

Michael Burawoy (1947–2025): The Man of Dialogue and Path to Objective Knowledge

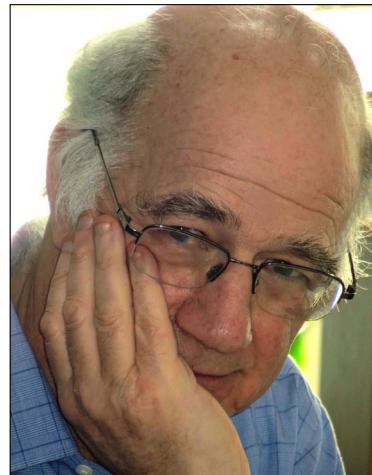
On February 3, 2025, Michael Burawoy – a key sociologist of his generation who persistently defended the idea of *public sociology* – tragically passed away. His contributions to the study of globalisation, industrial relations and class stratification stemmed from his conviction that truly robust sociological theory is born when sociologists engage in direct dialogue with society. While critics sometimes accused him of ‘politicising science,’ he countered by asserting that through engagement in broader public debates, he was in fact protecting sociology from the one-sided pressures of ideology and power. This led to what he called *engaged objectivity* (Burawoy, 2004), in which rigorous methodological reflection is merged with discussions of real-world problems.

We reflect on his life and intellectual trajectory as well as the ways in which his academic journey found renewed inspiration in the interwar Czechoslovak tradition, which similarly emphasised the importance of public engagement and the study of totalitarian regimes as safeguards for *living* democracy and objective knowledge.

Life and academic beginnings

Michael Burawoy was born in 1947 in the United Kingdom and completed his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, where he was drawn to the *Chicago school of sociology* and its focus on urban ethnography. In the 1970s, he travelled to Zambia, where he studied the everyday workings of factories and how workers’ daily practices reflected broader power structures (Burawoy, 1972). Burawoy’s emphasis on in-depth ethnography in diverse contexts eventually led him to the University of California, Berkeley, where he became a professor and systematically developed the *extended case method*.

Burawoy published some of his most influential studies, most notably *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), at the University of California, Berkeley. Inspired by the theories of Friedrich Engels and Max Weber as well as the psychoanalytic insights of Erich Fromm, Burawoy demonstrated how factory practices contribute



Michael Burawoy
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to the legitimisation of social inequalities (i.e., 'manufacturing consent') and why it is essential that workplace routines be understood within the context of global capitalism.

Academic career, key works and theoretical roots

Burawoy always approached social processes from a broad perspective; this culminated in his book *Global Ethnography* (Burawoy et al., 2000). This work, co-authored with several colleagues, demonstrated that local phenomena cannot be understood in isolation from transnational structures, indicating that globalisation has tangible impacts on workers, communities and institutions across continents. His other writings (e.g., *Public Sociology: Mills vs. Gramsci*, 2007) explored how publicly engaged intellectuals can navigate between traditional academic research and the world of grassroots social movements.

Following the tradition of Max Weber (1949) and Karl Mannheim (1936), Burawoy emphasised that scientific neutrality is an ideal that can only be achieved through constant self-awareness of one's own values and the power dynamics influencing research. Mannheim's theory of *utopia and ideology* led Burawoy to examine how concepts of *objectivity* can be distorted by dominant ideologies if sociologists naively believe in absolute detachment. As an intellectual successor to W. E. B. Du Bois (1935), Burawoy recognised the importance of studying racial, class and colonial inequalities. Reading the work of G. H. Mead (1934) provided Burawoy with a theoretical foundation in interactionism, reinforcing the idea that self-awareness and social consciousness emerge from public communication and everyday interactions. Burawoy also drew inspiration from John Dewey (1927) and Jürgen Habermas (1984), who both saw democratic discussion as a primary source of knowledge and legitimacy. Without such engagement, Burawoy argued, sociology risks becoming trapped in technical jargon and vulnerable to hidden political pressures.

Public sociology as a counterbalance to the politicization of science

A central theme in Burawoy's concept of *public sociology* (*For Public Sociology*, Burawoy, 2004) is the idea that when research is ignorant to society, it becomes even more susceptible to external power interests. A detached (or purely expert-driven) science can paradoxically become more prone to the influence of political or corporate funding, thereby being politicized in a hidden way. On the other hand, *open collaboration with the public* strengthens the ethos of social science. This position aligns not in opposition to but in agreement with Mertonian principles of scientific objectivity. *Fieldwork-based discussions with the public* help uncover blind spots or biased interpretations that might otherwise remain invisible. Public sociology, in this sense, balances society's direct ties to corporations and government institutions, which often seek to dictate what constitutes research that is relevant to the public.

Burawoy pointed to Robert K. Merton's (1973) principle of the communal nature of scientific knowledge (*CUDOS* norms) to counter concerns that public engagement diminishes expertise. Open debate and verification of findings across different social groups ultimately strengthen the robustness of theories and lead to the development of a more *objective* understanding of the *status quo*.

This logic was also shared by thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu (1988) in his analyses of 'fields of expertise' and Hannah Arendt (1958), who argued in *Vita Activa* that the world is truly 'common' only in spaces in which citizens can mutually interact. Public sociology, therefore, prevents academia from becoming an unwitting tool of political power – the more a sociologist engages with the people, the less likely sociologists and people are to be controlled by the political apparatus.

Living theory and legacy in the republic of sociologists

Because we are analysing Burawoy's approach within our own *social context*, it is essential to recognise its connection to Czechoslovak intellectual traditions. A similar line of thought in In the Czech and Slovak setting can be traced back to the first two Czechoslovak presidents, T. G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, as well as the journalist Ferdinand Peroutka, a prototype of the first *public sociologist* who stood against the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century. Peroutka (*Budování státu*, 1933) emphasised that the study of totalitarian tendencies requires the active participation of experts in public life to reveal mechanisms of manipulation, censorship and ideological distortion. Peroutka's stance clearly intersects with Burawoy's argument that theoretical depth and objectivity are strengthened when sociology is oriented towards the public, which forms the foundation of democracy.

The concept of a *republic of sociologists*, which was introduced by Nešpor (2011) to capture the situation in interwar Czechoslovakia, resembles Burawoy's (2021) conception of *living theory* in that intellectuals are expected to participate in discussions that shape society and ensure that totalitarianism is prevented. Without this grounding in real social dynamics, science risks becoming a mere tool of propaganda.

Contribution to contemporary sociology

Burawoy's concept of *public sociology* resonates with scholars seeking a path beyond excessive technocratic approaches and rejecting a mere *neutrality without ethics*. Burawoy further developed Mills' (1959) *sociological imagination* and Gramsci's (1971) idea of the *engaged intellectual*, advocating that sociologists should not be isolated academic experts but rather *catalysts of public discourse* through their writings, teaching or civic engagement.

Engagement with the *field* fosters methodological innovation. In Burawoy's *extended case method*, local encounters are the starting points for theories that

are tested and refined through interactions with public actors. Public sociology allows questions *alive in society* (about power, inequalities and ideologies) to mature in light of public discussion. Burawoy (2004) asserted that this approach minimises the risk of research being covertly politicised.

Michael Burawoy's unwavering commitment to *public sociology* demonstrated that the path to *objectivity* does not lie in retreating to an ivory tower but in opening up to a diverse, critical and even dissenting public. His legacy is a testament to the power of dialogue as the foundation of sociology and democratic knowledge.

Whether the *purity, purposelessness and pride* of theory itself are born from that which assumes the dual nature of a single entity – *dialogue – is a great question that history has left unanswered*. Ultimately, Burawoy's pursuit of dialogue as the path to objective knowledge was the focus of his life and scholarly work.

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