

Micro Office

- Move in immediately
- Furniture included
- Access to conference rooms
- Utilities included

Affordable Office space  
800-424-72  
www.microoffice.us/

## Tales of the Kefir Furnaceman

### ••• A Roving Ethnographer's View From the Factory Floor

Jeff Byles

published: April 10, 2001

On a frigid February morning in 1985, Michael Burawoy's dream came true. He passed under gate number one of the Lenin Steel Works, ground zero of Hungary's industrial heartland, and found himself belly-to-brimstone with the flame-belching maw of an 80-ton furnace. This was no velvet-rope tour for the Berkeley sociologist, however. Over the course of three separate stints totaling a year, it would be Burawoy's job—along with seven comrades in the work team called the October Revolution Socialist Brigade—to tend this ungodly vessel, in which molten pig iron and scrap steel are melded in a roiling bath and pierced with high-pressure oxygen, kicking temperatures upwards of 1600 degrees. "A departing Boeing," he later wrote of the works at full gale, "couldn't make more noise." It may as well have been music to Burawoy's ears. "The dream of my life was to get a job in a

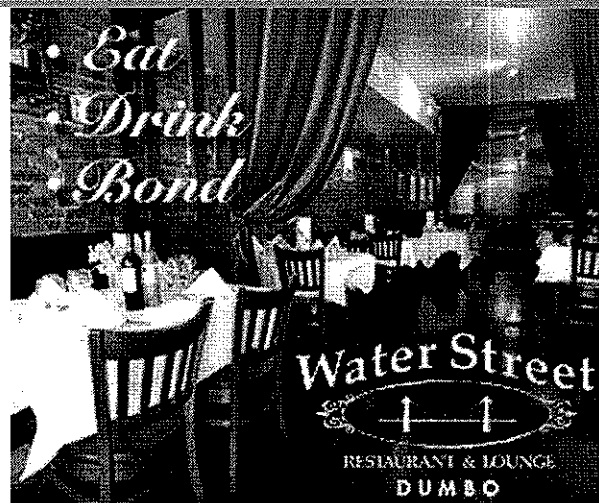


illustration by Tim Lane



steel mill in a socialist country," he recently told a conference of graduate sociology students at New York University. He added bemusedly, "I think I'm the only person in the world who's had that dream."

It's the rare academic who can add the title "furnaceman" to his CV. But for the past 20-odd years Burawoy, 53, has been sociology's underground man, scribbling field notes from the factory floor and beaming back dispatches against the global grain. He's worked 10 months as a "miscellaneous machine operator" in a South Chicago engine shop, toiled at a champagne factory in Hungary, and spent over a year as a personnel officer in the Zambian copper mines. His take-home message? Don't believe the free-market hype until you've lived it from the bottom up.

And hitting the bottom of the slag pit at the two-century-old Lenin Steel Works was for Burawoy a career-defining coup. "It was my *pièce de résistance*," he says in an interview. "I had finally gotten to the heart of the socialist working class."

You might call him the Walter Benjamin of the ravaged post-Soviet landscape. A professor at UC Berkeley since 1976, the self-described itinerant worker-academic takes one semester out of four and most summers to scour small-parts departments and scrap yards, seizing on the picked-over details of ordinary lives—say, the stamp on the wobbly radial drill he plied in a Hungarian auto shop that reads Csepel Machine Factory, 1959—just as Benjamin wrote of the arcades of Paris, where the debris of mass culture imparted utopian jolts to strolling passersby. But Burawoy is no factory flaneur. Whether at a Moscow rubber factory or, more recently, tracking a furniture plant in the Arctic Circle burg of Syktyvkar, he immerses himself in what he calls "the politics of production." Then it's back to the tie-dyes of Telegraph Avenue and the relative luxury of Barrows Hall, where he now chairs the sociology department, to ponder his encounters with the world's industrial working class. "I've got almost two different personalities," he explains simply, "and I like to think the one complements the other."

Bipolarity has served him well. By some accounts, Burawoy has turned industrial sociology upside down, using the extended case method—mounding up data through sustained participant-observation—to shovel grit into the works of so much armchair sociology. His 1979 report from the Chicago machine shop, *Manufacturing Consent*, has become a canonical text; *The Radiant Past*, a book on Hungary he co-authored with János Lukács in 1992, reads at times like the witty screenplay for a lost Elia Kazan film. And last year he published *Global Ethnography*, a collaboration with nine graduate students that probes the slippery concept of globalization as lived by its agents and victims—welfare clients, homeless recyclers, breast cancer activists, software engineers.

Burawoy isn't one to boast. "To make claims about what's happening in the globe as a whole is a very audacious and perhaps foolhardy thing to do," he says. "My main focus has been in seeking to make little contributions to shifting sociology in a critical direction. As a Marxist I try to bring visions from the shop floor to academia, to recover visions from below that might inform alternatives in the future. I think that's what has been lost."

Dredging for those visions has fallen to the grad students who beat a path to the professor's office, backpacks bulging with volumes of Gramsci and Foucault. "Particularly at Berkeley, there's a resurgence of interest in American labor," Burawoy says, "even though the story continues to get bleaker and bleaker." While students are increasingly mounting hardcore fieldwork, however, his research remains harder core than most: "Not many people actually go and get a job. It's often not that easy."

That's an understatement. Getting the gig at the Lenin Steel Works entailed feats of diplomacy from fellow sociologist Lukács, who prevailed only through the favors of a relative in the ruling party's Central Committee. "They were not very enthusiastic about American sociologists doing this sort of work," Burawoy recalls. "It's sacredly off-limits to foreigners." There was also the distinct possibility of having a dead American professor on their hands. During Burawoy's tenure at the plant, one worker was burned alive; a brigade-mate had his leg chopped in two after being pinned under a steel pipe. "That was a really dangerous place," he says. "If you get a drop of molten steel on you, you're dead."

The constant threat of danger had the slightly comic effect of endearing him to his comrades—at least in Hungary. "I am not a competent worker," he admits. "One of the most interesting things is how skilled workers respond to somebody as incompetent as myself. In Chicago they were disgusted. In Hungary they thought it was rather charming and they would come round and help me. In Russia they were also

disgusted."

Fortunately, the October Revolution brigade took a shine to him. When he couldn't stomach the lumps of pork fat his mates carved up for meals, subsisting instead on cartons of diluted yogurt, they christened him their "kefir furnaceman." (They also dubbed him Jackson, after the globally iconic Michael Jackson.) The camaraderie was sealed before a visit by a state dignitary, when the workers were ordered to paint their slag drawer bright yellow. Burawoy could only scrounge a black brush and proceeded to paint the group's shovels black. When a supervisor demanded an explanation, he replied haltingly that he was, well, helping to build socialism. A comrade shot back with gallows humor: "You are not building socialism, you are painting socialism, and black at that."

The metaphor became a potent one. Workers in the plant, Burawoy found, were forced to paint over waste and favoritism spurred by meddling managers. When Burawoy and Lukács, who studied management while Burawoy tended the furnace, reported this to the plant's officers, they took it icily. "We argued that in a socialist economy there's a lot of uncertainty, with shortages and the like," Burawoy says. "The only way to handle that is to have flexibility on the shop floor. We accused management of continually undermining the workers' autonomy." Management was outraged. "They said do the study again. We gladly did it again."

Lenin Steel Works jettisoned most of its employees and was bought by a Slovakian company in 1997, one of many factories in eastern Hungary sputtering as the global market sucked capital from the region. "There I was with my nose to the machine, while the whole fabric of state socialism was crumbling," Burawoy says. So he set the controls for the last great socialist destination on the map: "I got on the next plane out of Budapest and I went to Moscow."

Foiled again. "I went there in June 1991, and by August the place disintegrated," he says. "Everywhere I went, everything collapsed after me. Now my friends won't let me go anywhere. China? Cuba? They say no. You're staying in the Arctic Circle." There's work to be done, anyway, and the living is cheap. Though Burawoy has received grants from the MacArthur and National Science foundations, he often covers the bills himself. "I just go there," he says. "It doesn't cost much to live in Eastern Europe. It's my summer holiday. It's like going to Club Med."

Alas, those slag-strewn beaches of Burawoy's dreams have almost all been privatized or sacked, which in Russia's Komi Republic amounts to the same thing. This turn of events happens to comport well with his career: "It's a big problem working on the shop floor when one is 53." For the last decade he's been returning to Syktyvkar, a heavily forested outpost that was thick with labor camps until the 1950s. "In this part of Russia, they've never seen a foreigner, let alone an American, let alone an American professor who wants to work on a shop floor," he recalls of his first visit to the Polar Furniture Enterprise. "This was all too much."

Burawoy proved the least of their worries. As the Soviet Union imploded and a seedy merchant capitalism sprang up, workers' wages toppled, then vanished. Some of them got paid in butter, others in wood. Burawoy returned in 1995 to find most of the factory in darkness; the plant was soon liquidated. He has now been tracking the fate of Polar's employees, focusing on the household and gender. "Men become increasingly marginalized as their industrial jobs disappear," Burawoy explains. "Their life expectancy

dropped to 59 during the first years of the post-Soviet period. Russian society as a whole has been re-peasantized."

This summer means more work in Syktyvkar with colleagues Pavel Krotov and Tatyana Lytkina. His tireless ethnography might lead one to believe that Michael Burawoy is simply in love with labor. But no, he says. Though it may be madness, there is methodology in it: "I don't love working on the shop floor. I'd be much happier just sitting in my office. But there is very little research of an ethnographic kind on Russia. Most of what's written doesn't really touch people's day-to-day existence, I'm afraid to say."

Besides, a little humility helps in the machine shop of the modern university. "It's good to be humiliated from time to time," he says, recalling his chagrin on the factory floor. "It's quite healthy. I think all of academia should have to do this sort of work."