Reply to Burawoy's Comments on "Reflections on Classes"

By Erik Olin Wright

I would like to briefly discuss three issues raised in Michael Burawoy's comments: the tension between commitment and skepticism in science and revolution; the relationship between knowledge and emancipation; and the relationship between a realist ontology and scientific knowledge.

1. The Tension between Commitment and Skepticism

From early in its history, Marxism has been troubled by tendencies for Marxist theory to degenerate into Marxology. Debates over theoretical issues are often waged through an idiom of interpretation of texts of Marx (or Lenin or Stalin or Mao, depending upon the historical context). Scientific writings become viewed as sacred texts in which authoritative readings become the criteria for truth. This is the sense in which Marxism can become more like a theology than a science. Any defense of the harmonious "unity of theory and practice" needs to be able to account for the strength of this tendency within the Marxist tradition.

In my comments I suggested that this tendency reflects an inherent tension (not polar opposition, but tension) between the psychological states required for revolutionary practice and scientific activity. The former, I said, required absolute commitment; the latter, perpetual skepticism. Since Marxism was simultaneously the ideological foundation of revolutionary movements and the theoretical foundation of a social science, it embodies this tension and, in certain times and places, one mode or the other dominates.

The rhetoric with which I expressed this tension was perhaps somewhat overdrawn. It is certainly excessive to say that revolutionary movements require "true believers" instead of open-minded activists prepared to learn from their mistakes. The image I conveyed was of the revolutionary as fanatic, and while tendencies toward fanaticism may be inherent in revolutionary movements, revolutionary commitment itself does not entail fanaticism. And, as

Burawoy points out, it is equally essential for the advance of Marxist science that theoreticians have passionate commitments. No one would ever be a Marxist simply from a dispassionate weighing of the evidence and argument in its favor, without extra-scientific commitments.

To say that scientists need deep commitments and revolutionaries need open-mindedness, however, is not to deny that a tension between these modes of thought exists. It may be true, as Burawoy suggests, that without dogmatism (or at least some degree of dogmatism) there is only chaos, but this does not eradicate the tension between the intellectual rigidity encouraged by dogmatism and the intellectual flexibility required to learn new things. What I described as the tension between revolutionary practice and revolutionary theory, therefore, may equally be a tension within the practice of revolutionary theory, but it remains a tension nevertheless.

2. Knowledge and Emancipation

Burawoy poses an interesting contrast between the view that "truth would serve the Marxist cause" and the view that "the ultimate grounding of Marxism is its truth." He believes that there was a time in which I believed the first of these statements, but that I am now committed to the second. Thus, if I came to believe that Marxism was not true—or, perhaps more precisely, that some alternative theoretical perspective was closer to the truth—then I would abandon Marxism.

Burawoy is correct in this conclusion: I would abandon Marxism if I came to believe that it was false relative to a rival theory that attempted to explain the same things. But the initial contrast he draws between truth serving the "Marxist cause" and Marxism being grounded in truth is a misleading one and leads to misinterpretations of the implications of this conclusion. I would reformulate the contrast by saying that I believe that truth serves the cause of emancipation (where emancipation is understood as the elimination of oppression, exploitation, domination) and that "Marxism" is the name I give to the emancipatory theory which I believe is closest to the truth. Thus while Burawoy is correct in saying that if I came to believe that Marxism was false (relative to a rival) I would indeed abandon it, this would not in any sense imply an abandonment of the moral and political cause of emancipation itself. Emancipatory interests are central to defining the kinds of questions I think are important to ask and thus the explanatory objects that a scientific theory to which I am committed should address. My commitment to these questions remains grounded in moral and political concerns, but my commitment to the specific concepts and explanations embodied in Marxist answers to these questions is based on my assessment of their truth relative to rivals.

This raises the issue of the relationship between emancipatory goals and scientific knowledge. Burawoy quotes Bhaskar as saying "the emancipatory potential of social science is contingent upon, and entirely a consequence of, its textual explanatory power." This, Burawoy says, is a form of idealism for it sees ideas as having a social force (an emancipatory potential) independently of the interests of actors. There are two comments I would like to make on this issue.

First, I agree entirely with Burawoy that the social efficacy of ideas is contingent upon the ways in which they resonate with interests. "Truth" per se has no effects. Contrary to Burawoy, however, I do not think that there is anything whatsoever inherent in a realist perspective on knowledge that implies that ideas should have an autonomous social effectivity. A realist would say that in order to understand the effects of ideas we must study the real mechanisms through which ideas work in the world. These mechanisms would include a range of psychological mechanisms (through which ideas are "heard" and incorporated into cognitive and motivational structures) and institutional mechanisms (through which ideas are disseminated). It is entirely plausible that as a general "law" in the sociology of knowledge we might decide that ideas have social impact only when they resonate with the interests of actors. This claim about the conditions for ideas to have causal weight in the world, however, does not follow logically from any epistemological premises. It is a substantive claim about how the world works, not an a priori philosophical assertion.

Second, I cannot defend rigorously my assertion that scientific truth in fact has emancipatory potential (when this truth "resonates with interests"). It could be the case, for example, that distortions and lies aid the cause of emancipation more than knowledge. It might be the case that people need illusions of grandeur, exaggerated beliefs in their historical efficacy, confidence in the ultimate triumph of communism, in order to engage in the practical sacrifices needed to accomplish even limited emancipatory transformations. A scientific analysis which convinced people that historical materialism was false (i.e. that communism was not inevitable) might thus in fact reduce the chances for even partial emancipation. Since I believe that partial emancipation is preferable to no emancipation, it might therefore be the case that defending strong historical materialism (which I believe to be a false theory) could serve the cause of emancipation (or the "Marxist cause" if you prefer). Such a situation would pose a serious moral and intellectual dilemma for me: would I support ideas which I believed to be false when I also believed them to be emancipatory?

If the interests served by particular ideas become the essential criterion for their "truth," the above dilemma of believing certain ideas to be simultaneously false and yet emancipatory would be reframed as a conflict between two interests held by a theorist: their interests as academics (which leads them to adopt realist-type criteria for truth) and their interests as Marxists (which leads them to hold emancipatory criteria for truth). The theorist thus simply has to choose which of these interests is more important: is it more important to be an academic or a Marxist? As Burawoy says, "to save sociology or to save Marxism—that is the question."

This seems to me to be an unsatisfactory resolution of the dilemma. When I say that strong historical materialism is false what I mean is that I can marshal evidence and argument which, if presented to a revolutionary who was willing to listen and to rationally weigh the issues, would lead that revolutionary to reject strong historical materialism. It would not necessarily lead the revolutionary to reject revolutionary goals, but it would lead to a discrediting of the theory that such goals will inevitably be achieved because of the fettering of the development of the forces of production by capitalist relations of production. Of course, some people will not "listen" and rationally consider the evidence—that are dogmatic in a way that destrovs rather than complements skepticism—and thus discredited ideas can remain durably believed. Nevertheless, it seems much more plausible to explain this by the analysis of various social and psychological mechanisms of belief formation—cognitive dissonance, wishful thinking, pressures to conform to institutionalized ideologies, etc.than by the global epistemological claims that truth has meaning only in terms of interests and thus different truths are no more than direct expressions of different interests.

3. Realist Ontology

Burawoy's critique of scientific realism rests on a critique of its ontological position (that real causal mechanisms exist independently of the theorist) and its epistemological position (that we are capable of distinguishing the relative truthfulness of rival claims about the world). These two issues are joined, for the ability to adjudicate between rival explanations of the same theoretical object hinges on the existence of a "real world" independent of our thought, since it is this independence that makes the various strategies of adjudication plausible (experimental and quasi-experimental designs, criteria of internal consistency of concepts and data, etc.). Adjudication may still be fraught with difficulties, and in many cases it may prove impossible to decisively marshal evidence and arguments to differentiate rival explanations of the same phenomena, but nevertheless if the realist ontology is correct, adjudication becomes at least possible in principle.

Burawoy rejects the realist ontology by saying that in his perspective, "the world is neither external to us waiting to be mapped nor is it a figment of our imagination but exists in an inseparable relationship to us. The world does not exist outside our relationship to it" (p. 59). Particularly in the context of social science, there is a deep ambiguity in the collective personal pronoun used in this statement. Is the claim that the social world does not exist outside of my individual relationship to it, or that it does not exist outside of the relation of people in general to it? The latter statement seems to me eminently reasonable: the theoretical objects of social science are constituted by the relations among people and their practices, and thus the social world does not exist independently of our collective relationship to the world.

The former statement—that the social world does not exist independently of my personal relation to it—does not make sense to me. I believe that apartheid exists, that workers are exploited and that the United States government is supporting right-wing movements around the world independently of my individual relationship to any of these particular social phenomena. I could, of course, be wrong about any of these beliefs, but whether or not apartheid, capitalist exploitation or support of right-wing movements exists is independent of me.

Furthermore, with the exception of a radically idealist epistemology, in all of the alternative epistemological positions mentioned by Burawoy-consensus views of truth, pragmatic views of truth, realist views of truth-the belief that the social world exists independently of my individual relationship to it would be considered "true." Burawoy's preferred epistemology is what he terms the consensus view of truth "in which truth is what we agree to be true." (p. 70). It would certainly be the consensual view of human beings in general (and certainly of human beings in modern capitalist societies of whatever class) that the social world exists independently of each individual person, and thus the realist ontology would be consensually validated. It is one thing to say that each person does not exist independently of the social world (since we are all constituted as persons within social interaction) or that the social world does not exist independently of people in general, and quite another to say that the social world does not exist outside of my individual relationship to it.

A realist ontology does not logically entail a realist epistemology—the view that real mechanisms exist in the world independently of our theories and our individual relation to the world does not imply the view that we are capable of differentiating the relative truthfulness of claims about those real mechanisms. But a realist ontology does imply that our descriptions of the world, and

the theories we construct using these descriptions, are constrained both by the effects of these real mechanisms and by the concepts which we use to analyze them. This double constraint at least opens up the possibility for scientific adjudications between rival concepts and explanations of the social world.

-Telos-

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