

# An expert interview about Public Sociology

with Prof. Dr. Michael Burawoy

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**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *You once wrote that most sociologists were driven by their passion for social justice when they decided to study sociology. Can you tell us what your motivation was to study sociology?*

**BURAWOY:** I went to the university to study mathematics but was not really good at it – and you have to be really good if you want to be a professional mathematician in the future. It was a very exciting period in history (1965 to 1968) and at this time (1965) I visited the United States for six months. For somebody who comes from this little island, England, (from Manchester) and goes to New York it was a dramatic revelation to me that a world like that could exist. This journey was very transformative for me. It was a time of the beginning of the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement – very exciting!

I went back to university and did mathematics but I was always interested in what was going on in the world and at that time – because this was an era of student move-

ments – the idea of the critique of capitalism was in the air. It was something that was part of common sense, at least among large sections of the student population. Sociology took off in that period as a critique of modernity. I was very influenced by that, went to Africa after graduating in search of student revolts and stayed there for four years. But it was my earlier trips to different places in the long Cambridge vacations, to Africa, to India, and before that to the United States, that were really the things that shaped my interest in sociology.

And yes, I think this question of social justice was propelling so many of the movements during the 1960s and even if you were not necessarily active in one, the ideas were contagious. In Africa it was a honeymoon period soon after many countries had achieved their independence. Societies had only recently been decolonized and there were fascinating and lively debates about openings and possibilities of what could be – debates that would subsequently be closed down.



Foto: Ana Villarreal

Prof. Dr. Michael Burawoy is Professor at the University of California, Berkeley with research interests in labor, methodology and capitalism. He has done participant observation on industrial workplaces in Zambia, the United States, Hungary and Russia. Professor Burawoy was president of the American Sociological Association in 2004 and of the International Sociological Association from 2010 – 2014.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *And you studied sociology in...*

**BURAWOY:** ...Zambia. I was a young mathematician who went to South Africa in 1968, became a journalist for six months and then I moved to Zambia. I think I was already determined to be a sociologist, but England had no serious sociology, particularly not in places like Cambridge where I was. It was a time when sociology was being discovered in England in the so-called red brick universities and, especially, in the newly created universities. Oxford and Cambridge remained as stuffy as ever. At the University of Zambia, there was a lively and emerging social anthropology department. This is where I did my M.A. in sociology studying student movements, but I also conducted a side project, which became my most important work of those years: the study of the copper industry, then owned and run by two multi-national corporations. I wanted to study how they were responding to Zambia's independence in 1964.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *Has there been a time while you studied sociology where you experienced something like a disillusionment of sociology or of the academics?*

**BURAWOY:** Yes. You might say so. In hindsight my studies of the Zambian copper industry were a great story. The copper industry, these multinational corporations, provided 95 percent of the export revenue of Zambia at that time. I studied how they were reproducing what is called the *colour-bar*, according to which blacks do not give any order to whites. It is 'white over black'. They managed to promote black Zambians, but at the same time retained the *colour-bar* by promoting whites into positions or taking a department that was dominated by whites, pushing it aside and making it entirely black. There were all sorts of organizational manipulations that retained the *colour-bar*. That was my study and it was a complicated thing to get it published. I was basically a spy there; I did not tell anybody what I was doing. But in the end my research became public and

that was my initiation to public sociology.

I think there was a good public discussion of my report. People took the problem very seriously – but the mining companies decided to use this Marxist monograph to discipline their managers. So I realized, well, you have no control over the knowledge you produce and it is so often power that determines the way research findings will be deployed and that was a disillusioning moment.

By that time I had already migrated to Chicago and there I became, indeed, very disillusioned. I went there because I was looking for the source of the development sociology that was disseminated around the world in the name of *modernization theory*. It was a conservative view of the transformation in Africa and I wanted to discover its source. I thought it needed to be deeply criticized, which meant I needed to know it. So I went to the US. But when I arrived in Chicago, sociologists were no longer interested in Africa – there was one person who had studied ‘Ethiopia’ in his past. But basically the study of new nations was over. I was too late and the department was conservative and narrow-minded, deeply professional.

Going to graduate school in the United States was a real shock because there I was treated like a child and that too was very disillusioning. I was just very lucky that I had a ‘protector’ in the department, William Julius Wilson (an African-American sociologist who has since become very

famous), and then I worked most closely with a very inspiring political scientist, Adam Przeworski who also went on to global recognition. At that time I was lucky they both had time for a young, rebellious graduate student. But that was the scene of sociology in Chicago in 1972. At times I was ready to quit this expensive venture. In Zambia it had been very different; I was deeply embedded in society in Zambia and at seminars with people all doing field research, talking to one another about their different researches, contributing to each other’s projects because we were all studying Zambia. It had been very productive and exciting. I had no idea how special it was until I went to Chicago.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *You wrote in 2004 that sociology was in its ‘best shape’. It would be interesting to take a look back. Has it changed? Is it still in its ‘best shape’?*

**BURAWOY:** What I was trying to say there was that sociology was growing. The American Sociological Association had its biggest meeting ever (in San Francisco). It was a very vital meeting. I had money from the Ford Foundation to bring in scholars from all over the world to talk about sociology in different places. As President of the ASA I had two projects: one was public sociology and the other was to ‘provincialize’ the US, to demonstrate how US sociology was not the universal project it claimed to be, but a

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product of US history, its place in the world, its university system, etc. For the first, I brought in world renowned figures such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Mary Robinson, Arundhati Roy, and Paul Krugman to stimulate discussion about sociology's wider role in society. The audience of over 5,000 people was very receptive to these critical ideas as this was 2004 – just after the US government had invaded Iraq. Sociologists were moving to the left, producing a more vital sociology (or so I thought) – but the world around was not in such a good shape. We were in a bubble in San Francisco. That is what I was saying.

Since then, sociology has remained very strong in the United States – for reasons that are not altogether clear; but one reason is how the higher education is organized in the US with lots of students taking sociology courses. That is an important factor. In the US undergraduates have a much wider choice of courses to pursue than an undergraduate and sociology is a gateway to many different professions. In other countries sociology is not in such a great shape, so looked at it globally it is a different story. It is still a critical discipline compared to economics and political science. Political science has

been moving towards a rational choice modelling for some time, trying to imitate economics. Sociology (with anthropology and human geography) is on its own (in a sense) but it can play a vital critical role.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *You said that the university is a public good and it is important for sociology to defend that idea by engaging with publics, becoming accountable to publics. What did you mean by that?*

**BURAWOY:** Public universities have become ever more privatized as state funding has diminished and universities have responded by seeking new sources of revenue. Now universities look ever more like corporations and the role of sociology is to recognize what is happening, to be reflective about what is happening. I think sociology is a discipline that is very reflective about itself and its context of production. But we cannot return to the old era of the public university fully funded by the state although Germany seems to be hanging on to that model – so far. But in the US and many other countries it is gone! In the time of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964 nobody thought about that education was going to be privatized. They were all thinking about 'oh, this is a

big bureaucratic machine', 'mass university'. Clark Kerr said it was a multi-university and the students said 'no, it is a mass university'. That was the critique then. And of course Clark Kerr – at that time the enemy – had the vision, a 'master plan' which was to think higher education is accessible to all for free. That plan is utopian now, gone out the window and our students are paying huge fees now! The trajectory is pretty negative but we cannot go back to the period of the 'master plan' – that is gone.

What we have to rethink is what a public university means today. I think it means that a university has to be accountable to publics. It is not just that the university has to be accessible at all – and it has become more accessible, that is definitely true – but it has to be accountable. There has to be an engagement with the world beyond. It cannot survive as an ivory tower anymore. If it tries it will be taken over by corporations, so it has got to make alliances in civil society. We cannot go back – we have to go forward. This is public sociology taken to a different level, thinking of the university as an institution that is accountable to and engages with publics. It is what I call embedded autonomy.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *You have said, that from the point of view of faculty, students are our first public. Could you define briefly what public sociology is and what you meant by students being the „first public“?*

**BURAWOY:** First, Public sociology is taking sociology beyond the academy, sociologists talking to non-sociologists. It turns out to be quite difficult because the sociological perspective as practiced in the academy is inherently at odds with the lived experience of those outside the academy. That is the nature of professional sociology. Sociology unveils the truth that is not obvious to the people they are studying. So that is the public sociology – a conversation between sociologists and publics.

What does it mean for public sociology to be a form of pedagogy? I think there are four types of teaching in sociology. First of all, there is what I call professional sociology: there is professional teaching in which a body of knowledge; be it sociology or economics or whatever, that students should know. So you have a textbook, you have formal courses and students learn the foundational knowledge. That is professional sociology. And that is fine, it is important if there is to be a discipline. Second, there is what I call teaching that corresponds to policy sociology: that is sociology as on the behest of a client. This is vocational education. In the sociology departments, for example, criminology is becoming more important, training people to become criminologists. And now, in the US sociology departments have created a vocational sub-discipline that gives out certificates. That is teaching as policy sociology. And then there is critical sociology – a form of teaching that

broadly learning to think, read and write in a sophisticated way. Philosophy is often the prototype of this sort of thinking, but, of course, it happens in sociology, too. And finally, there is public sociology.

So what is teaching as public sociology? It is treating students not as empty vessels into which you pour knowledge but it means recognizing their lived experience coming from many different sectors of society and working with that lived experience, elaborating it, so students understand who they are in the wider social context. At my department in Berkeley there are many second generation immigrants and they come from very different communities and when they come into contact with one another and with sociology they can better learn who they are. So, for example, one can teach an introductory course on sociology with the theme of the “school.” Normally, students have just graduated from high school and think they are ‘cat’s pyjamas’, the ‘crème de la crème’. They have a very vivid memory of their high school experience. So, you start telling them that there are ‘high schools’ and there are ‘high schools’. And you introduce them to data – there is a massive amount of data now about high schools, the economic background of high schools, of teachers, of grade point averages and so on and so forth. One can then introduce them to the wonderful ethnographies of schooling which you can discuss with them in relation to their

own experience. That is the first dialogue.

In the second dialogue – taking place at the same time as the first – students should be talking to one another. If you have a class of 200 students, that is a challenge. You can divide the class up into groups of three or four and let them talk to one another about their high school experience. They will be very surprised about how different schools can be! There is a third dialogue in which those students take what they learn in the course into actual schools; perhaps into the school where they came from and talk to the students about the ideas they have learned in the sociology course, about schooling and about education. This is the third dialogue between sociology students and high school students. This three level dialogue would be an example of teaching as public sociology.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *But how to do public sociology precisely? Not only teaching as public sociology, but learning how to do it as students?*

**BURAWOY:** Alright, so now you are asking not about teaching as ‘public sociology’, but teaching public sociology. Of course the third dialogue, above, is a form of public sociology undertaken by students. When these undergraduates go into the schools, that is already a form of public sociology. But you are talking in a much broader sense and public sociology

is indeed very difficult to teach. For example, I am an ethnographer, I teach participant observation. There are no rules, there are sorts of text books but they are useless. You can only learn it from practice. I have a seminar of ten, fifteen students – now we are talking about PhD students – who are doing projects of ethnographic kind. I send them into the community or I choose the community and they write field notes, they all talk to each other about it, it is a practicum.

I have done field work for many years so I have an idea how to direct it but this *tacit knowledge* is not easy to communicate. There are no simple rules. Of course in that seminar on participant observation there are people who think that they are going to be public sociologists when they enter the field. Ethnography is already interacting with communities and some of these students think of themselves as bringing sociology to the community. This will be a two-way relationship, they hope, and they are going to be accountable to the community. I say ‘Okay, you are going to be accountable to the community but do not forget twice a week you are coming back to the seminar and you are going to be accountable to us as academics’. And there you see the tension. They do not realize it in the beginning but very quickly they learn that there is a tension between the two sides – the academic and the public. And of course in the end I say ‘Look, if you want to do public sociology, fine. But I want you to also do the profes-

sional sociology. So you have to write two papers: one for them, one for us.’ So it is not easy.

I cannot emphasize this enough that public sociology has to be done collectively. People need to be involved in the world but having an institutional basis is very important. The actual details, frustrations and dilemmas of public sociology are best dealt with in a collective context. I do not think there are actual rules to do public sociology. I know this is not very satisfactory but it is the best I can do in an interview like this.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *That is fine, thank you for the answer.*

*When students decide to do public sociology and they want to change something, the subject of public sociology is obviously ‘the social’. But do we then theoretically need to re-define ‘the social’?*

**BURAWOY:** Yes, in some ways. Think about Max Weber, basically he was a great public sociologist. He had no name for it, but he was a public sociologist! His problem was that he could not theorize it because he had no concept of civil society. So with him we have a clear example of why you have to reformulate the meaning of ‘the social’ to understand the possibilities of public sociology. In fact, you need to have a notion of a civil society and you need to have a notion of the public sphere. That is one thing you need. Max Weber had a very dismissive view of the

dominated classes. He talked about them as subject to irrational passions, easily manipulated; he talked about them as an inarticulate mass. That is not the notion of a public that we are working with here. As public sociologists we believe that there is somebody to dialogue out there who is in some sense capable of rationality and capable of having a discussion, very different from Weber's view of the "demos". So again, you have to re-define what is understood as 'the social'.

US and even some European Sociology in the 1950s and 60s, following in the footsteps of Weber and Durkheim had a similarly dismissive view on the lower classes. The social movements of the 1960s transformed our understanding of civil society, public sphere and of the dominated as articulate but subjugated. It is possible to enter into a dialogue with lay publics and they form rational social movements. So yes, I think the meaning of the social requires a reformulation of the social and I think we are already doing this through our self-conscious engagement with publics. The conference we have just attended here in Jena was full of such reformulations.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *There was a time, maybe in the 1990s, when society was explained mostly by economic narratives and after 2008 – the financial crisis – it was obvious that economy was not the only science that can explain social phenomena. Does this mark the rise of sociology and is*

*there a new potential for sociology now?*

**BURAWOY:** Potential, yes. The economists survived 2008 very nicely and thanks to that it is interesting to look at the economics profession and their movement from macro to micro. I mean, economists are deeply embedded in the reproduction of the very conditions that led to the financial crisis. And now they are not just in economics departments, they are in business schools, too, and they are actually shaping our economy, giving it an ideology. You know, a crisis of capitalism is often good for capitalism and in this case good for economists because we have got an economic problem and sociologists are not the people to whom one turns to solve an economic problem. The economists first created the "object" called the economy and then monopolized knowledge about it. If only we could do that with the concept of "society"! There is some public shaming and discrediting as a result of the great recession but I think economics is as powerful as before. However, there are some interesting developments: Thomas Piketty, a French economist, has written the book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, an extraordinary analysis of two centuries of changes in patterns of inequality. A collection of data nobody has ever seen before. The book compared two centuries of data from countries of advanced capitalism, arguing that there was a brief period of redistribution of diminishing inequality between 1920 and 1970 but since the

1970s inequality has taken off again and it is not going to stop, or so he says.

And why is it not going to reverse itself? Because the dominant class actually invests in its own wealth and there is nothing going to stop them. He proposes a tax on wealth. I mean, where is that going to come from? Where is the political pressure for taxing the rich – well, perhaps in parts of Europe but in most of the world, not a chance. Piketty is not a sociologist, he does not study social movements, he does not know about the state, he cannot grasp how there could be a sustained movement against the 1 percent.

But, here we have an economist who is fundamentally questioning neoclassical economics, focussing on inequality as something that would deepen to such a degree as to become very destructive. You might say, in his eyes, capitalism has the potential to destroy itself and everything else. Such an argument is a turn-around for economists! So I think he has potential for changing economics. And then you have Nobel Prize winners such as Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, Paul Krugman who are all very critical of the direction of market economies. And if economists increasingly focus on inequality then they look more and more like sociologists. They steal our terrain

but that is okay, we will join them. If they want to come over to our side, that is okay although it might threaten our existence! Anyway, I do not think that they were fundamentally discredited by 2008 which has, indeed, been a real opportunity for sociology. The book of Klaus Dörre, Hartmut Rosa and Stephan Lessenich offers us a sociological approach to the crisis of capitalism. And they have made major efforts in the direction of publicizing their views, you might call it an experiment in public sociology.

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**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *In "For Public Sociology" you talk about facing the 'public arena'. Is there someone who rules the public arena or can we see the public arena as something we address or select?*

**BURAWOY:** Haha! This is where the problem begins – what is a 'public'? We have to think about re-defining the term 'public', sociologists have limited ideas as to what a public is! There is little theorization of the concept. We need a theory of publics that recognizes for example the power inequalities operating in the public sphere, so the problem, for example, is that sociologists have to compete with more prestigious disciplines like economics and political science. We have to compete with media monopolies that obfuscate truths in a very effective manner.

Look at the story of climate change; it is amazing how some media obfuscate the truth agreed to by scientists. And there is competition from social media. If we do not transform our modes of communication we will be squeezed out of existence.

We cannot be naïve as public sociologists that we are entering a level playing field and all we have to do is find our public and talk and everything will change – no way! It is impossible, first of all because publics will resist what we have to say and, if they do not, we are probably not doing our job properly. We are revealing things they do not necessarily like to hear, for example, the constraints under which they operate. And secondly, we are competing with a very powerful ideological apparatus that is antithetical to the foundations of sociology. So we had better work together because we cannot be public sociologists as isolated individuals. We really have to think collectively about how we can expose and engage the public sphere and that is not that easy.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *We as Soziologiemagazin try to give sociology a broader audience. Is there something similar in the US?*

**BURAWOY:** There are a number of such organs. At Berkeley, where I teach, there is the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. It started in the 1950s and many of the famous sociologists who graduated from the de-

partment published their first article in the *Berkeley Journal* when they were students. So it is an amazing collection of articles over some sixty years. In the 1980s, sociology graduate students thought that an article in the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* was not going to get them a job – the job market was contracting and competition stiffening. Students had to become more professional. The BJS had been a journal of critical sociology that critiqued professional sociology but was losing its impetus. Students tried to revamp the journal – bringing big names to write for it, having conferences to attract papers, develop thematic issues. But in the end it just did not work. It continued but not with energy.

So last year graduate students decided to revamp the whole thing and so now it is probably similar to your magazine. It is still called the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* but it has become a magazine for public sociology. Basically, they are looking globally for people, sociologists for the most part, writing on pressing public issues in different places. It is published online and thus has become a very different project. It is not going to build their careers; they do this out of their commitment to questions of social justice.

I think it is very important to develop such projects. The international Sociological Association has its own magazine that I edit, called *Global Dialogue* which comes out four times a year in 15 languages. I cannot believe it but it really does.

I work with teams of young sociologists all over the world who translate the articles, also drawn from all over the world. I think we have to build a dense presence on the internet. You may want to talk to the students at Berkeley about your journal? They would be very interested in talking to you.

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *Of course!*

*Last question: What would be your dream? What would you like to see for example at sociological cocktail parties? What would you like to see sociologists do or talk about?*

**BURAWOY:** I think it is very important to think about alternative worlds. After the 2008 crisis some people thought there would be a re-structuring in capitalism but no, the wave of marketization that began in the 1970s for the most part continues. The crisis was exploited by financial capital to consolidate rather than undermine its power. It is important to understand how capital is able to exploit the crises it creates. So in these circumstances it seems very important to develop alternative imaginations of what could be, because the capitalist world of today has an unprecedented capacity to make us believe that it cannot be otherwise.

Sociology has to rediscover its moral foundations and build alternatives on their basis. I would hope that the sociology of tomorrow would dig around for different ways of doing things, ways that show that

capitalism does not have to be the only game in town. And there are such alternatives, if only we would see them. Take the originally Latin American idea of participatory budgeting where the citizens in a municipality partake in direct democracy to decide what to do with their budget. In Europe there are ideas of a universal income grant which would enable everyone to survive without a job! Capitalism as we know it would not survive such a policy intervention, depending on how big was the basic grant! Wikipedia is another interesting example of what my friend Erik Wright calls real utopias – collective self-organization which if generalized could pose challenges to capitalism, expanding the realm of freedom.

What is important is not to ‘dream’ of alternatives but to start with concrete and actually existing institutions. That would be a good public sociology, to start from these examples and then examine the conditions for their dissemination? That is what we could do as sociologists. A cocktail party with people discussing their favourite real utopias – that would be a real utopia in itself!

**SOZIOLOGIEMAGAZIN:** *Thank you very much, Michael Burawoy!*

**BURAWOY:** Thank you!

*Das Interview wurde geführt von Markus Rudolfi, Mitglied der Redaktion.*