



Ethnographic fallacies: reflections on labour studies in the era of market fundamentalism

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Abstract

Michael Burawoy reflects back on 40 years of industrial ethnography in Zambia, the USA, Hungary and Russia to discover the mistakes he made and, thus, to infer the fallacies to which ethnography is subject. He traces these fallacies not to any 'theoretical imposition' but to inadequate theoretical reflection. All methodologies are fallible and scholars should spend more time examining the limitations of their own methodologies and less time attacking the limitations of others.

Keywords

capitalism, ethnography, industry, socialism, working class

Introduction

When I reflect on the ethnographies of industrial workplaces that I have conducted over the last 40 years in Zambia, the USA, Hungary and Russia, a disturbing pattern reveals itself. Economic and social catastrophe followed me from workplace to workplace. No sooner had I completed a study than unanticipated disaster befell those I left behind. It was as though I cast a spell on their lives – the ethnographer's curse. My friends blamed me for the plight of these industrial communities across the world. They told me to stop doing ethnography.

I do not believe it was actually anything to do with me. It is a case of mistaken causality. Although I was slow to realize it, the real culprit was an economic tsunami – what I call third-wave marketization (Burawoy, 2008, 2010) – that devastated my field sites as it did so much of the world, starting in the middle 1970s. If this supposition is correct, then I need to consider why it took me so long to recognize this wave of market

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fundamentalism; and, now that it shows no sign of abating, I need to consider what this means for labour studies today.

From the ethnographer's curse, therefore, I turn to the ethnographic fallacies that limited my vision of market fundamentalism. First, there are three traps that await the ethnographer who seeks to comprehend the world beyond the field site: the fallacies of ignoring, reifying and homogenizing that world. Second, there are three traps awaiting the ethnographer who fails to give the field site a dynamic of its own: the fallacies of viewing the field site as eternal or, when the past is examined, the danger of treating the present as a point of arrival rather than also as a point of departure; and finally the danger of wishful thinking, projecting one's own hopes onto the actors we study.

I describe these six fallacies not to indict ethnography but to improve its practice, to help ethnographers grapple with the limitations of their method. No method is without fallacies, it is a matter of how honestly and openly we approach them. Being accountable to the people we study requires us to recognize our fallibility and, thus, to wrestle with that fallibility. The methodological dogmatists, who declare they have found the flawless method and spend their time condemning others for not following the golden trail, are the real menace to our profession.

Zambia: the colour of class (1968–72)

I began my career as an industrial ethnographer in 1968, soon after graduating from university. I migrated from England to Zambia as an aspiring sociologist but with a mathematics degree. In search of a job and a project, I entered the Zambian copper industry through its Personnel Research Unit, as an employee of one of the two multi-national corporations that owned the seven mines, producing over 90 per cent of Zambia's foreign revenue and 50 per cent to 70 per cent of government revenue and employing almost 50,000 workers in a country of four million. I wanted to understand how these corporations were responding to postcolonial rule inaugurated four years earlier. More specifically, I was interested in what had happened to the racial order as the labour force was localized, as it was Zambianized. I showed how class forces – working class, managerial class, capitalist class – and the postcolonial state conspired to reproduce the colour bar, the rule of white over black, despite government declarations that racial injustice was being eliminated (Burawoy, 1972). These were flush times with the price of copper high, so the companies could undertake organizational manipulations that advanced Zambianization without undermining the colour bar, while also consolidating an African labour aristocracy made up of unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Profits could keep everyone more or less content.

By the time I completed my study in 1972 the mines had been nationalized and then, after I left, the price of copper began to plummet, turning profits into losses, shrinking the labour force and prompting back migration to the rural areas. The demise of the copper industry created a fiscal crisis, leading to the intervention of the IMF with its structural adjustment loans that called for reprivatizing the mines. As privatization gathered momentum though the 1990s, as fate would have it, the price of copper began to climb again to the benefit of the new owners – international consortia, Indian capital and Chinese capital – while great swaths of the Zambian population as a whole remained mired in poverty and disease, not least HIV-AIDS.

How had I missed this dismal outcome? In situating the reproduction of the colour bar I had confined my attention to the national configuration of class forces, underlining how these hampered economic development (Burawoy, 1972). I treated international dependency, such as the dependency on copper and its price, as an ideology that the Zambian ruling class used to obscure or justify its domination. When faced with challenges and demands from below, it too easily pointed to the forces of 'neo-colonialism' as responsible for the plight of the country, distracting attention from its own class privileges.

Here lay my error – the first ethnographic fallacy. In extending out from the micro processes to the macro forces I stopped at the national level and, therefore, failed to recognize the operation of global forces, whether in the form of copper prices or such international agencies as the IMF. Not for the last time did I lose sight of global factors and global institutions that were wreaking havoc with the Zambian economy.

The USA: manufacturing consent (1974-75)

I left Zambia in 1972 for the University of Chicago, where I enrolled as a PhD student in sociology. I was on a fool's errand searching for the Committee on New Nations that had been disbanded and for Chicago ethnography that was in remission. For my dissertation I chose to take on the Chicago School with a factory ethnography in their own backyard. For 10 months, in 1974–5, I became a machine operator in a South Chicago factory, coincidentally the same factory that the great Chicago sociologist Donald Roy had studied 30 years earlier at the end of World War Two (see Roy, 1952, 1954). To be sure the company had moved and it was now the engine division of a large multi-national corporation, Allis Chalmers, but it was nonetheless the immediate descendent of Buda Company where Roy had worked.¹

From my first day I was amazed by the labour intensity on the shop floor, delivered without any obvious pressure from management. I turned the question posed by industrial sociology – why don't workers work harder? – into its opposite, why do workers work as hard as they do (Burawoy, 1979)? The answers, I argued, were to be found in the displacement of a despotic regulation of work by what I called the hegemonic regime. It had three components. First, the constitution of work as a game organized by workers that absorbed their social as well as labouring skills, turning arduous and boring labour into a moment by moment challenge. As a result, the work day sped by. Second, the internal labour market distributed jobs on the basis of seniority and skill, resulting in the coordination of the interests of individuals with those of the company (the longer they stayed the better the job). On the other hand, workers could bid on another job in the factory if they did not like their foreman's practices – a threat that effectively contained the foreman's arbitrary powers, creating a more negotiated relation. Third, the internal state regulated shop floor relations through the collective agreement and grievance machinery patrolled by the trade union. Here the worker was constituted as an individual with rights and obligations at the same time that worker interests were coordinated with those of management through concession bargaining, ultimately tied to profits. The hegemonic organization of work operated as a combination of force and consent, with the application of force itself the object of consent, through which capital successfully presented its interests as the interests of all.

This hegemonic regime, which was to be found across the organized sectors of US industry, looked impregnable. Yet it would dissolve as silently as it appeared. In the years following my departure, Allis Chalmers – once one of the leading international producers of agricultural and construction equipment – went bankrupt. It was taken over by a succession of companies. When I returned to the engine division 30 years after I had left, I found that it had been turned into a warehouse for steel tubes. From being the heartland of industrial expansion, South Chicago had become a waste land, a ghetto for warehousing not just steel tubes but African Americans expelled from the housing projects nearer the centre of the city – housing projects that were being pulled down to make way for the boom in real estate speculation (Venkatesh, 2002).

In extending out from the shop, to the factory, to the wider political economy, I once again missed the global picture – the international competition faced by Allis Chalmers, and by US industry more generally, that lay behind rapid deindustrialization through the 1980s. I had artificially locked my study into its national container. Even within that framework I made an error, however, assuming that the state was an unchanging external force. Here I committed the second ethnographic fallacy – not ignoring but *reifying* the external forces that shape micro processes. Of course, the state is itself a product of social processes, so it cannot be assumed to be fixed. The Reagan state, emerging in 1981, took the offensive against labour in general and organized labour in particular, creating new conditions on the shop floor, what I would later call hegemonic despotism (Burawoy, 1985).

I overlooked the global context of production and the state's aggressive disposition toward labour, but even within the factory I missed what was going on in front of my nose. Built on class compromise and on the individualization of workers as industrial citizens with rights and obligations, the hegemonic regime effectively disarmed workers, undermining their collective capacity to defend their interests in the face of assaults from both market and state. The hegemonic regime effectively sowed the seeds of its own destruction, manufacturing consent but also stripping the working class of its weapons of collective defence. What I had thought was a permanent feature of organized capitalism, proved to be a short-lived, unstable holding pattern. Thus, the third ethnographic fallacy – to assume one's field site is eternal.

Hungary: the radiant past (1982–8)

Two reasons drove me from Chicago to Hungary. First, my claim that the hegemonic regime was a feature of advanced capitalism rather than industrialism required a study of industrial workplaces in a non-capitalist society. Second, I was inspired by the Polish Solidarity Movement (1980–81), the first historical case of a sustained society-wide working class revolution (Staniszkis, 1984; Touraine et al., 1984). How was it, I wondered, that state socialism gave rise to working class revolt whereas advanced capitalism so effectively atomized, fragmented, absorbed and otherwise contained class struggle? Too late to study the Solidarity movement itself – Jaruzelski's military coup on 13 December 1981 preceded my academic leave – I turned to the study of Hungarian workplaces through the decade of the 1980s. Factories were never easy to access for an alien sociologist, nonetheless I managed to wend my way from a champagne

factory on a collective farm to a small cotton spinning shop on a cooperative farm and from there I managed to insinuate myself into a machine shop just like the one at Allis Chalmers. Finally, I entered the heart of the socialist working class, enrolling in the Lenin Steel Works of Miskolc where I worked as a furnace man for a total of 11 months in three stints between 1985 and 1989, that is, until state socialism disintegrated (Burawoy and Lukács, 1992).

What did I discover about the socialist workplace and socialist working class consciousness? Why did Solidarity appear in state socialism and not advanced capitalism; why in Poland and not Hungary? Comparing the two machine shops, Allied and Bánki, I surmised the Hungarian one to be more efficient, at least on the shop floor (Burawoy and Lukács, 1985). Indeed, with half-completed engines lining the aisles, with its hot jobs to meet managerial targets, with its continuing bottlenecks plaguing production, Allied closely approximated the image of socialist production. Bánki, on the other hand, followed a pattern of flexible specialization, based on worker collectives, creating a pseudo-market within the enterprise as an adaptation to the exigencies of the administered economy (Stark, 1986). Just as US corporations are not all equally efficient, so socialist enterprises are not all equally inefficient, as I discovered when I worked in the Lenin Steel Works. There management was far more bureaucratic, not granting workers the collective autonomy to fix the problems of shortage. Intermittent chaos reigned in the socialist steel mill.

What of working class consciousness under the workers' state? I argued that if consent was manufactured in the advanced capitalist workplace then dissent was manufactured in the workplace of state socialism (Burawoy, 1989). Here exploitation is not hidden but transparent and the state its orchestrator. The state is present at the point of production in the form of the institutional troika: party, trade union and management. The state is responsible for planning production and appropriating the product. Moreover, it justifies this barefaced domination on the grounds of its omniscience – it 'knows' the needs of the people and 'represents' their interests (Konrád and Szelényi, 1979). Unlike the capitalist state that secures consent indirectly, the socialist state relies on its continuing legitimacy, a far more precarious form of order that easily turns into despotism. Thus, the party state proclaims equality, justice and efficiency in the compulsory rituals of party meetings, Saturday shifts, public festivities and so forth, yet workers experience the opposite: inequality, injustice and inefficiency. They are quick to turn the legitimating ideology against the party state, which is hoisted, thereby, on its own petard. I argued that the immanent critique of ruling ideology led workers to blame the state for not living up to its promises and in the process they came to embrace a socialist consciousness.

When state socialism began to disintegrate in 1988 I indulged in a form of sociological wishful thinking, the fourth ethnographic fallacy, projecting my own Marxian hopes onto actors in the field, in this case the working class. I argued that, following their latent socialist consciousness, Hungarian workers would struggle for a workers' socialism, a democratic socialism (Burawoy, 1990). To be sure there were signs of the restoration of the 1956 workers' councils but this tendency was weak as, indeed, were all tendencies within the working class. Labouring in their factories or their steel mills, workers were largely silent onlookers to events they did not initiate. Contrary to my claims about their

socialist consciousness, it turned out that they were not interested in any reform of socialism – they had seen enough of those. Looking back now I would say I erred in projecting a socialist consciousness onto the working class: in seeing the gap between ideology and reality, workers chose to emphasize reality rather than ideology even if, or particularly if, that reality was fast looking like a market society. Even in Poland, where Solidarity was reconstituted after seven years in the wilderness, the inheritors of that working class movement showed little interest in democratic socialism, or socialism of any kind.

Why did state socialism collapse? Here I succumbed to a fifth ethnographic fallacy – not just reifying but homogenizing the world beyond the workplace. I simply failed to appreciate the dynamics and tensions among the different forces operating beyond the workplace. On the other hand, in explaining why Solidarity occurred in Poland rather than Hungary I did invoke such factors: namely the way the Church acted as an umbrella for opposition activity, providing the resources for collective action in Poland versus the atomizing effects of the market in Hungary that channelled workers toward individual strategies of resistance and advancement (Burawoy, 1989). These factors, however, were introduced post hoc to explain variation between countries without interrogating the institutions that mediated between state and everyday life – and thus identify the dynamics of state socialism's disintegration.

In one respect, however, I was correct: the transition to the market came at enormous cost. Workers soon found themselves either without a job or working under ever more precarious conditions and in a rapidly polarizing society. When I revisited my friends from the October Revolution Socialist Brigade in 1999, 10 years after the Fall, I found a world following South Chicago's path to deindustrialization (Burawoy, 2001a). For them, indeed, the socialism that they had spurned had now become the radiant past, whereas the promises of capitalism looked very tarnished.

Russia: the great involution (1991–2002)

I had come to Hungary to study the possibility of a transition from state socialism to democratic socialism and not the transition to market capitalism. So I had no hesitation in grasping the opportunity to pursue a factory ethnography in the Soviet Union at the beginning of 1991, when it was still 'socialist'.

I began in a famous rubber plant, Kauchuk, located in the centre of Moscow. It was an intense two-month study, more of management than of workers, which I undertook together with Kathie Hendley (Burawoy and Hendley, 1992). I had finally discovered a socialist factory that conformed to my preconceptions – atrocious working conditions, many of the workers migrants from other parts of the Soviet Union, a production process plagued by shortages, especially in the winter of 1991. The trade union leaders promised us a microcosm of the Soviet Union and so it was. We were able to study the new forms of cooperatives and small enterprises that had sprung up within the factory, enterprises run by managers who turned access to state resources into private profit. I had seen such cooperatives in Hungary, but I had never seen a factory convulsed by its own civil war. This was the time of an intensifying struggle between Yeltsin-led Russia and Gorbachev-led Soviet Union; between a new market orientation and old-style planning. These divisions cut right through the centre of Kauchuk, dividing the factory into warring factions:

the Young Turks, led by engineers and technicians, versus the Old Guard, led by the Director and the Chief Engineer. The factory was almost paralysed by these divisions, displayed in both public and private venues.

While the struggle was intense and the writing was on the wall, I still did not have a premonition of the collapse of the Soviet Union. That was unthinkable. Certainly things were in transformation but where it would all end was unclear, even after I conducted a second study in Syktyvkar, capital of the Republic of Komi in Northern Russia. There, I worked as a machine operator in Polar furniture factory, which was profiting immensely from the economic crisis and the breakdown in central planning. Polar had a regional monopoly in the production of wall systems and had the political connections to assure itself of the materials necessary to make those wall systems. With Pavel Krotov, I went beyond the workplace to explore the relations among enterprises along the Komi timber chain. This was a relatively prosperous time in Komi and Polar itself was a new factory, employing young workers. Working conditions were far better than in the satanic dungeons of Kauchuk and Polar management was far more unified in developing strategies to take advantage of their monopoly position (Burawoy and Krotov, 1992).

I left Russia in July 1991. In August Yeltsin repelled the attempted revanchist coup that was bent on reasserting the crumbling Soviet order and by December the Soviet Union had collapsed. It was here that I began to catch up with history. More clearly than ever I could see the devastation that the revolutionary – Bolshevik if you will – transition to the market would bring in its wake. The ethnographer's curse had struck again, only this time it was a matter of only a few months after I left before the Soviet Union was swept up in a headlong flight from communism. So my friends not only forbade me from visiting any other country but condemned me to living through the market transition in the Arctic North.

For the next decade I followed the transition to the market economy in Komi, watching the collapse of its working class as factory after factory closed its doors, or failed to pay its workers, or if they were lucky paid them in kind rather than the rapidly declining ruble. I spent time in Vorkuta, the centre of coal mining, where a militant working class movement had dealt a hammer blow to the old regime. Once the old order was defeated, miners imagined they would enter the promised land. Yet, the opposite happened as they were the first to suffer the shock therapy of the new order. With Tatyana Lytkina, a local sociologist, I studied the survival strategies of the now ex-workers of Polar and other closed-down enterprises (Burawoy et al., 2000).

With Pavel Krotov, I followed the demise of the regional timber industry and then turned to the only sector that showed signs of vitality – the construction sector, building luxury apartments for those who made a killing from the high end of merchant capitalism. The planned economy was replaced, as Oleg Kharkhordin would say, not by a free market but a flea market – a retreat to a barter economy that wreaked havoc with production. Unleashing the market, rather than stimulating growth, led to rapid economic decline, the likes of which had never been seen in peacetime (Burawoy, 2001b).

Finally, therefore, at the end of the world, in the tundra of Arctic Russia, I met the tsunami of third-wave marketization face to face. The devastation of society was strewn everywhere around me. At this time and in this place there was no collective movement against the market but instead a headlong retreat from the market. This was no revolution

or evolution to capitalism, as the pundits were claiming, but this was indeed a Great Involution. I had no inkling of the tsunami when I left Zambia in 1972, when I left Chicago as late as 1979, nor even when I left Hungary in 1989. The trouble was I had my back to future – and this is the sixth ethnographic fallacy – studying the present as a point of arrival rather than a point of departure; studying the constraints posed by colonial legacies for postcolonial society, how despotism gave way to hegemony under advanced capitalism, how Solidarity appeared in Poland rather than Hungary. When eventually I turned around to face the future, to consider the bleak prospects for Russia, I had to rethink my theoretical orientation. I had to turn from Marx to Polanyi.

Capitalism revisited: from Marx to Polanyi

So I committed multiple ethnographic fallacies, making false assumptions about context on the one side and historicity on the other. But why did I make these mistakes? Was it simply methodological naiveté? Or bad training? Some have said the problem lies in the theoretical presuppositions that I took with me to the field, presuppositions that blinded me to the reality of the field. I would claim the opposite – the problem was inadequate attention to theory. If I had been more self-conscious and consistent about my Marxism I may not have so readily missed the importance of global capitalism and its dynamics, or the changing economic interventions of the state, or the way institutions sow the seeds of their own destruction. The Russian transition, in which opening up the market was destroying production, forced me to rethink the theoretical foundations of my research.

What had I learned about the working class over those 34 years from 1968 to 2002? In Zambia I learned that workers sought to defend their position as a labour aristocracy; in Chicago I discovered how consent was organized in production; in Hungary I had thought dissent was manufactured in production but it turned out to be a flavour of political cynicism; while in Russia miners and a few other workers had seized the political opening in the twilight of Perestroika to challenge the party state with a radical platform, but this was quickly drowned in the storm of the post-Soviet transition. Together these studies belied the Marxian prophecy of a mobilized, militant working class. Indeed, the story from Russia was that the working class was rapidly disappearing in the face of market destruction and more generally we can argue that across the world exploitation has fast become a privilege desired by ever more people. Instead of a proletariat we have a precariat (Standing, 2011), desperately seeking to defend its exploitation. Enter Polanyi.

I first began studying Karl Polanyi's (1944) *The Great Transformation* in connection with the Russian transition from socialism to capitalism. If Marxism was relatively silent on this matter, Polanyi's analysis of the consequences of market fundamentalism seemed to offer more. First, and most obviously, it underlined the dangers of shock therapy, the most rapid possible transition to the market. There is no market road to market capitalism: the market needs all manner of supporting and regulating institutions. These cannot be created overnight. Nor can this be accomplished by blindly destroying everything from the past. The Chinese seemed to have learned the lesson of Polanyi, incubating capitalism under the umbrella of the party state (Burawoy, 1996; Naughton, 1995).

If this is the more conventional, static side of Polanyi, the more exciting, dynamic side is the spontaneous rise of counter-movements to defend society against unfettered markets. For Polanyi, three entities are essential for human existence: land (and by extension the environment or nature) from which we derive our sustenance, labour through which we produce our means of existence and money that makes the coordination of productive enterprises possible. Subjecting these three so-called 'fictitious commodities' to free exchange threatens their use-value and thus human society. Commodifying nature threatens its capacity to nurture human life, commodifying labour threatens its capacity to engage in productive activity, commodifying money so destabilizes the economic environment as to put businesses out of business. In other words, these commodities are fictitious because they lose their use-value, their function, when subjected to unregulated exchange. In other words, the unregulated commodification of nature, labour and money is a self-destructive process.

Polanyi claims further that unfettered commodification of nature, labour and money so destroys human society that the latter is galvanized into its own defence. He examines the rise of cooperatives, communes and trade unions in 19th-century England that protected labour from its commodification. He examines the rise of interventionist states in the 1930s – Fascism, Stalinism, New Deal and Social Democracy – that protected national economies from the gales of international trade under the gold standard. He does not regard these as two separate rounds of counter-movement, reacting to two distinct waves of marketization. Had he done so, he might have been less sanguine about the impossibility of a third wave of marketization (Burawoy, 2008). If labour lies at the centre of the first wave of marketization (producing local responses), if money lies at the centre of the second wave of marketization (producing national responses), then perhaps we can say that the environment will ultimately lie at the centre of the third wave of marketization and that this wave demands a global response. Just as second-wave marketization also included the recommodification of labour, so third-wave marketization sets in motion the recommodification of labour and money, even if its peculiarity lies in the destruction of the environment, threatening the very survival of the human species.

What does this shift from Marx to Polanyi, from exploitation to commodification, portend for the study of labour? In the Marxian view the labour movement takes centre place, as indeed it did in 19th-century Europe. Defined by their place in production as an exploited class, workers have had great difficulty in constituting solidarity within the factory, let alone beyond the factory (Burawoy, 2010). If, however, we think of labour not in terms of exploitation but commodification, and if we shift from relations of production to relations to the market, then new possibilities open up. Instead of the common experience of exploitation that might bring together different working classes, we substitute coalitions around the experience of commodification – potentially bringing together those struggling to defend the opportunity to sell their labour power, those struggling to defend their access to unpolluted water, land and air and those struggling to defend themselves against the machinations of finance capital.

We cannot assume that the Polanyian counter-movement will appear magically out of nothing. Society, after all, can defend itself through retreat as well as through counter-movement; and counter-movement can be reactionary as well as progressive, can limit freedoms as well as expand them. Still, as the devastation of our planet continues

unimpeded, as time horizons shrink, as states are enfeebled, as finance capital creates havoc with our lives, as the old working class is enfeebled and replaced by a precariat, so we have to search for the most effective ramparts to reverse third-wave marketization. In that search the ethnographer plays a critical role, digging around like an archaeologist for the nuclei of contestation, for embryonic institutions struggling to make their appearance against the tsunami. We then have to comprehend the conditions for their expansion and dissemination. Ethnography is on the front-line in the battle to save society from market fundamentalism, so we had better reflect deeply on the fallacies to which it is prone.

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Note

- 1 I called Allis Chalmers 'Allied' and the Buda Company 'Geer Company' in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979).

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