the steel worker is the prototypical socialist worker.

But one of the most interesting things I found was the ways in which the steel workers' consciousness was shaped by the workplace in opposition to the ruling ideology. The ruling ideology in state socialism was the claim that state socialism delivered a society that was egalitarian, that was just and efficient. And the workers just shook their heads. This is a society that is unjust, inegalitarian, and above all, very inefficient.

So they would critique the dominant ideology of the party state and the local representatives of the party states for not delivering socialism. So it was an imminent-- what we call in sociology-- an imminent critique that the party state was not delivering on its promises. So in a sense, the consciousness of the workers was socialist by virtue of the country not delivering socialism.

DE: And this you identified through conversations over lunch in the middle of the shift.

MB: Conversations, but also practices. One of the early days of my time in the steel mill was when the prime minister came. The prime minister was going

to come and visit the steel mill. And I was in the October Revolution Socialist Brigade. And we had to do a Saturday shift, so it's sort of equivalent in socialism of taxation. And we had to paint the steel mill. I mean it's ridiculous idea to paint the steel mill.

So I was working with my fellow workers, but I couldn't find a paint brush or a new paint brush. And they were painting the slag door in green and yellow, totally absurd. Anyway, I got hold of a paint brush and found some black paint. And so I started painting the shovels, which is a very important tool of the furnace man, and it's the essential tool, painting them black. And the supervisor came up what the hell are you doing? Misi, they called me. I said, well, I'm trying to sort of build socialism.

And everybody collapsed in laughter. And the wit of the October Revolution Socialist Brigade said Misi, Misi, you are not building socialism, and you are painting socialism. And you're painting it black at that. This idea of painting socialism was not just something that people talked about, but it was actually in the practice. A whole set of rituals in which one sort of pretended that socialism was this nirvana on earth. At the same time, workers realized that this was a ridiculous charade.

DE: So the final stop on our travel itinerary is Russia, or then the Soviet Union.

MB: Yes. I was in Hungary until 1988, '89. And finally it dawned on me that this is coming to an end. There was a moment when I thought that this and might have been a transition from a state socialism to a democratic socialism, which I thought had been the imagination of the solidarity movement itself. But it was a flicker of a possibility, but rapidly disappears. And the transition was clearly going to be from state socialism to some form of capitalism. And I was not interested in that transition.

So I thought that I would try and make my move to Russia, which was at that time still the Soviet Union. And it was about the only time it was conceivable that I could work as a worker on the shop floor. So this was the beginning of 1991. By August 1991, basically, it was the failed counter-coup. Yeltsin on the tank. And by the end of '91, there was no Soviet Union.

But in those six, seven months, I was able to actually, first of all, observe very closely a rubber factory in Moscow where there was a civil war taking place between those who were representing the old order, the Soviet Union, and the planned economy on the one side, and the Young Turks who were representing the market economy and the independence of Russia from the Soviet Union. I've never seen anything like it in my life. Daily warfare within management and it embraced all the workers in this very famous rubber factory.

Then I move far north to the Arctic Circle nearly, a republic of [INAUDIBLE]. There I worked in a furniture factory as a semiskilled operator. There I really saw the true socialist workplace. You know, in Hungary, it was relatively efficient. In fact, I often argued that the Hungarian factory was more efficient than the one in South Chicago. But in Russia, it was a very different story. The shortages were really quite severe. So it meant there was a lot of shock work. For part of the month, there was no work. And then, the last three or four days of the month, you had to make up for lost time.

DE: You've obviously had an amazing career, fascinating experience in different workplaces. When you go there, you're not going there looking at the workplace through neutral eyes. You're going there with a Marxist perspective, aren't you? And I just wondered whether that affects what you see.

MB: Well, I'm definitely going with a Marxist perspective. And it definitely affects what I look for. But it doesn't necessarily affect what I actually see. In all these workplaces, I was often faced with lots of surprises. You know, I was not expecting

to find people working so hard in South Chicago. I was not expecting the reproduction of the color bar in Zambia. I certainly wasn't expecting the Hungarian workplace to be an efficient workplace.

So I have a perspective. And I have certain expectations that come with that perspective. But very often, those expectations are violated, which leads me to reconstruct the theory. And that's how the Marxist theory of the workplace proceeds through the ways in which it is shown to be at odds with reality, through the anomalies that sort of challenge the framework.

DE: But it's never led you to question the framework itself?

MB: Ah. Now that's an interesting question. The most radical challenge to my Marxist framework came in the post-Soviet Russian experience when I was following these workers that I had been working, with who then lost their jobs in a period of extraordinary decline through the 1990s. And there was no work. So the Marxist perspective that I developed, which was production-based, really didn't give much insight into what was going on. What was really the dynamics of post-Soviet Russia revolved around the market place, around market relations, relations of exchange, not relations of production.

So I had to really shift my framework. And at that point, I became very much entranced by the work of Karl Polanyi and a book called *The Great Transformation*, which focuses much more on the processes of commodification rather than production.

DE: Do you see your project-- if that's not too grand a word for it-- as being essentially a descriptive one? Or do you have a normative agenda? Do you want to change things, improve things, for the workers?

MB: Yeah. I don't think there's any doubt about that. The Marxist framework that I come with is concerned with the experience that workers have of exploitation,

understood in the very technical sense of the product of the work of being appropriated from the worker and the worker being left with sometimes a subsistence wage, sometimes less than a subsistence wage, sometimes with no wage at all. In Russia, they were working and they were not getting anything for it.

You can't do sociology without having a normative framework. It's what drives all our theoretical frameworks, whether they are the Draconian, Weberian, or Marxist.

DE: You're not an activist though. So how would your work help promote the change that you would like to see?

MB: [LAUGHING] No, I'm not an activist. I definitively was not an activist, for example, in South Chicago. There I was trying to build a Marxist theory that would displace sociology. In those days, the resurgence of Marxism within sociology, within academia, was aimed at that displacement of the reigning mainstream sociology. And I think we made-- looking back on it-- amazing headway.

But the idea was very naive. The idea was that somehow the displacement of reigning sociology would have, itself, consequences.

DE: You're very unusual in that you've totally immersed yourself in the work place. Often it must have been strange for the your fellow workers to have you there. Was the fact that you were observing what they were doing changing the nature of what they were doing?

MB: No way. The way I do ethnography-- you call it total immersion. And it is a sort of total immersion, but it's quite an interventionist mode of engagement. So I would go into the workplace and actually try to provoke crises, little ones, not huge ones, but little ones.

You know, when I was in South Chicago, I would go around the workplace asking people why are you working so hard? And they would get furious, because they

don't believe that they're working so hard, which is very, very clever on the part of management. And so they would get very annoyed. And the responses were very interesting.

In Hungary, similarly, just my very foreign presence would be a sort of provocation. But that is not to say that I was actually shaping or reshaping in any way the workplace. The workplace has sort of obduracy that was quite far beyond any of my interventions.

I had no intention in my workplace studies to change anything. The disruptions I created were of a very small scale character, but very crucial to my understanding of the processes that I was observing. You need to shake a social system a little bit to understand really what holds it together.

DE: It sounds like you're describing the work of an ethnographer or an anthropologist. You call yourself a sociologist. To what extent do you see yourself though as also interdisciplinary, drawing on these other disciplines?

MB: Yeah. Well, I was trained as an anthropologist, as well as a sociologist. I've always been committed to the ethnographic approach to doing research, studying other people in their space in their time. I am quite open to drawing on different disciplines. I do this regularly, whether it be anthropology, whether it's human geography, whether it's economics.

However, I am a sociological chauvinist. I do believe in the specificity of sociology as a discipline. I think particularly important in this era of what I call third wave marketisation and that people called neoliberalism. This is a period in which state and economy collaborate in an offensive against civil society, those institutions and organizations and social movements that are not part of the market nor part of the state.

And I think sociology's standpoint is actually in the standpoint of civil society.

We study the economy, study the state, from the standpoint of its effects on civil society. And in that sense, sociology is very different from economics which is interested in the promotion of the market, and different from political science that is interested in the promotion of political order.

Now let me say, it's very important, that I am not denying that there are dissident economists, dissident political scientists, very important figures who are contesting the mainstream character of those disciplines. However, the central feature of sociology is indeed to contest the overextension of the market and the overextension of the state. And as such, it plays an incredibly important role today.

DE: Presumably, that's where your work can go now, because you've been studying the industrial working classes. Well, in the developed world, the industrial working classes are, if not quite an extinct species, then an endangered species. And it could be said that your work belongs in the past.

MB: Yes, indeed. My work was done in the past. My friends would laugh at me when I would move from one apparently extinct industry to another. But many of the principles I developed, and many of the ideas I developed, and many of the methodologies I developed for those industries are applicable to contemporary workplaces.

So, for example, the idea that one should not just look at the work process as a set of relations that produce things, but also make sure that the work process has a place of politics-- that is a place of regulating relations, that relations in the workplace are regulated sometimes coercively, sometimes through organizing consent. And the idea of actually studying the workplace through ethnographic methods, through being there working alongside people, is also something that can be transmitted and reenacted in the contemporary workplace.

DE: Michael Burawoy, thank you very much.

MB: My pleasure, David.

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