

## The Modern Prince and the Sociological Imagination. Michael Burawoy in Conversation with Riccardo Emilio Chesta

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### Abstract

In this conversation, Michael Burawoy discusses how he discovered the sociology of Gramsci in radically diverse contexts — from a vibrant post-colonial Zambia to Analytical Marxism in Chicago. The British sociologist reconnects the travels of these debates to contemporary public sociology, updating Gramsci's key sociological concepts with the critical scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu, the social anthropology of Jaap Van Velsen and Raja Jayaraman, and the political economy of Karl Polanyi. These somehow real and imaginary conversations with social theorists bring Burawoy to stress the importance of reflexivity in sociological research. This means that sociological imagination is fostered through a constant dialectical relation between the art of theorizing and the “concrete phantasies” of social movements, which are well exemplified in Wright's “real utopias.” Moreover, in Burawoy's view, a new “Modern Prince” is urgently needed today and it is a public sociology which recognizes the mission of his critical knowledge against marketization.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu through Gramsci; Capitalism; Intellectuals; Public Sociology; Social Movements; Sociological Imagination; Theorizing.

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*In memory of Erik Olin Wright*

## Introduction

After decades spent investigating working conditions and class consciousness in American capitalist factories as well as in socialist Hungary, the intersection between (post) colonialism and class structure in Zambia, the transition from socialism to capitalism, and the implication of globalization on labor for the broader public, Burawoy became the President of the American Sociological Association (ASA) who, in 2004, launched the so-called “public sociology” program (Burawoy, 2005). There, in eleven theses, he critically summarized the current state of the social sciences, detecting the risks of cold instrumentalism, subordination to the self-referential rules of the academic market and denouncing the epistemological parochialism of the US sociological field.

Interrogating the type (*for what*) and scope of knowledge (*for whom*), Burawoy has called for a “partisan sociologist,” co-producing a reflexive knowledge informed by critical publics. In so doing, he has tried to overcome the separation of theory and praxis in which academic sociology incurs and has ultimately updated in contemporary sociological terms what Gramsci once coined the tasks of the “organic intellectual.”

Indeed, if Gramsci saw in the party structure — the Communist Party — the “Modern Prince” in whom resides the range of action of the organic intellectual whose task is to demystify the ideology of bourgeois society and state, for Burawoy the mission of the public sociologist resides in conceiving his scientific work as on the side of civil society or of humanity (*Thesis XI* of his ASA Presidential Address, Burawoy, 2005).

These theses stimulated a wider debate on the mission of sociology as a science and as an emancipatory tool, one which has reinvigorated not only theoretical discussions on the state of the social sciences but also the interrelation between sociology, the state, the market and the way they contribute to a critical public sphere (Brint, 2005; Burawoy et al., 2007; Calhoun, 2005).

In this conversation, which took place at the margin of Michael Burawoy’s lecture entitled *A Polanyian Theory of Social Movements*, held at the Center on Social Movement Studies at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, we tried to detect the roots of the public sociology program in previous parts of his scientific and individual biography. The dialogue explores Burawoy’s intellectual travels, his first degree in mathematics, the discovery of the passionate chaos and logic of the social world, and the first efforts and difficulties of a young scholar who, while deciding to pursue a path in US academic sociology, never separated scientific rigor from serious activism.

This conversation shows, moreover, the importance of an interdisciplinary mindset in the elaboration of new theoretical and practical sociological toolkits. Far from being a linear trajectory, Burawoy’s scientific path creatively merges contributions from Jaap Van Velsen’s Manchester School of Social Anthropology, from Jack Simons’ activist and Marxist scholarship originally developed in South Africa, from Indian social anthropology via Raja Jayaraman, and from debates in Continental as well as Analytical Marxism.

Since the beginning, Burawoy’s sociology knows no borders and constantly discusses theoretical and empirical problems in light of different politically-relevant (and sometimes contentious) intellectual and material contexts — from post-colonial Southern Africa to industrial Chicago and socialist Hungary.

Starting from a puzzle which is particularly resonant for the Italian sociological public, the conversation tries to make sense of the dilemma concerning the international circulation of Gramsci’s sociological toolkit (and its Italian removal). Indeed, the sociological legacy of Gramsci has also been widely recognized in the US field through courses and seminars held in many sociology departments, not least by Burawoy himself.<sup>1</sup>

But Gramsci is not the only great theorist who inspires Burawoy’s critical scholarship. Instead, Gramsci’s reception is triangulated with a broader engagement with Western and Post-Colonial Marxism, the critical structuralism of Pierre Bourdieu and the critical political economy of Karl Polanyi.

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1. [http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/syllabus/gramsci\\_syllabus.pdf](http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/syllabus/gramsci_syllabus.pdf)

Far from being a natural encounter, the interview also shows how Burawoy's reception of Bourdieu's theory is a story of initial rejection. Already trained on the critical sociology of Gramsci, Burawoy initially refused the most fatalistic elements intrinsic to Bourdieu's class analysis (specifically, the one contained in *Distinction*) and it was only through the intellectual intercession of Loïc Wacquant that he later acknowledged the relevance of Bourdieu's scholarship.

In this sense, Gramsci is also read close to analytical Marxist scholarship. It was indeed at Adam Przeworski's seminar on *Marxist Theories of Politics*, held in Chicago in 1973, that Burawoy had the opportunity to reflect on Marxist class analysis but at the same time to construct his path in the US academic sociology of the period.

As in a recent Presidential Address at the International Sociological Association (Burawoy, 2015), our conversation ended with a discussion around the fertilizing role of theory and sociological imagination. Burawoy tackles the issue of social theorizing by starting from one of the main domains of sociology: social movements. Indeed, if both the economist Thomas Piketty in his *Capital in the XXI Century* (2013), and Pope Francis in his *Apostolic Exhortation* (2013), acknowledge the instances of diverse social movements which have emerged around the globe since 2008, Burawoy here reads the similarities of these two eminent and radically-diverse critiques in terms of manifestations of a Polanyian third wave of marketization: Neoliberalism (Burawoy, 2015).

In this sense, social movements are not only objects of study for sociology but also subjects of theorization which can help sociology in designing alternatives, "concrete phantasies" suggesting new paths and practices for society. Focusing therefore on the centrality of social theory, the end of this interview becomes, coincidentally, an homage to his old and great friend who unfortunately passed away before this interview could be published: the sociologist Erik Olin Wright. The last words are for his "real utopias" project, which appears to Burawoy to be the most successful and enduring of public sociology projects, an indispensable work based on rigorous scholarship and passionate activism, a source of deep inspiration and expertise for many generations of present and future sociologists.

*Florence, 22 May 2018*

**Riccardo Emilio Chesta (REC):** I would like to start with a very provocative question. It is a little bit embarrassing for me as an Italian — it is the first time that I interview a sociologist who doesn't just use, but also teaches Gramsci! Because in Italy, no academic program has put Gramsci in the canon as a sociological author to study. So, since you are not only using Gramsci but rediscovering the key concepts of Gramsci's intellectual background — you also teach a syllabus that goes deeply into the key tools that are useful for contemporary sociologists — I wanted to basically know how you met the author — this Sardinian writer who has got lost in the Italian sociological panorama but who has become a global author, and also ask if this meeting is related to the context of American Marxism and culture.

**Michael Burawoy (MB):** It's a long and circuitous story. I became a sociologist in Africa, in post-colonial Zambia. Originally, I was a mathematician, but I quickly lost interest in mathematics at university. I became very interested in sociology at a time when it was being discovered in England, which is where I was studying. We are talking about the mid-1960s. Sociology was the up-and-coming discipline, attracting a lot of young people committed to transforming the world. I finished my math degree at Cambridge (UK) in 1968 and immediately took-off for what struck me as the interesting world of Africa. I was not disappointed.

**REC:** That was quite a huge break...

**MB:** It wasn't so huge. While I was in Cambridge, I took-off for different parts of the world every summer — and in those days, the summer vacations were four months long. So, my appetite for sociology was cultivated in those trips. The first trip — and this was between school and university —

was to the US in 1965. It was an exciting period in US history. Coming from such a provincial town — Manchester — in England, arriving in New York, I found myself in an overwhelming world. This was the beginning of the civil rights movement, the student movement, and the anti-war movement. The US is responsible for my losing interest in mathematics.

Still, I persisted with math at Cambridge, and every summer I would spend four months traveling the world. The first summer I hitchhiked all the way through Africa. The second year I went to India, rather presumptuously to study the medium of instruction in universities. I thought the choice of language — English, Hindi or Regional Language — was an educational problem. I quickly realized it was above all a political problem. My sociological habitus was incubated there. After I finished my three years in Cambridge, I returned to South Africa to become a journalist. I now knew I wanted to become a sociologist.

**REC:** So, you graduated in mathematics, I would say, very efficiently...

**MB:** Not very efficiently, I just had to finish in three years like everyone else. My math degree would prove useful in surviving graduate school in the US, but I didn't realize that at the time. The simple fact is that there was little else that attracted me — at that time sociology did not exist in Cambridge. There was just one famous token sociologist in Cambridge, an American by the name of Edward Shils.

After graduated I returned to South Africa, where I was a journalist for six months in 1968 — I hated writing to deadlines, almost as much as I had disliked mathematics, but as with the latter, the training in journalism proved very useful in my future career. I was given the foreign desk at *Newscheck* magazine and found myself reporting on events that included the eruption of student movements across the globe, the Biafran War, the Prague Spring... In South Africa, however, the apartheid state seemed to have perfected its repression. There was no intimation of the Durban strikes (1974) or the Soweto uprising (1976). After six months, I left for Zambia.

**REC:** Was there already, at that time, any sociologist you found particularly influential or inspiring?

**MB:** One of the most influential was Jack Simons, an exile from South Africa who had been very active in the Communist Party. He was teaching sociology at the University of Zambia. In South Africa he was a famous figure, actually he had been a professor in Cape Town. I remember him saying to me when I arrived in Zambia that we know all too little about how the multinational corporations, who still owned the copper mines in post-colonial Zambia — Zambia had obtained independence in 1964 — were relating to the new government. He suggested I take advantage of my contacts in the top echelons of *Anglo-American* — the biggest mining company in southern Africa — to get a job in the copper industry that dominated the Zambian economy.

I got a job, but it wasn't the sort of blue-collar jobs that I took subsequently, but it was a job in management. I had a degree in mathematics and I wanted to be a sociologist, so I got a position as a researcher in what was called the Personal Research Unit.

What the company was concerned with was job evaluation. In the colonial period, there were two wage structures: a white one and a black one. In post-colonial Zambia the idea was to integrate the two because, supposedly, racism would be disappearing. But it was a huge problem to actually integrate these two wage structures in a way that did not destabilize the accepted wage stratification. So, it was complicated. With the job evaluation, you measure each job according to certain characteristics, thereby creating a job hierarchy tied to a given ranking of key jobs. It was a mathematical problem for which I had the necessary skills. In this way, I came to observe the negotiations between the trade union, management and the government as they tried to build an integrated wage structure.

**REC:** So, did they recruit you because you were a mathematician?

**MB:** No, not really. I had a degree and a white face — that's all they wanted. I was just lucky that it placed me at the center of a fascinating struggle around race and class. I have never again done field work as interesting as that — watching multinational corporations respond to the post-colonial government, just four years old. In the end and unbeknownst to the copper companies, I would go on to study the fate of the color bar — the organizational imperative that no black should have any authority over any white. So, the question was: what happens to the color bar in post-colonial Zambia when the purpose

of the ruling party was, ostensibly, to get rid of the racial order. My research was an examination of the social forces that conspired to maintain the color bar. For example, a Zambian would be promoted into an expatriate position, but the expatriate position would be promoted into a newly-created position over the head of the Zambian successor. It was a floating color bar.

**REC:** So, you were basically using some Marxist tools already...

**MB:** Exactly, but I learned those tools at the University of Zambia where I went after my employment in the copper industry. I was a lone MA student, learning at the feet of three Marxists — Jack Simons, whom I mentioned before; Jaap van Velsen, a Dutch social anthropologist who had the most lasting impact on my thinking; and a young Indian anthropologist, Raja Jayaraman. From these three assertive, intimidating teachers I imbibed a crude class analysis that seemed to fit Zambia's persistent colonial dependence on copper. I was especially influenced by the writing of Frantz Fanon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Marxist Bible of Third World Revolution. The book I wrote, *The Color of Class on the Copper Mines: From African Advancement to Zambianization*, applied Fanon's analysis of the "National Bourgeois Road" to Zambian independence. I drew out the implications of the colonized, replacing the colonizers without a transformation of the economic structure. The color of the incumbents of class may change but class structure remained largely the same.

After receiving my MA in social anthropology, I applied to the US for a sociology PhD. I was accepted at Chicago, home of the development theory that dominated much African social science at that time. Development theory, or, as it is often called, modernization theory, was the enemy of class analysis, attributing Third World underdevelopment to cultural backwardness. I turned up in Chicago in 1972 at a time of a renaissance of Marxism in the US.

This Marxist renaissance took place in other places in the US and England, under the influence of French structuralist Marxism, associated with such figures as Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Nicos Poulantzas and Maurice Godelier.

**REC:** Did they have an impact on African studies?

**MB:** Yes, indeed, especially with regard to the historiography and sociology of South Africa, which underwent a transformation under the leadership of Harold Wolpe, a Marxist sociologist in exile in England. Rather than reducing racism to a form of political domination, he considered it as the political reflection of a peculiar economy, the articulation of two modes of production: a dominant capitalist mode of production and a subordinate pre-capitalist (tributary) mode of production. The latter exists to subsidize cheap labor power, by providing for the social reproduction of the labor force, while the laborer is paid less than a family wage in the towns. The state makes sure families do not enter the towns (pass laws, influx control), while workers have only limited residence rights, forcing them to migrate between town and country. Remittances from the workers to their families in the reserves are essential for rural survival, just as workers depend on having a home to return to. The racial order, with its elaborate rules and regulations, exists to maintain a particular cheap labor economy. This was a very original argument at the time and became the foundation of a research program that examined how this system changed over time — from segregation to apartheid — and how it was maintained by the state's racialized institutions, extending to all spheres of life. The program was inspired by French Marxist theories on the articulation of modes of production and of the state and even ideology.

**REC:** So where does Gramsci fit into all this?

**MB:** Good question! Gramsci's thought lay behind the French structuralists. They appropriated his ideas about the way the state organizes hegemony in advanced capitalism, while dismissing him unfairly as an historicist, someone who believed in a teleology of class formation. I came to understand the importance of Gramsci's ideas through the Polish political scientist, Adam Przeworski, who arrived in Chicago in 1973, fresh from Paris, in my second year. He offered a course in Marxist political theory, beginning with the careful reading of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, especially the section titled "The Modern Prince," his theory of political parties. The course then took us through major texts of French structuralist Marxism — especially Poulantzas' *Political Power and Social Classes*. I had never read Gramsci or these other books, and so this proved to be the perfect introduction.

**REC:** Yes, because Przeworski was one of the most prominent analytical Marxists...

**MB:** Yes! But he would grow tired of the strictures of Marxism, and his more recent work is focused on the conditions of the possibility of liberal democracy — back to the question that drove political sociology in the 1950s.

**REC:** Analytical Marxism was then a major part of the renaissance of Marxism?

**MB:** Indeed. The foremost analytical Marxist among sociologists is, of course, Erik Olin Wright. Although I didn't realize it at the time, Erik was exploring the same texts in Berkeley, building a scientific Marx(ism) to replace the more popular humanist Marx(ism). He became famous for his elaboration of a Marxist class structure, based on the idea of contradictory class locations. He tried to show how his model of class structure mapped the empirical world not only better than Poulantzas' class theory but explained income distribution better than the dominant stratification models of sociology. Unlike Adam, Erik was never especially interested in Gramsci — too ambiguous, too obscure, too elusive. Erik was more interested in objective structure, not so much in subjective responses.

**REC:** How did Przeworski make use of Gramsci? What were his research problems?

**MB:** He was interested in the role of electoral politics in the reproduction of class domination — how the organization of political participation secured consent to capitalist domination. He developed his ideas in a brilliant collection of essays under the title *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (1986) and in a monograph, written with John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism* (1986). Przeworski starts from the Marxian claim that democracy and capitalism are incompatible. In *Class Struggles in France*, Marx concludes that universal suffrage would unfurl class struggle and overthrow capitalism. It made logical sense that universal suffrage would install socialist parties which would in turn inspire a struggle for socialism. Przeworski asks why Marx was wrong. His answer is simple: where Marx predicted that the working class would become a majoritarian class, in practice the proletariat doesn't become a majority — they peak at different times in different countries, but they only very rarely achieve 50% of the electorate. He asks further what is the “working class,” arguing that “class struggle” is a struggle over the meaning of class before it is a struggle between classes.

The shortage of workers presents a dilemma for socialist parties. If they continually lose elections, then they will not be able to win material concessions for their supporters and support will fall away. If they are to win elections, therefore, they must seek allies from other classes, but that means watering down their socialist program, which in turn means they lose support from the working classes. To regain working class support by forging a stronger socialist platform, socialist parties have to sacrifice support from allied classes. These rational strategies of socialist parties are governed by the class composition of the occupational structure. Developing a mathematical model, Przeworski is able to map and anticipate the strategies of socialist parties in seven European countries over a period of nearly a century. It's a remarkable *tour de force* in which individual political participation, i.e. voting, is the result of party strategy, itself shaped by class structure.

If there is no electoral road to socialism, then what about a revolutionary road? Przeworski has an original argument here, too. Maintaining that the basis of capitalist hegemony lies in the material concessions granted by the capitalist class, Przeworski argues that workers will only adopt a revolutionary strategy if they think they will be materially better off in some future time under socialism. Given that any transition would have to pass through a valley of depression, workers would be unlikely to be willing to make such sacrifice. The assumption throughout is that workers are more driven by material interests than ideological commitments. This is the very best of analytical Marxism, forcing any serious critique to call into question one or other element of his argument and to present an equally clear alternative.

**REC:** And this argument is based in Gramsci's theory of hegemony?

**MB:** Yes, indeed, it is. A particular reading of Gramsci. But not the only reading of Gramsci. In my own research, I ran with his essay on *Americanism and Fordism* where he writes that “hegemony is born in the factory.” This dovetailed with my experience as a machine operator in a South Chicago factory. I was struck by how hard everyone worked and how, contrary to Marxist suppositions, consent was organized on the shop floor. I show how this is the product of the way work is organized as a game, and how

an internal state and internal labor market were the basis of a hegemonic regime of production in which workers were constituted as industrial citizens with rights and obligations while collective bargaining organized a concrete coordination of the interests of management and workers. In other words, I took the evolving theories of the state — heavily influenced by Gramsci's ideas — to the point of production. Even before consent is organized in civil society, it is organized at the point of production. And not just in the US, but, in different ways, across advanced capitalism.

**REC:** And then you started teaching Gramsci?

**MB:** Yes, indeed. But it took me quite a few years to develop sufficient confidence to devote a whole course to his writing. For that would mean recognizing there was much more to him than a theory of hegemony, or a theory of hegemony entailed much more than its material basis. I had to grasp him as a comparative sociologist of fascism and democracy; as a philosopher of lived experience; as a historian of Italy embedded in a theory of passive revolution; as a theorist of politics, sandwiched between economic structure and military force; and, of course, as a theorist of intellectuals and, indeed, of Marxism itself. For me, this was daunting.

**REC:** Yes. But you have a specific way of doing sociology and teaching. In building your theoretical framework, you combine Gramsci — a sort of proto-critical sociologist — with Pierre Bourdieu — a French critical sociologist, who has some episodic links with Gramsci. Bourdieu never takes Gramsci seriously, even in his lectures on the state at the Collège de France, he spent but a few words on Gramsci. But you bring them into conversation with each other. How did this come about? When did you begin reading Bourdieu?

**MB:** The first time I read Bourdieu was when Adam Przeworski showed me an article Bourdieu had written on kinship strategies in the Béarn, the rural area where Bourdieu grew up. It was a fascinating account of the decline of the region through the lens of gender relations, men unable to find marriage partners and women leaving for town. It gave a real sense of agency, people unavoidably participating in their own demise, much as Marx shows how capitalists in pursuit of profit sow the seeds of capitalism's demise.

From here I read his famous book with Passeron on the reproduction of class relations through education. I was disappointed. It seemed, then, that this was an unacknowledged application of Marxist structuralism. Following that I read *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, a theoretical exposition based on a stylized account of the Kabyle in Algeria. Again, I thought there was little that was new. The idea that social action should be seen not as the execution of norms, but the manipulation of norms in pursuit of interests, was at the basis of my teacher Jaap van Velsen's book, *The Politics of Kinship*, written almost a decade before. There were one or two footnotes referring to his work and the Manchester School of Social Anthropology, largely critical of them for not having a concept of habitus — embedded and embodied dispositions acquired through socialization.

That must have been in the late 1970s when I was already at Berkeley, but before the Bourdieu mania had taken root. It was in 1987, while I was working in a Hungarian socialist steel mill, that I read the humongous *Distinction*, in preparation for what was the first and last meeting with Bourdieu. By the time I had finished, I decided that once again there was nothing novel in Bourdieu's theory of symbolic domination. Unacknowledged by Bourdieu, Gramsci's theory of hegemony had said it all before.

**REC:** You mean there was nothing new in *Distinction*?

**MB:** That's right. That's what I thought — Gramsci's theory of hegemony was designed to understand how cultural forms (ideology) contributed to the reproduction of class domination. I had a dim view of Bourdieu — his work was much ado about nothing. As we entered the 1990s, the students I worked with became more irritated by my dismissal of Bourdieu — that there was nothing new and his was a theory of reproduction without a theory of social change or of history. Students were insistent that I was misguided and so four students organized a seminar to instruct me on the virtues of Bourdieu. I listened to their presentations every week and by the end I was convinced that I had little appreciation for the breadth and importance of Bourdieu's writings.

The straw that broke the camel's back were the two pages from *Pascalian Meditations* devoted to

the double truth of labor. It was almost the exact argument that I had made in *Manufacturing Consent* twenty years earlier — that the paradox of the capitalist labor process was the way it simultaneously secured and obscured the surplus appropriated from workers. It was a very strange intervention as Bourdieu had written so little about work, let alone adopted a Marxist approach to work as exploitation! Since a number of my papers had appeared in his magazine, he was definitely aware of my work. As I would later learn, the securing and obscuring of domination was at the heart of Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence.

**REC:** This was a coincidence, indeed! So, what did you do next?

**MB:** It was clear to me that I needed to be re-educated and so I asked my Berkeley colleague Loïc Wacquant, Bourdieu's most distinguished disciple, whether I could attend his "boot-camp" seminar on the work of Bourdieu. Yes, he said, so long as you do all the work expected of the graduate students, namely, all the reading and writing of weekly memos. That's what I did in the spring of 2005. I was lucky, of course, because there's no one who knows Bourdieu's work better than Loïc — including Bourdieu himself, who regularly consulted Wacquant as to what he had written!

It was here, in my weekly memos, that I first developed my *Conversations with Bourdieu* that have been published in successively revised and expanded forms in Brazil, South Africa, France and the US. I was struck by the repressed relations between Bourdieu and a series of Marxists, each of whom developed the idea of cultural domination. Bourdieu had always said that the meaning of theory depends on the field in which it is developed, and most importantly in relation to other actors in that field. Only he didn't always do that himself! In dismissing Marx he thought he had dismissed Marxists, but actually Marxists developed their ideas as a critique of Marx, ideas that had parallels in Bourdieu's thinking, ideas that were very much at play in the French intellectual field. I tried to restore his relation to a succession of Marxists, starting with Marx, moving on to Gramsci, Fanon, Beauvoir, Freire, C. Wright Mills and myself. But Gramsci was the most important interlocutor.

It slowly dawned on me that Bourdieu, far from being a pale version of Gramsci, was a serious sociological antagonist to Gramsci. I began to see that hegemony and symbolic violence represent opposed approaches to the idea of cultural domination. For Bourdieu, the dominated classes can never come to recognize their subjugation, deeply embedded in their unconscious habitus. Except under unspecified and rare circumstances, they were unable to reflexively grasp their subjugation. Only the sociologist, with access to the scientific field and not subject to the immediacy of material pressures, can understand cultural domination. As Bourdieu would say, the problematic aspect of "false consciousness" is not the "falseness" but "consciousness," the delusion that subjectivity can be altered through consciousness-raising. For Gramsci, and indeed all Marxists, while the dominated may not comprehend their place in society, however hard it may be it is always possible, in the last instance, to transform and elevate their self-understanding. In Gramscian terms, there is a kernel of good sense within the common sense (invaded by distorting ideologies) that can be elaborated with the help of certain intellectuals organically connected to the working class. Bourdieu is repeatedly dismissive of the idea of the organic intellectual, a mythical and dangerous idea, because there is only "bad sense" in the dominated classes. If there's good sense, it must spring from intellectuals, especially sociologists — reflexive of their circumstances, cognizant of their privileges, organized as a collective representative of humanity. Gramsci, for his part, would label Bourdieu as a traditional intellectual, one who believes that he is being critical but, by virtue of his relative autonomy from the dominant class, is contributing to capitalist hegemony. Indeed, the concept of capitalism, or the supposition of a world beyond symbolic domination, is absent from Bourdieu's oeuvre.

**REC:** What influence has Mills and the critical sociologists of the US left on your work? In your book on *Conversations with Bourdieu*, you suggest certain parallels between Mills and Bourdieu. You can see the presence of Mills in *Le Métier du Sociologue (The Craft of Sociology)*, written with Chamboredon and Passeron in a scattered way, in a few sentences. In fact, as you say, Bourdieu and his colleagues freely borrow from the appendix to Mills' *Sociological Imagination* (1959), entitled "On Intellectual Craftmanship." So, what was your own encounter with Mills?

**MB:** Like so many others, I have always taken the writings of Mills as an inspiration. *The Sociolog-*



*ical Imagination* is still today a canonical book for graduate students, a guiding illumination for those who despair of mainstream sociology. Its sentiment — its habitus if you will — is very similar to that of Bourdieu — critical sociology that puts the normative kernel of our discipline front and center, a sociology primarily focused on different dimensions of class domination. Indeed, you might say that Bourdieu is the French C. Wright Mills. If you put together Mills' three most famous books — *New Men of Power*, that deals with labor, *White Collar*, that deals with the middle classes and *The Power Elite*, that is concerned with the dominant class — then you've got Bourdieu's *Distinction* that focuses on the Dominant Class, New and Old *Petite Bourgeoisie*, and the Working Class. They have the same skepticism toward the working class as an historical agent, the same elevation of the intellectual as an independent force. One notable difference, marking the historical context of their research, lies in the way they see the composition of the dominant class. For Mills, there are economic, political and military elites whereas for Bourdieu, there are economic, political and cultural fields.

**REC:** Your method is interesting because you bring these different authors into the same intellectual field, whereas in France many sociologists belonging to the Bourdieusian tradition would hardly recognize the Marxian influence on Bourdieu because they are traditionally academic competitors.

**MB:** Yes, even though it is not visible on the surface, Bourdieu is heavily influenced and shaped not just by Marx but by Marxists, past and contemporary. By virtue of their competition, academic competitors necessarily influence one another, even if the competition leads them to deny that. I'm just applying the Bourdieusian idea of field to Bourdieu himself.

**REC:** Because you came to the US with a knowledge of Marxism and development theory, you were able to identify the structuralist influence on Bourdieu rather than the more conventional view of Bourdieu as a critical Weberian.

**MB:** Yes, it is true that one can see Weber in Bourdieu, especially the focus on cultural domination. But as with Bourdieu's critique of "consciousness," so Weber's notion of "legitimacy" is an equally shallow rendition of subjective acquiescence. For Bourdieu, the dominated can only legitimate domination if they recognize it, and recognition is very difficult. Indeed, at the core of Bourdieu's idea of subjugation is the notion of misrecognition, embedded and embodied habitus, operating at a far deeper level than Weber's legitimation and Gramsci's consent. People draw parallels between Weber's distinction between class and status and Bourdieu's class and consumption, but there's a difference: the established hierarchy of consumption practices exists to obscure and secure participation in the reproduction of class. There's no notion of misrecognition in Weber.

**REC:** Another difference that I see between you and this structuralism is your way of viewing ethnography, that is nowadays very specific. For example, as an international student, I would say that we hardly get the impression that ethnography can be linked to structural dynamics. Most of the time, what is more common in ethnography is to localize the agency of actors in specific contexts: there is very little attempt to link ethnography to structural dynamics. Indeed, you worked with these structuralist authors, such as Bourdieu or Gramsci, but you link them to the aspects of agency. So, on this point, you say that in Weber there is no misrecognition; also in Bourdieu, there is no misrecognition of social change. I mean, the agentic party is more present in Bourdieu in the inner circle — the idea of practices, of course, there are strategies, there is the idea of agency. But I think that the idea of social change in Bourdieu is almost absent. This stress on social reproduction. It is interesting how you link, for example, this structuralist analysis along with the stress on the possibility of resistance and emancipation that is a very important category of the critical tradition. Nowadays, you also link it with the idea of the emancipatory role of sociology, that can link social movements to social change.

On this point, I wanted to ask you if you can describe the context in which you started elaborating your idea of "public sociology" — the crisis of mainstream American sociology. How did you get the idea that sociology was indeed losing a real connection with the public relevance, probably due to the domination of marketization, as you explained, and the domination of economics as a sovereign discipline?

**MB:** Like so many of my generation, we entered sociology precisely because it seemed to offer eman-

cupatory possibilities, it pointed to a better world. To be sure, mainstream sociology harbored the conservation of capitalism, but Marxist sociology would be redemptive. It was this unstated, taken-for-granted assumption that drove my early research on the racial order of the Zambian copper mines, which was, indeed, a “public sociology” widely discussed in the media.

Arriving in Chicago in 1972, I faced a provincial mainstream, professional sociology with little interest in public engagement. I deployed Marxism against the conventional sociology, trying to demonstrate that it was more scientific than its antagonist. Along with others, we were surprisingly successful but that proved Marxism’s domestication as it, too, succumbed to professionalization and became mainstream.

It was my experience in South Africa in 1990 that restored my faith in the emancipatory role of sociology. Because of the academic boycott of apartheid, I had not returned to South Africa since 1968. The boycott was lifted, and I was invited to address the Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa. I came straight from Hungary to report on the collapse of state socialism — at a time when the South African Communist Party was, belatedly, opening up. I was struck by the role sociology had been playing in the struggle against apartheid, disseminating ideas of trade unionism, recording strikes and industrial abuses, training shop stewards... This was a risky business as the state was ready to assassinate the opposition. I was not only impressed by the intervention of sociology, but how that intervention had created vibrant academic sociology with its own distinctive theoretical frames. Here, then, were two diametrically-opposed sociologies: professional sociology in the US, in which debates were largely confined to the academy, and a public sociology in South Africa, deeply engaged with the wider community.

At the same time, my own department at Berkeley was distinctive in the public engagement of some of its most important members: Bob Blauner’s studies of racial oppression; Bob Bellah’s promotion of civil religion and his public critique of individualism; Todd Gitlin’s dissection of the power of the student movement and the media; Arlie Hochschild’s feminist analysis of the domestic division of labor; Kristin Luker’s examination of the politics of motherhood; Jerry Karabel’s critique of higher education, and so on. When I became chair of my department, I profiled its distinctive history of public sociology, so different to the other major departments at that time. Armed with the very different examples of public sociology from South Africa and Berkeley — the one more organic and the other more traditional — I contrasted it with an alternative to mainstream sociology. And when I became President of the ASA in 2004, I had a platform to give public sociology national prominence.

I was not the first to advocate public sociology: C. Wright Mills had all but coined the concept and Herb Gans had explicitly propagated such ideas when he had been President of the ASA. The debate was more intense in 2004 because of the political context, not least the unpopular invasion of Iraq in the previous year, but also because I distinguished not just between public sociology and professional sociology but also between the latter and policy sociology and critical sociology. This set the scene for intense debates in which sociologists took up positions in one or other quadrant, stigmatizing and pathologizing the others. Professional sociology was dismissed as irrelevant, policy sociology was condemned as the handmaiden of power and wealth, public sociology became populist sociology, and critical sociology was accused of dogmatism. I was the enemy of everyone as I sought to defend all four types of sociology as necessary for a thriving discipline. So there was much debate about the nature of sociology, although it is not clear that it affected the practice of sociology, that it increased the amount of public sociology.

**REC:** It was needed probably...

**MB:** Yes, perhaps it was a salutary if sometimes acrimonious debate. I remember the distinguished French sociologist, Alain Touraine, accustomed to the staid sociology of the 1950s and early 1960s, being astonished by the lively discourse at the 2004 San Francisco Meetings of the American Sociological Association that were devoted to the theme of public sociology. Touraine remarked that Bush must be good for sociology, having incensed and politicized the sociological community with his bellicose policies in Iraq. Over 5,000 participants joined the ASA meeting that year — bigger than ever — creating spaces for those who had been marginalized by their activist view of sociology; it gave an opportunity for many to recall why they had become sociologists, and to identify with its social justice aspirations.

**REC:** And then it became a global movement?

**MB:** There was a second theme to the San Francisco Meeting — a focus on the provinciality of US

sociology — how its claim to universality was based on a peculiar and particular society, the United States of America. In as much as US sociology was globally hegemonic — and it had enormous resources to establish its hegemony — national sociologies were compelled to subscribe to frameworks, questions, methods and theories that were at odds with the pressing concerns in different countries. Not least, was the way US hegemony imposed itself through the English language, handicapping those who wished to participate in global discussions. There have been many reactions to this hegemony — separatist movements for indigenous sociologies, Southern sociology, postcolonial sociology as well as national sociologies. For the next decade (2004–2014), I would engage these dilemmas through the ISA. Giving public sociology a global mission entailed making national sociologies accountable to local, national and regional issues, challenging the hegemony of US and European sociology without dismissing their contributions.

**REC:** So, on this point, public sociology also raises the issue of sociologists as intellectuals, their role. I think this is the main difference between you and Gramsci, if this comparison can work — Gramsci sees the role of the organic intellectual as organized through the political party.

**MB:** Yes, that's right. This is one of the differences. Gramsci saw the “Modern Prince” as the counterpart to the modern state. If the latter's autonomy and claims to universality guaranteed the hegemony of capitalism, then the former organized an alternative hegemony of the dominated classes. But what is the “Modern Prince”? For Gramsci it was unequivocally the Communist Party, accountable to and organizing into a single bloc the plurality of subjugated interests in civil society. One is hard pressed to see the Communist Parties of today in this role, especially with the widespread discrediting of party politics.

**REC:** Is there, then, an alternative meaning to the “Modern Prince”?

**MB:** Well, that's a challenging question! Gramsci saw the “Modern Prince” as the organizer of the working class and its allies in terms of exploitation, the way surplus is pumped out of the direct producers. But exploitation is mystified by the process of production and today, in the light of rising precarity, stable exploitation with security is becoming a dream for so many. I would argue, therefore, following Polanyi, that commodification rather than exploitation is becoming the defining experience of modern capitalism — the commodification of labor, but also of nature and money. These were Polanyi's three “fictitious commodities” whose unregulated commodification spelled the demise of society. To these I would add the commodification of knowledge through the privatization of the university and of information through the digitalization of everyday life. If I'm looking for a “Modern Prince,” then it would have to bring together the diverse experiences of commodification, and sociology is in a good place to play such a role — potentially!

**REC:** In this case, you are criticizing the fact that the sociologist should be a specialist of a specific issue without a connection to general theory. There is a tendency nowadays to specialize more and more on a specific and narrow subset, putting out one new methodology after the other and... in this case, the critical and also reflexive part that a sociologist needs to have to perform his role of intellectual, is in your view, this capacity of linking a specific problem to the broader picture: the neoliberal conditions...

**MB:** Exactly! Here we can return to C. Wright Mills — the promise of sociology is to turn private troubles into public issues, linking social movements to their wider context.

**REC:** If you would re-write the last chapter of *The Sociological Imagination*, and if you could add specific issues that you think should be at the core of the curricula of the new sociologists of the future, what would you put?

**MB:** That's a challenging question! Let me reiterate what I've been saying. Sociological imagination — linking private troubles to public issues, micro processes to macro forces — is not enough. We also need a political imagination to realize this in practice as well as in theory. Mills worshipped the autonomous intellectual, unsullied by connection to politics, untainted by compromise or critique from above. That won't do. Indeed, critique by itself only leads to despondency.

At the same time, I don't want to belittle theory — it may not be sufficient, but it is necessary. For

theory gives us the tools to link lived experience to the social forces that shape it. Social theory also offers you the possibility of recognizing what can be done within limits defined by social structure. Social theory, therefore, offers an understanding of the limits of the possible and possibilities within limits. As Weber once said, to realize the possible we have to pursue the impossible — but how, if not through politics?

**REC:** Very Kantian...

**MB:** Yes. But social theory is important for many reasons. As a succinct summary of accumulated knowledge, social theory brings unity to the fragments of our discipline. No less important — as a pointed account of history, social theory gives us an imagination of the future, of alternative futures. Here I'm very indebted to Erik Wright's vision of real utopias — so important in an era when it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (as Fredric Jameson once wrote). It is not enough to recognize that capitalism may not be the end of the world, we have to think of that future in progressive terms by excavating existing institutions that lie within but also challenge capitalism. Wright's examples include participatory budgeting, universal income grants, cooperatives. As sociologists, we should be able to study them in detail, articulating their principles, exploring their conditions of existence as well as their internal contradictions, and promoting their dissemination. Rigorous though it is, Wright's idea of a normatively based sociology has achieved limited appeal within our discipline that is still committed to a mythical value neutrality. But his project has had striking success outside academia, among activist groups across the globe. His real utopias project is perhaps the most successful case of public sociology!

**REC:** Sorry if I quote a very pessimistic critical theorist, but the last aphorism of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* says that the mission of all thought is to examine the world from the standpoint of redemption...

**MB:** If by that, Adorno meant that we cannot look at the world as data, as an object, as it simply is, but always to look at the world as it could be, then I totally agree. That's crucial to social theory. Without theory we are lost.

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