
INTERVIEWS

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WE ARE LIVING IN A CAPITALIST WORLD

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МЫ ЖИВЕМ В МИРЕ КАПИТАЛИЗМА

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— **Michael, first of all I want to thank you for the opportunity to talk to you. I can see how busy you are here in Toronto. It is really nice that you agreed to have a conversation not only with yours truly but with young scholars Pavel Lisitsyn and Valentin Starikov. We will publish this interview in the Special Issue of the Public Opinion Monitor Journal. The basic idea of the Issue would be to have a look at the development of sociology from Yokohama to Toronto. So, if we can ring up the curtain, here is a prelude question. How many interviews have you had in your professional life? Does it make any sense for academia people? Does it make any interesting input to sociological business?**

— I'm always flattered to be asked for an interview and it would be impolite to turn them down but I'm not convinced my knowledge warrants them. At the same time,

interviews can force one to take positions that one might not otherwise; it leads one to think about things in novel ways. And, of course, interviews can be more exciting to read than long exegeses, after all they are dialogues! It gives a more dynamic dimension to a person's thinking.

— **Do you really believe it's a good activity for academia, or specifically for those who will read that after?**

— When I edited *Global Dialogue*, every issue had one or two interviews, and sometimes I would even turn a boring article into a lively interview.

— **Well, let me ask you about optimistic-pessimistic issue with regard to sociology that you discussed in your presentation at the ISA past Presidents Session. So, what makes you believe that the next stage of sociology development would be optimistic rather than pessimistic, as you have argued today in your presentation?**

— Not as simple as that. When we were in Yokohama there were already black clouds moving in from the horizons. We had arrived in Yokohama riding on an unexpected wave of largely positive, progressive social movements — Occupy, Arab Spring, Indignados — over the previous 4 years. They were receding and even disappearing and have been replaced by more «reactionary» movements, but that does not preclude another reversal in the future. What exists is not natural and inevitable, but the result of forces at work — we have to study those forces that might give rise to different future scenarios. My claim, today, was, in fact, that you can't do that without theoretical framework.

— **Just to make a link with the previous question: how would you assess, or rather characterize the papers presented tonight by the past ISA presidents? I will be more specific. In Yokohama, and this is my personal take, all the past ISA presidents were sort of criticizing your way of understanding what sociology is. Today I would say that only Michael Burawoy himself sort of criticized the sociology he defended back in Yokohama.**

— I think that the difference between myself and all the others is how I talk about the contemporary world as a form capitalism. It was very interesting how Alberto Martinelli, with whom I share many views, rooted the turning of the tide as a failure of democracy, the failure of globalization, but he didn't bring up the concept of capitalism. It's a quite deliberate omission — glossing over what I believe are the fundamental contradictions we face in contemporary society — contradictions that are not going to simply evaporate, contradictions that have been with us for the last three centuries or longer. In Yokohama, I was making an argument that we have to rethink the link between capitalism and social movements. And Polanyi obviously gives us a very interesting way of doing just that. Neither Michel Wieviorka nor Piotr Sztompka talked about capitalism. And it was interesting, Margaret Archer spoke of new powers of regulation, I could have made a point about how that, too, is linked to capitalism. She definitely did not make that move. As soon as we talk about capitalism, at least in the way that I do, or the way Polanyi does, one thinks of socialism — something dismissed by my colleagues for whom the concept is very problematic. Even though it is gaining ever great credence in the US and elsewhere.

— **Following up the line about capitalism, can we come to the name Karl Marx. The year 2018 is the year of his 200th Anniversary. How would you characterize the development of Marxist oriented sociology from Yokohama to Toronto?**

— Well, four years is a very short time! But, I might mention two ideas. The first, as I said to day, is an old idea, closely associated with Rosa Luxemburg, but most recently developed by David Harvey. It is the idea of accumulation through dispossession — an idea closely linked to our conference theme. It refers to the accumulation of private wealth through dispossession of people's access to work, dispossession of our control over nature, land, and air, and dispossession over the production and circulation of money. The idea of dispossession is a powerful one present, in this ISA meeting, but also within Marxism. So, that's one issue; the other is the importance of conceiving of alternatives to capitalism. I'm thinking here, in particular, of the real utopian projects of Erik Olin Wright. He is calling for a normative sociology that discovers challenges to the existing order of capitalism. He includes the conditions of existence and expansion of such experiments as participatory budgeting, cooperatives, new modes of organizing and delivering care, and above all the idea of a universal incomes grant which has become a popular project in the last few years, both from the right and from the left. Exploring the ways in which capitalism is not just compatible with but actually generates alternatives to itself is another line of development.

I suppose my own interest lies in thinking about changing modes of knowledge production and, as I said at the end of my talk, the transition from universities in capitalist societies to capitalist universities. We have to see how this process takes place in different parts of the world. In fact, you might say that Russia has been one of pioneers in the privatization of higher education — one of the advantages or should I say disadvantages of late capitalist development. But it's happening all over the world. I think this transition makes higher education ever more problematic, serving those who have money and power rather than the public interest.

— **Why do young social scientists, or sociologists, have to read Marx, more generally, to read someone who was born two hundred years ago?**

— Good question. There are many reasons. Along with Durkheim and Weber, Marx provides a model or even an aesthetic of how to go about theoretically informed research. They are a fund of important ideas and concepts that continue to inspire sociology. They are founders of disparate research programs. For myself I'd emphasize their importance at a time when sociology has become a specialized field, and is split up into disparate sub-specialties. So, the broader vision of what we are up to gets lost. When Marx, Durkheim and Weber were writing the discipline of sociology was only beginning. They were not hampered by narrow professional concerns and could be more expansive, could develop a broad imagination of the world we inhabit. We are steadily losing that imagination as the best minds are expected to tackle narrower questions. The classics give us a sense of important issues — still important because we are still living under capitalism — the ones we face now and the ones we are likely to face in the future. These theorists create magnificent architectures around such concepts as alienation and exploitation (Marx), rationalization and domination (Weber), solidarity and division of labor (Durkheim). Each of them thought seriously and imaginatively about where society was heading. We lack that today. There's almost a refusal to think seriously about the future in favor of the development of technical expertise.

— **Yes, but you're comparing them. Could you, please, talk specifically about Karl Marx who was earlier than Durkheim and who said he is not a sociologist.**

— Karl Marx generated a theory of the world in which we live now. Actually his theory applies better now than probably it ever has. We are living in a capitalist world, and capitalism actually shapes lived experience in a more profound and deep way. Marx gives us the basis of a theory of capitalism, but, of course, various elements are problematic. To be a Marxist, among other things, is to work toward the reconstruction of Marxism. There is, of course a history of that — from German Marxism, to Russian Marxism, Western Marxism, Third World Marxism, and so forth. Each branch of Marxism has made original contributions to the Marxist intellectual tradition by dwelling on specific anomalies as posed by the history of different countries. Thus, today I would stress three issues that need rethinking within Marx's oeuvre.

First, embedded in his theory of capitalism was a theory of class struggle. It was a flawed theory. He thought that struggle would beget more struggle. But he was wrong, capitalism is more resilient than he anticipated — struggle leads to concessions and reforms, absorbing, refracting, and atomizing struggle. We have to modify that theory of class struggle.

Second, he had an undeveloped theory of the state. He thought that the state was an instrument of the capitalist class but he couldn't see how autonomous it was and how it could recreate capitalism in new forms — organized capitalism.

And, third, he didn't have a theory of transition from capitalism and socialism. Different branches of Marxism have contributed to the solution these problems — although some like Soviet Marxism was a degenerate pseudo-science that created obstacles rather than challenges!

Despite the shortcomings — and after all he was living in the 19th century when the world was a different place — he established the foundations of a theory of the world which we still inhabit. The problem with sociology is that in criticizing Marx, it too often thinks it is burying Marxism.

— **Exactly, that was also my question: how has it come that after 1991, after the Soviet Union collapse Marx withered away?**

— Well, did he wither away?

— **No, it didn't.**

— Indeed, you could argue that 1991 marked the liberation of marxism, from the stranglehold of Soviet Marxism whose degeneracy was proven by the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Marxism becomes a ruling ideology its usefulness as a scientific research program is lost. Still, as Marxists, we should not simply dismiss the Soviet Union as a form of «statism». It was the most important and tragic social experiment of the twentieth century — like it or not, it was one form of socialism — state socialism. So we must examine its origins, its history, its collapse. We must also recognize how the different expressions of state socialism — in different countries and at different times — inspired diverse real utopias that attempted to create a more democratic socialism.

— **If we can change our lenses a little bit. The word 'artificial intelligence' here at the ISA Congress in Toronto is not of a much use. I was really impressed in a positive sense when Margaret Archer said to us that she is working on the book about artificially intelligent robot. So, what do you think does sociology have to**

do something with artificial intelligence? Do sociologists have to look at their work in the era of Big Data, online technologies, artificial intelligence differently?

— There are two things I would say. And it's not a direct answer. You mentioned Big Data that has become a fad — as if collecting more data allows us to approach the truth more closely. Big Data does not deliver imagination, in fact, Big Data just confuses everything. So, I think it becomes even more important, as I was emphasizing, that we have social theory to organize our thinking, so that we can actually use the Big Data in a useful way. It's not a solution by itself. And it all too easily becomes a problem.

The second thing is about AI. I think there has been a lot of interest, re-interest, in the area that I used to spend all my time studying, namely the future of work. People, of course, are arguing that actually artificial intelligence is going to replace work. I have PhD students who study how digital platforms operate and with what consequences. It turns out — as in previous technological revolutions that predicted the end of work — these digital platforms depend on a massive input of deskilled computational and emotional labor. Why? Precisely because these platforms turn out to be very dynamic organizations so that there is the continual production of lags that can only be filled with mental labor. In addition to the labor involved in producing the ever-changing algorithm, Uber, for example, relies on and mobilizes masses of drivers. So, these are my two kopeks. In summary, artificial intelligence has to be seen in its institutional context, in an organizational context, and also in the context of — yes! — capitalism.

— What is the hottest theme, topic, question in sociology today?

— Probably 'What is sociology?'

— Still the same thing that was there two hundred years ago, right? And what do you think, should sociology be an activist or not? Or should it just be a science?

— You've got to have both. We need to have both a sociology as a professional discipline that engages in research and that should inform the way we engage with public. And that engagement with publics, in turn inspires new direction for research.

— Having today the ISA Congress in North America and looking at all the developments of sociological business how would you assess the situation with sociology in the United States, in North America more generally?

— It is surprisingly strong. If I look at my own university, sociology becomes stronger and stronger. We have more undergraduates than ever, who major in sociology, specializing in sociology, while the number of graduate students has fallen only slightly over the last 20 years. Undergraduates are interested in sociology because sociology actually speaks to their precarious existence. Student fees have shot up, they work longer hours at wage labor, they take out loans that later become an albatross around their neck and, at the same time, they face an ever more uncertain labor market. Sociology speaks to the frightening world they face.

— But how is sociology faring elsewhere?

— I'm at a public university. At places like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, there are few sociology majors — what parents will pay \$50,000 a year in fees and tuition for their children to study «useless» sociology. With growing inequality, sociology speaks to ever greater numbers of students, even if it does not lead directly to a career. It's one of those ironies that sociology becomes intellectually richer with the polarization

of inequality, the concentration of poverty and insecurity. We are past-masters at studying distress and suffering.

Sociology may be faring well in the US, but not necessarily in other countries. Whereas in the US it is the postgraduate degree that counts, in most countries it is the undergraduate degree. More is at stake economically when the destiny of a student depends on their undergraduate degree. But I should add students don't become sociologists to become rich, but to create a more just world. The best sociology — as we see in Marx, Weber and Durkheim — is impelled by moral commitments. That's why public sociology is so important — sociology should speak to the lived experience of broad populations.

— **In this case, would you recommend not just abstract young people but your relatives or people who you see every day to major in sociology?**

— Yes, sure! Why not? But I would do no more than explain why I love it I love to teach — to have a dialogue with students about their lives. You can't do that with mathematics, chemistry, physics. History — possibly. Political science — problematic. Economics — no. So, you can actually enrich people's self-understanding and how they fit into the world — that's what sociology offers.

— **If you were a young researcher what field or topic would you choose within sociology?**

— What would I choose... That's interesting — perhaps I'd study China. That extraordinary complex and dynamic world. Perhaps I'd study the rise and fall of Soviet communism, and its key turning points. Closer to home, I think I would be interested in the university. The sociology of the university is poorly developed. Perhaps that's because it's difficult to study one's own world but, as I said before, very important. I'd probably have difficulties finding a job with that specialty because young professional sociologists are not supposed to question the institutional foundations of their own discipline.

What else? Sociology of work has become a new exciting field once again if only because of the impact of AI and digitalization. Social movements continue to support interesting research. As I said today we should devote more time to the study of right-wing movements, reactionary movements, movements with which sociologists don't sympathize. Slowly but surely young researchers are recognizing that. I was just in Poland and discovered a number of young sociologists studying the distinctive brand of populism that has grown up there and, one might add, all over the former Soviet Union and its satellites. What is the popular appeal of populism? Why do so many of my Russian friends adore Putin?

— **And a young PhD, what should he or she do to become a good sociologist?**

— There is no one way. The advantage or from some points of view the disadvantage of the US PhD is that it takes forever, as many as nine years, to finish. There are few, at least those who work with me, who do it in the normative time of six years. It is a major chunk of their lives. The first thing they have to do is to learn the field, learn what others have discovered. They are not starting from scratch, but stand on the shoulders of their forebears. Few countries can afford to have their doctoral students master the existing literature and so science doesn't develop so rapidly or it does so only by accident. By spending three or four years learning the field, what others have

accomplished, allows you to focus your research, which of course makes it more rather than less challenging. I think one shouldn't be in a hurry, but for so many that's a luxury they cannot afford. It means you have to be funded somehow or other — to pay the fees as well as keep yourself together, body and soul. One of the best ways of surviving is to teach — indeed, that's where one often learns the most — and after all if you don't like teaching then you have to think twice about becoming a sociologist. Research positions are few and far between, and they can be quite sterile.

But to return to research — for it to give satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment one not only has to build on the work of one's forebears, one has to submit oneself to the critical gaze of one's colleagues. One has to try to publish in the best journals that have a strong refereeing system, where you will receive constructive feedback from experts in the field. One has to get used to rejections! It's important to acknowledge that one is part of a community of researchers and it can be very important to work in a team with a dedicated leader like yourself, Andrey.

What I'm saying to you is very much shaped by my own experience in the United States, which has its pluses and minuses. Many countries can't afford such training. But, wherever one is, one should turn sociology into a vocation — to live for as well as off sociology. You know, I often joke, there are three types of sociologists: 8-hour, 12-hour and 24-hour sociologists and they develop corresponding types of sociology.

— If you remember back in 2010, after Goteborg ISA Congress where you were elected as the ISA President you came to St Petersburg to the Summer School that Piotr Sztomka and myself have organized for sociologists from the former Soviet Union. We had the session «University in crisis». Is University continue to be in crisis? Is it in ruins as I insisted at the time? May be you detect today something else?

— Well, I don't remember what I said then but today I do think the university is in crisis or, at least in transition. As I said before we are seeing a move from a university in capitalism — a university with some autonomy producing knowledge for publics — to a capitalist university run as a profit-making machine.

I think we can identify four crises. First, there is a fiscal crisis. And I think that affects universities everywhere. In the past the university was regarded as a public institution, essential to the very meaning of the nation and thus amply funded with public money. When I was in Zambia after independence, the university was among the first institutions to be created. The public university, educating its best and brightest, is no longer viewed as a symbol of nationhood. Today states are telling universities to garner their own funds. So each university develops a machinery for revenue seeking and cost cutting — student fees, charitable donations, subsidized research for corporations, etc.

This reshapes the structure of the university, which leads to the second crisis — a governance crisis. Now that the university becomes a profit center with hard budget constraints, its administrators are imported from the private sector. They often know nothing about the university and its traditions, regard academics and their ways as obstructionist, so they expropriate control from or coopt those who used to run the university. From a cooperative, decentralized self-regulating entity, it becomes centralized into the hands of an administrative class with its pet projects and luxurious living. I call them spiralists — spiraling in from outside, they use the university to build up their reputations, so they can spiral on and the university spirals down.

Trying to turn the university into a private corporation leads to a third crisis — an identity crisis. Who are the staff, students, and faculty? Whom do we serve? Are we servants of power, generators of money for the new class of administrators or are we still in the business of innovative research? Are we in the business of orchestrating new money-making degrees through on-line education; are we training students for lucrative jobs or instilling ideas for the development of a humane society. Which brings me to the fourth crisis — legitimization crisis. The university is no longer a public institution with unquestioned legitimacy. The more it seeks revenues from outside, the less likely states will fund it — it has become a private good rather than a public good.

The solution to the degradation of higher education — if there is one — is for the university to rethink itself, to make itself accessible to broader sections of the population but also to recover its public mandate by being accountable to publics. It has to shed its «ivory tower» quality and engage the broader society. That will require a lot of rethinking, but it could give sociology a privileged place in the university. Sociologists will become the architects of bridges between the university and the wider community.

— **How would you assess the university today with regard to junior scholars: does it like them or does it just use them?**

— They are exploited. Whether as PhD students providing cheap labor, subsidizing research for corporations, whether as teachers paid miserable wages and suffer blocked opportunities. In some ways we are still a feudal institution. When I teach my large classes I have a bevy of «teaching assistants» who do the face-to-face instruction and the grading of papers. This can only be justified if those young scholars are also apprentices who will become fully-fledged professors in due course. If, however, their mobility is blocked and they remain in lowly, exploited positions, then we are in trouble. In many European countries — such as the UK, Spain, Italy, Germany and Poland — upward mobility is indeed blocked, and young scholars are employed on a short term contract basis, often cobbling together a series of part time employments or moving out of higher education altogether. Not surprisingly unionization is spreading across the field of higher education affecting the character of the university.

That's the negative side. But on the other hand, the university still depends upon the originality and inspiration of the next generation. The next generation challenges and supplants the senior generation. That's how science and scholarship progresses. Of course, the senior generation resists those challenges from below, but in the end they have to give way — gracefully or reluctantly. Over time, if the university works well, knowledge production gets transformed. So, universities are dependent upon both the exploitation and the stimulation of young scientists. The university still offers a space for creativity — something important to and treasured by young people of today.

— **So, exploitation is necessary here?**

— It seems so. In the old feudal order exploitation was more hidden, but, as I've been saying, in the capitalist university it becomes ever more transparent. We have to learn to fight to retain our autonomy with a view to contributing to justice and prosperity for all.

— **Professor Burawoy, thank you so much for the interview!**