

THE GAMES ACADEMICS PLAY: A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL BURAWOY

*OS JOGOS QUE OS ACADÊMICOS JOGAM:
UMA CONVERSA COM MICHAEL BURAWOY*

*LOS JUEGOS QUE LOS ACADÉMICOS JUEGAN:
UNA CONVERSACIÓN CON MICHAEL BURAWOY*

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Keywords

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Abstract: Michael Burawoy, former president of the American Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association, is one of the most distinguished social scientists of the early 21st century. Having been engaged in ethnographic fieldwork for a great deal of his academic career, Burawoy has lately turned his attention to the internal divisions of labour in his discipline, engendering a compelling analysis which culminated in his case for public sociology. In the following conversation, Burawoy draws upon examples from his ethnographic research to address prevalent themes in the sociology of sport. He articulates his views on the social movements that have recently erupted in various parts of the world, and provides an incisive critique of the commodification of sports and leisure.

Palavras-chave

Sociologia Pública.
Jogos.
Hexis Corporal.
Movimentos Sociais.
Esportes.

Resumo: Michael Burawoy, ex-presidente da American Sociological Association e da International Sociological Association, é um dos cientistas sociais mais destacados do início do século XXI. Depois de ter realizado trabalho de campo em pesquisa etnográfica durante boa parte de sua carreira acadêmica, Burawoy recentemente direcionou sua atenção às divisões do trabalho internas à sua disciplina, produzindo uma análise instigante que culminou em sua defesa da sociologia pública. Na conversa a seguir, Burawoy usa exemplos de sua pesquisa etnográfica para abordar temas predominantes na sociologia do esporte. Ele formula suas visões sobre os movimentos sociais que eclodiram recentemente em várias partes do mundo e apresenta uma crítica incisiva à mercantilização do esporte e do lazer.

Palabras clave

Sociología Pública.
Juegos.
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Movimientos
Sociales.
Deporte.

Resumen: Michael Burawoy, expresidente de la American Sociological Association y de la International Sociological Association, es uno de los científicos sociales más destacados de inicios del siglo XXI. Después de hacer trabajo de campo en etnografía durante buena parte de su carrera académica, Burawoy recientemente centró su atención en las divisiones del trabajo internas a su disciplina, generando un análisis provocador que culminó en su defensa de la sociología pública. En la conversación que sigue, Burawoy usa ejemplos de su investigación etnográfica para abordar temas predominantes en la sociología del deporte. Formula sus visiones sobre los movimientos sociales que estallaron recientemente en varias partes del mundo y presenta una crítica incisiva a la mercantilización del deporte y del ocio.

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The so-called Revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents – small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. Noisily and confusedly they proclaimed the emancipation of the Proletarian, i.e, the secret of the 19th century, and of the revolution of that century.

Speech at the Anniversary of The People's Paper – Karl Marx (1856)

Perhaps best known by the readers of the *Movimento Journal* for his contributions towards the invigoration of “public sociology”, Michael Burawoy (MB) is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. For over 40 years he has employed ethnographic techniques in the study of industrial workplaces in countries as diverse as Zambia, Russia, Hungary, and the United States. Among the most notable outcomes of this extensive fieldwork – which ultimately led to the formulation of his “extended case method” – are the books *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979) and *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes Under Capitalism and Socialism* (1985).

Whereas the bulk of Burawoy's research is centered around labour/power relations and the struggles of the working-class, his scholarship also covers a wide range of subjects, which include: methodological considerations on the practice of ethnography; the deterioration of working conditions amidst the increasing corporatization of North American universities; the challenges and possibilities for a “global sociology”; and, within a more theoretical framework, a reassessment of the relevance of Marxism to contemporary leftist projects.

In parallel to such a prolific scholarly production, Burawoy served as president of the American Sociological Association (ASA) from August 2003 to the 99th ASA annual meeting, held in California on August 2004 – the occasion on which he delivered the speech that is remembered in this special issue. He has, moreover, recently finished his term as the president of the International Sociological Association (ISA), a position that he held from July 2010 to July 2014. Burawoy is also the editor of *Global Dialogue*, a magazine published by ISA.

Over the course of the last decade, much of Burawoy's work has been dedicated to the advancement of “public sociology” – an endeavour that, broadly speaking, is anchored in the understanding that a particular division of labour exists within the disciplines that deal with sociological modes of inquiry; and that, whereas for a great deal of the 20th and 21st centuries radical perspectives have emerged and grown into prominence in the “professional” and “critical” realms of these disciplines, the scholarship produced in this context has had only a limited impact in shaping the world in which we live (thus the task which concerns “public sociologies” and its practitioners). Beyond academia, Burawoy has himself been an active public sociologist and, with regard to a domain of identity politics which often brings British and Brazilian folks together, a devoted supporter of Manchester United.

The interview featured below was carried out by a supporter of an equally red-and-white coloured soccer club from the far south of Brazil who shares with Burawoy the burdens and exhilarations of supporting his team from a distance. Guilherme Nothen (GN) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, where he is currently undertaking – informed by ethnographic and historical methods – an inquiry into the rise and downfall of the production of hockey equipment in Canada, as well as some parallel projects tackling the (ab)use of animals in sport. The following exchange was conducted by email during the first half of 2014.

GN: On behalf of the staff and the editorial board of the *Movimento Journal*, I would like to thank you once again for generously accepting our invitation to be featured in this interview. We are looking forward to hearing the challenges and contributions that you, as a leading sociologist in your area of expertise, will be able to bring to our field of inquiry.

You seem to be very fond of the use of the notion of “combat” as a metaphor for various issues that we face in academic life: you have depicted the process of writing and supervising a dissertation as a relationship resting upon an inherent imbalance of power and unfolding as a “combat” in a variety of tasks, rites, and interests (BURAWOY, 2005); you have suggested that the public university, pervaded by conflicting ideologies, is an ongoing “battleground of competing real utopias” (BURAWOY, 2012)¹; and, perhaps more significantly to our area of study, your book, *Conversations with Bourdieu* (2012), revolves around his intriguing characterization of “sociology as a combat sport” – an idea that you developed further and which ultimately took form in your insightful attempt to portray the perspectives of those who would have been some of his potential “combatants”. In addition, just recently you edited a collection of papers by well-known public sociologists under the title: *Precarious Engagements: Combat in the Realm of Public Sociology* (BURAWOY, 2014). Would you say that interviews (and I mean here also in a methodological sense) are a little bit like “combats” as well? In which case, in the spirit of self-preservation, I would deem it appropriate to begin by clarifying where you stand in relation to the – somewhat controversial – notions of “good sportsmanship” and “fair play”...

MB: That’s interesting! I have never reflected seriously on the idea of combat though, as you point out, I have used it in many contexts. It is true that I see academic life as combat, having been involved in endless and often senseless battles throughout my academic career. Perhaps, I became more self-conscious about its significance when I studied shop floor politics in a Chicago factory. It was there that I saw the power of the “game” to elicit the active consent of workers, who themselves patrolled rules which had the effect of guaranteeing profit for their employer. I have been in other situations, for example in Russia in the last year of the Soviet Regime, when factory games were suspended for open combat. Indeed, the enterprise was consumed by a civil war.

I have always thought that the game metaphor captured well the idea of social structure in which actors exhibit agency that results in the reproduction of constraints. The game metaphor is a way of thinking through Marx’s aphorism that people make history but not under conditions of their own choosing. Then, it became a question of understanding the dynamics of games, how they destroy or transform themselves as well as the way they intersect with each other, but that’s another story.

Moving toward your question, I have always been struck by the games academics play, games of recognition in which what looks totally trivial from the outside becomes a major stake to the players themselves. Here Bourdieu has helped me think through the importance of domination within games although he overlooks the exploitation that is often their hidden precondition.

Talking of Bourdieu and fair-play, it is curious that the film about his life, *La Sociologie Est un Sport de Combat* (2001), is translated into English as *Sociology Is a Martial Art* – the reason I suppose is that in France academic life, especially at the top, is a sport without rules, an open struggle for sovereign power, you might say, whereas in the United States (US) it is a more genteel rule-bound competition within disciplinary regimes. To call sociology a “combat sport” in

¹ The public university: A battleground for real utopias. Unpublished manuscript, 2012.

the US would be to effectively discredit it, whereas in France it is more likely to be a term of endearment! One of my colleagues is a Frenchman and he continually discredits himself, unable or unwilling to follow American rules, our professional code of conduct. I wonder what it's like in Brazil where the French influence, at least in the social sciences, is so strong?

GN: Your remarks on rules and codes of conduct, as well as some of their practical effects, are quite stimulating! I am not sure how far can we push the analogy with academia here, but remaining for a moment in the terrain of professional sports, one thing that has always puzzled me is the manner in which our widespread obsession with the “fairness” of the contest (take the issue of “doping” for example) largely resonates with the meritocratic reasoning of capitalist societies and has thus for the most part only been articulated at a superficial level, that is, mainly as rules and codes of conduct that pertain to the “field of play”. On the contrary, structural “unfairness”, for instance the huge economic disparities among clubs in European soccer, is hardly ever called into question. And if one follows such a path of inquiry further, an intriguing paradox soon becomes apparent, which is the fact that the few serious attempts towards “redistribution of wealth” in professional sports – the North American “draft lottery”, “revenue sharing”, and “salary cap” policies – were developed at the heart of financial capital and in societies that, historically speaking, have strongly resisted most efforts in this direction.

But you also ask a very interesting question, and I am afraid that my answer to it will be only partial given my limited knowledge of the issues at stake. As you have accurately pointed out, the development of the social sciences in Brazil has been largely shaped by scholarship from continental Europe (and most notably from France). Yet, it seems to me that the last two decades have also been characterized by a growing influence of the North American (and I would add British) academic “ethos”, expressed among other things by the regulation of research through grants and scholarships; the institutionalization of several ongoing processes of evaluation and measurement; and the overarching attempt to quantify almost everything. I suspect that the gradual shift towards such understandings of academic life has had the effect of downplaying polemical exchanges among Brazilian scholars – although they still understandably take place in a country squeezed between these dominant academic traditions.

With respect to “combatant” approaches, I recall an intriguing debate within the field of sports studies that perhaps you will find of interest. Around the mid/late 1990s, the work of the so called “Leicester School” – which pioneered the study of soccer hooliganism in the United Kingdom drawing upon the legacy of Elias and the framework of figurational sociology – began to fall under attack by a group of scholars conducting a more “ethnographically-based” inquiry on the topic. So sharp did the exchange between these two schools become that one commentator has suggested that, “without wishing to trivialize some of these academic rivalries, one can see similarities between their behaviour and that of the people whom they study” (BAIRNER, 2006, p. 595). What is unusual in this case is that the “combat” was not only acted out symbolically but arguably fed from the empirical research itself, almost as if these scholars were seeking to “embody”, within the academic domain, some of the values and practices prevalent in the fan culture that they were trying to represent.

Speaking of embodiment, I am really glad that you brought Loïc Wacquant into our conversation, as he is often regarded as a highly influential scholar in our field due to his contributions towards the study of bodily practices. Being immersed in fieldwork for such an extensive period of time, how do you account for the issue of embodiment in your own scholarship, par-

ticularly given the physical exertion that is often involved – but also so frequently obscured – in the labour process?

MB: That's another issue to which I have given too little thought. You are correct embodiment is a central feature of working life and central to the way workers "recognize" each other. Coming from the middle class and having never undertaken physical labor as a livelihood my entry into factory life was quite a spectacle – and humiliation from the get go. My bodily hexis stood out, situating me awkwardly among those born into the laboring class. It was not just a matter of awkwardness – my uncoordinated movements on the shop floor became a danger to myself as well as to others. Indeed, it is a miracle that I'm still alive. We can talk as though unskilled or semi-skilled work is work without skill, as something anyone can pick up but that is simply not true. All such work presumes tacit skills, usually acquired from an early age in working class communities. Even such a simple act as shoveling ore or rubbish is quite an art as I discovered to my chagrin, when I became a furnaceman in a Hungarian steel mill. With awe I would watch the arc of an experienced shovel sending its contents streaming through the air, all the more remarkable when placed alongside my own clumsy efforts to combat gravity. My bodily comportment was a permanent embarrassment.

From a sociological point of view the response elicited by my foreign body offered me all sorts of "outsider within" insights into working class culture. How different communities respond to incompetence discloses a great deal. In Chicago my fellow workers resented my presence as well they should have as I was a danger to everyone. I was an affront to their self-conception as experienced workers. In Hungary, by contrast, they found my incompetence amusing and saw me as a resource in other respects – source of information about the United States (it was the 1980s when Hungary, although still socialist, was opening up to the West) and an amusing and seemingly harmless distraction. They found my spoken Hungarian endlessly entertaining and so all my defects became tokens of endearment, so different from Miklos Haraszti, author of *A Worker in a Worker's State* (1977). As a Hungarian dissident sent by the state to work on the shop floor as punishment he was largely shunned by his fellow workers. My experiences in Hungary were also very different from those in Russia where I worked in a furniture factory in 1991, toward the end of the Soviet Union. There I was again shunned by my fellow workers, suspicious of my intent – what was an American Professor doing working on the shop floor in the Arctic Circle? They had never laid eyes on a live American or even a professor let alone an American professor who was working in their factory.

Only later did I discover the real source of their animosity. My forewoman would tell her workers that they had better come to work on time because an American professor was watching them. So I was being used as a pawn in class combat on the shop floor. More than that, this was a time of great deprivation, not only because of the generalized shortages, but because of the ban on alcohol, which meant the absence of the most important social lubricant.

But let me get back to this matter of bodily hexis. In writing about the working class Bourdieu is very disparaging because, so he says, they cannot understand the conditions of their own subjugation. They internalize the dominant classifications as their own, classifications that disparage their own way of life. This is a very intellectualist approach to the working class. If he were to take his own concern with embodiment into the working class, then he might have discerned the reversal of his hierarchy based on the skillful use of the body. In this classification which is at the center of working class consciousness, the dominant are dominated and

disparaged. I experienced all the shame and embarrassment on the shop floor that Bourdieu attributes to workers when confronted with questions about the music, food, art, films that they “appreciated”. So yes, indeed, embodiment forms the practical consciousness of the working class, much as Gramsci wrote, and it is the role of organic intellectuals to give it a cultural form.

GN: I find what you refer to as “bodily hexis” a fascinating notion, and one which seems to speak directly to our efforts to further advance a branch of scholarship that places the matter of embodiment at the center of its inquiries. On a related note, it may be interesting to point out that, flirting with a somewhat similar idea, some physical educators and sociologists of sport have come to articulate, also drawing upon the work of Bourdieu, the concepts of “physical” or “bodily” capital – although they usually had quite different concerns in mind when compared to the ones that came up in your answer, such as for instance the manner in which the hierarchies established among school kids are often anchored upon athletic/sports skills, etc.

I am however intrigued by the empirical examples that you have offered in order to illustrate this idea of “bodily hexis”, as they so vividly expose the disconnection between physical and intellectual labour that, according to Marx’s early writings, is at the very heart of ideological reasoning (and such a tension became apparent even despite the fact that you, being engaged in fieldwork for so many years, are probably much more skilled in manual labour than most career academics). Given that towards the end of your last answer you have already started to discuss a task that appears to be linked to the endeavor of public sociology, could you elaborate a bit further on this shift from “practical consciousness” to “cultural form”, particularly in how it relates to bodily practices? And, perhaps more broadly, does the project of public sociology, in your opinion, somehow seek to address (or maybe “bridge”) the gap between physical and intellectual labour, more or less in the same manner that it tries to reconcile, arguably in a mutually enhancing spirit, the division of labour within the discipline of sociology?

MB: This is an interesting matter. In his early writings around the time of the factory occupations in Turin, 1920-21, Gramsci, then editor of the workers’ cultural magazine, *L’Ordine Nuovo*, had a rather optimistic view about the possibility of linking mental and manual work, elaborating the practical consciousness of workers into a cultural form. Later he would see how difficult it can be for workers to develop their own class culture and the important role for intellectuals, but even then the problem lay less with the workers and more with their supposed organs of representation, trade unions and political parties. This was why he paid so much attention to *The Modern Prince*, The Communist Party. In my view the problems are even deeper and to be found in the very ways that work is organized under capitalism – ways that gives rise to *mystification*, a concept you won’t find in Gramsci. Although he did talk about hegemony being born in the factory in the US, this hegemony was concerned with the *securing* of consent and not with the *obscuring* of exploitation.

Here I begin to look more like Bourdieu and his claim that “misrecognition” is necessarily part and parcel of the experience of the dominated, including the working class. But for Bourdieu the source of misrecognition lies in the unconscious formation of the habitus, the internalization of social structure that makes domination invisible. I take the view that “misrecognition” or what I call “mystification,” following Marx, is a product not of embodied habitus, but of the social situation of capitalism, the way its *organization* hides exploitation and organizes consent. Thus, in an alternative form of work organization and political regime, what is mystified under capitalism, namely exploitation, can become transparent. Under state socialism, for example, where

I worked for many years in Hungary and Russia, exploitation and domination in production are palpable and therefore they have to be justified. But this is a very precarious form of domination. It generates demands that the party state live up to its claims, generating class struggle, and bringing forth state violence.

Whereas in advanced capitalism intellectuals can look ridiculous when trying to represent their interests as the interests of workers, in a state socialist order there is a potential material basis for intellectuals and workers to form a united front. Perhaps, the best example of this is the Polish Solidarity Movement of 1980-81, especially in its early days when intellectuals played an important role not only in connecting different groups of workers but also in articulating a theory of the movement – the self-limiting revolution – that lay behind its appeal to different classes. In other words, the possibility of an organic link between manual and mental work varies with the social and political context.

This is, indeed, one way of thinking about public sociology – the linking of sociological knowledge to the practical, everyday consciousness not just of workers but of any actors in society. It is what C. Wright Mills famously wrote as the definition of the sociological imagination, connecting personal troubles to public issues, connecting the experience of the milieu to the wider social structure. Only, this is far harder than he imagined. Simply presenting sociology to people (even to sociologists themselves) does not convince them of its truth. A lot of hard work has to be done to bring people out of their cocoons to see the bigger picture in which what they regard as freedom can be a manifestation of domination. The world conspires to make sociology appear incredible and unbelievable – and it's the challenge of public sociology to break through the power of everyday experience and to do so in the face of competition from so many alternative messages. Perhaps in Brazil, with its traditions of contestation and social movements, with its history of slavery, colonialism and dictatorship, it is easier to transmit sociology than it is in the US where sociologists have to contend with the culture of hyper-individualism.

GN: I have never thought about this matter in such a light, but I believe you are right when you suggest that our struggles for liberation have helped to create an enduring stage of social unrest in Brazil, while some sensitivity towards sociological knowledge can indeed be observed amidst the organizing principles of these collective efforts. I would, however, like to return to the problem of the articulation between social movements and public intellectuals that you alluded to above.

Not too long ago, demonstrations of great magnitude erupted all over Brazil, and among their most notable characteristics was the absence of a centralized leadership and a massive refusal to associate with symbols and demands put forward by political parties and labour unions – in this respect, the Brazilian case was in fact quite similar to many of the other social movements that have recently taken place in other parts of the world (such as the Occupy Wall Street protests or the Indignados in Spain, to name but two). Interestingly enough, some analysts have argued that it was precisely this lack of a clearly articulated agenda that constituted the major weakness of these social movements, and yet most of the traditional branches of the Left have been unable to respond to this challenge other than by placing their hopes once again in the long-established institutions devoted to the political representation of the working class. Further exploring C. Wright Mills' scholarship here, this would bring us to the problem of determining which factions of society could potentially undertake the task of producing structural change (the “radical agencies of change,” as he puts it), whereas his pessimism

about the revolutionary prospects of the working class was skeptically perceived by other proponents of the Left (e.g. MILIBAND, 1962). Provided that intellectuals and their publics are as manifold as the agendas they seek to advance, what stance would you take regarding the difficulties of bringing these struggles together and what forms do you believe such alliances would take?

Also interesting concerning these social movements in Brazil, if I may add, is their connection to sports. It seems to me that this connection possesses a twofold character: on one hand, it springs from the critique of the corporatization and commodification of sports themselves, and it may therefore as well take shape in the interrelated struggles that seek to combat racism, gender oppression, homophobia, etc. within this domain. But this connection also appears to be expressed, as we have witnessed a year ago, in the critique of sports megaevents and the use of the public/international interest that they attract as “catalysts” for the rebellion against social inequality at large. What do you see as the central tasks to be carried out by a “public sociology of sport” in face of these recent developments and what possibilities are there to keep articulating and pushing these struggles further, particularly given the commitment of the Brazilian State to corporatize(d) sports that will likely continue to shape its political agenda for the next few years?

MB: You raise two apparently disparate questions, one concerns the possible unifying cement of contemporary social movements while the other concerns the corporatization of sport. They are, as you intimate, connected. They are linked through “commodification.” We live in a world of what I call third-wave marketization, what many refer to as neoliberalism. This is not the first time the world has been subjected to market fundamentalism, but it is the deepest wave of marketization in which altogether new arenas and modes of commodification have appeared.

To understand its specificity, we can work with Karl Polanyi’s idea of fictitious commodity – those factors of production that when commodified threaten the existence of society, indeed human existence. He focused on labor, land and money, and, indeed, today we are experiencing new ways of commodifying labor power – from outsourcing to sex trafficking; new ways of commodifying money through financialization, resulting in economies of debt at the personal, national and global levels; new ways of commodifying nature that involve land expropriation, privatization of natural resources, including water, and even the attempt to commodify the air we breath through, for example, carbon trading and the purchase of the right to pollute. The commodification of sport, turning it into a giant profit-making machinery, and more generally the commodification of leisure represent clear-cut cases of contemporary marketization. The commodification of the production of knowledge and its dissemination, stemming from and deepening the privatization of the university is another feature of third-wave marketization with fateful consequences for arriving at solutions to the devastation of our planet.

One can trace many of the social movements to which you refer to the exigencies of commodification, both the creation of commodities through dispossession and the creation of new and deeper inequalities. To be sure the way these social movements – Arab Uprisings, Indignados, Occupy, environmental movements, etc. – express themselves politically will vary with the political regime, but as you suggest they are often suspicious of close collaboration with civil society and the state, as it is these formal institutions that are fueling the marketization these movements oppose. State and civil society have become instruments of marketization. Liberal democracy has been hijacked by capital, and, in particular,

by finance capital. These movements therefore seek alternative forms of democratization – participatory, direct, prefigurative, and horizontal. And Latin America is the home of such movements, perhaps in part because the transition from dictatorship to democracy was especially disappointing, coinciding with third wave marketization, and its local manifestation as structural adjustment.

You are right to point to the dilemmas of these movements – unable to forge the capacity that would threaten the status quo. As we have seen over the last four years, many of the movements have been the dynamite to challenge and even bring down old regimes, but they don't control the outcomes and they have tragically become victims of the processes they set in motion. Egypt and Ukraine are dramatic instances but none of the movements, except perhaps the Chilean student movement, have taken strides toward their goals. These movements are caught in an irrevocable vice in which formal and hierarchical organization absorbs and dissipates the movement just as self-reliance fails to generate public support, although here again Latin America, including Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Chile, is an exception. These movements, many of them heavily repressed, are liquid and reappear often where they least expected. As sociologists, I think we have to see them as expression of something much wider, forces they indicate but do not control, the forces of third-wave marketization that assume diverse political forms and, increasingly, I might add, of a right wing character. In the end this wave of marketization will only be arrested by a global counter-movement that can challenge the machinations of finance capital, the destruction of the environment, including, of course, climate change. We could already be witnessing the slow violence that will wipe out considerable proportion of the world's population, and in their desperation lead to a class war of unimaginable proportions.

And here perhaps the commodification of sport is relevant as this is a commodification that creates a social movement that only fuels further marketization. As I write I'm watching the beginning of the World Cup which has overtaken Brazilian protest against the diversion of so many resources. And I was in South Africa at the run-up to the last World Cup watching the illicit deals and fortunes being made by the ruling class as well as the expulsion of traders from their lands, not to mention the enormous diversion of resources away from the poor. And yet I'm as avid an enthusiast for football as anyone. I love my Manchester United, despite the disastrous times that have befallen it, whom I've supported through thick and thin since I was seven years old, even as I might condemn its financialization. Commodification turns out to have an appeal all of its own, and the biggest struggle in the world today is not against commodification but for participation in commodification, whether this means getting a real job or partaking in fantasy consumerism. If commodification is not reversed then human society will indeed be ripped up, but as Polanyi warned, we should also be wary of such reversals as they can bring all sorts of nasty regimes to power. Social science, and the study of social movements in particular, cannot look just to the benign or the progressive, it must strive for a balanced assessment of where we are and where we are going in an attempt to restore some sanity to the barbarism around us.

GN: Would it be fair to say that the combat against the commodification and stultification of human existence is, then, the “secret” of the 21st century?

MB: Let's call it then an open secret.

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