

Reading Burawoy's *The Politics of Production* Now: On the Political after Post-Politics

Critical Sociology
2024, Vol. 50(6) 931–942
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/08969205241265880
journals.sagepub.com/home/crs



Hyun Ok Park 

York University, Canada

I

In 1985, Michael Burawoy published his seminal book, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism*. Why is it still, or rather especially now, the must-read? It is not only because of its monumental status in Marxism and Sociology but because it provides an indispensable framework for grappling with the challenges posed by post-politics in theory and practice. Despite the passage of four decades and considerable changes, the theoretical and political challenges that Burawoy tackled in the book persist. *The Politics of Production* is a comparative analysis of workers' experiences across capitalist, socialist, and postcolonial countries since Marx's time. As the Marxist vision of worker insurgency and revolutionary transformation fell out of favor in both capitalist and socialist worlds, the concept of totality emerged as a focal point for theoretical exploration.

The Frankfurt School highlighted how workers found solace in mass culture, which offered a temporary escape from monotonous labor, conceptualizing culture as part of a homogenized whole under capitalism. Louis Althusser (1970) conceptualized this homogenized culture and life, formed by the overarching influence of capitalism, as the 'expressive totality'. He contrasted this with what he termed "the unity of a *structured whole*" or simply a "complex structural unity" through the theorization of overdetermination and aleatory politics. Althusser made this philosophical move in response to the bureaucratization of the socialist state and the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Burawoy (1978a), however, transformed this matter of history and politics into a sociological study of institutions and experiences, elaborating on Althusser's concept as "a structured totality." When studying the state as an autonomous organization with its own interests was popular in Marxism and Sociology, Burawoy shifted the focus to the interplay between the state and the economy, particularly regarding state intervention in production and the dynamics between state and factory apparatuses. The result is the historical and comparative study of production regimes across the great divide between socialism and capitalism and between the colonial and postcolonial eras. This trailblazing work continues to shape labor studies for generations to come. However, in this essay, I shall make a case that *The Politics of Production* also commands another enduring influence on how we think about the political.

Corresponding author:

Hyun Ok Park, Department of Sociology, York University, Vari Hall, Room 2060, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada.

Email: hopark@yorku.ca

Forty years on, new political conjunctures have reignited the urgency of understanding the concept of the political. The rise of neoliberal capitalism in the 1970s spurred debates on economic determinism and the state's role, but it has since permeated nearly every facet of society. Coupled with climate catastrophes, this has shifted the battleground beyond mere employment and welfare to encompass life itself. Risk, vulnerability, victimhood, care, and the value of life have become central political fields of the contemporary neoliberal experience. This homogenization of society parallels the Hegelian notion of totality, where individual parts reflect the whole. Resistance to this homogenization is too fragmented to hold a cohesive political dimension, as appeals to moral values like inclusion and compassion toward marginalized groups may not immediately translate into effective political action. Conversely, recent years have witnessed a resurgence in workers' uprisings, ranging from auto workers to platform workers and immigrant laborers, challenging the profit-driven machinery of capitalism. Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and global commune movements have reinvigorated mass protests. However, these movements are ensnared in a post-political quagmire characterized by spontaneous organizing devoid of clear 'ideology' or direction. Despite critiquing bureaucratic and authoritarian tendencies within the state and social movements, these protest movements are yet to muster the vision necessary to counter the well-organized and ideologically driven far-right and fascist movements. Amid global crises, including the rise of populist and illiberal regimes around the world exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Etienne Balibar (2020) ponders whether these crises will reinforce neoliberal capitalism or precipitate its downfall, possibly paving the way for socialist and communist revolutions. Questions arise regarding the distribution of burdens and benefits, particularly with proposals like universal basic income potentially increasing public debt and exacerbating exclusionary politics across regions, Balibar observes. In this tumultuous context, socialism and communism are resurfacing as resources for radical political thought (Sunkara, 2019) and as the ontology of politics (Badiou, 2019 [1985]), signaling a prospective shift toward more transformative political paradigms.

Althusser's intellectual legacy endures through the contributions of his students—Badiou, Balibar, Lazarus, and Rancière—who continue to shape theoretical discourse on the political and the state. Recently, some of their texts from the 1980s and 1990s have been translated and garnered attention in North America. For instance, Alain Badiou (2019 [1985]) challenges conventional conceptualizations of the political for conflating politics with state power and for lacking an intrinsic connection to truth. According to him, genuine politics emerges from a departure from state-centric perspectives. Politics, he argues, is not about social cohesion or unity but about disrupting and dissenting against established social orders. Therefore, Badiou famously characterizes politics as 'thought' and a rare event, prompting questions about how to engage effectively with practical politics within this ontological framework. Jacques Rancière (2004 [1995]) also distinguishes politics from state politics, which he conceptualizes as policing, defining (revolutionary) politics in terms of the 'disidentification' of those marginalized individuals who are excluded from the state's structures of power. His concern is the meaningful resistance of 'part of no part' to the state's policing. In contrast, Balibar (2015, 2020) theorizes politics not as a rare event but as a more common occurrence, emphasizing its articulation between 'the logic of state authority' and 'the logic of solidarity'. Balibar's approach suggests a broader understanding of political engagement beyond rare ruptures, highlighting the ongoing interplay between state power and collective action. These contemporary theoretical debates on the political and political subjectivity continue to orbit around themes of economic determination and the state's autonomy. The theorization of the political, initiated by figures like Burawoy and Althusser in the 1970s and the 1980s, remains important not so much because of theoretical debacles as because capitalism and sociopolitical responses to it remain urgent.

One may ponder what has changed in the meta-theories of politics. Now more than ever, it is crucial to view the state not as autonomous or purely instrumental but to delve into its

interconnectedness with the economy. This task proves still challenging in practice. To illustrate, I will draw on the politics surrounding precarious workers, whose existing studies are split between political economy studies and affect studies. I shall demonstrate how Burawoy's theory of structured totality and his analysis of the interplay between the state and economy remain indispensable after four decades. However, let me begin by delving into Burawoy's framework and exploring its relationship with Marxism and critical theory over the past four decades.

II

When contemplating Michael Burawoy, the term 'revolutionary' encapsulates his essence, as his teaching, writing, and speaking actions embody his revolutionary spirit. During his time at Berkeley in his 40s, he always wore the same red shirt whenever giving a talk in the department. Striding briskly across the podium, he exuded immense passion for his subject. Watching his hair blow in the wind, our anxieties and insecurities dissipated as we students rooted for him. On his office door, amid neighbors with less-than-friendly perspectives in sociology and politics, he proudly displayed the logo that marked the relaunching of the South African Communist Party in 1990, a testament to his unwavering commitment to revolutionary change. Burawoy's revolutionary ethos extended beyond academia; he did not merely study workers but actively became one of them, not for a conventional ethnography of participant observation and interview but for sharing work and life with other workers—universal socialist ethics. Born in Manchester, it seemed as though he was destined to lead a life immersed in the struggles of the working class. After earning a BA in mathematics from Cambridge, Burawoy entered the world of the shop floor. During his PhD studies at the University of Chicago, he worked as a machine operator in Chicago, an experience that provided the basis for his groundbreaking book, *Manufacturing Consent*. His work as a furnaceman at the Lenin Steel Works in Hungary in 1984, tending to an 80 ton, 1600° furnace, was realizing his lifelong dream to work in a socialist steel mill (Byles, 2001). This anecdote is legendary, highlighting his profound dedication to grasping the realities of working-class life. His publications, informed by these rich experiences, bear witness to his revolutionary dedication to understanding and advocating for the working class.

His magnum opus, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism*, is a comparative analysis of production regimes that concerns a central philosophical and scientific inquiry within Marxism and labor studies: the division between mental and manual labor under capitalism. When it was fashionable even then to treat Marx's *Das Kapital* as outdated or provincial due to its focus on early industrial capitalism in England, Marxists continue to recognize its lasting significance as a text that elucidates the economic logics of capitalism, including surplus value, the falling rate of profit, overproduction, and inherent crises. The separation of mental and manual labor, a defining feature of wage labor in capitalist societies, epitomizes workers' need to sell their labor power to survive, becoming mere cogs in mass production. Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie engages in mental labor to organize and manage production, maximizing the extraction of labor from the hired workforce. Marx's saying, 'fish in the morning, hunt in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening and do critical theory at night', is a utopian image of socialism that reunifies mental and manual labor. In capitalist societies, however, individuals are trapped by abstract mechanistic laws that reduce them to atomized and commodified entities, as expounded by thinkers like Lukacs and the Frankfurt School. Burawoy (1978b) contends that this separation of mental and manual labor defines capitalism as 'a process of becoming', or an expressive totality, wherein its immanent tendencies toward totalization subordinate all aspects of life to the logic of alienation and commodification. This philosophical debate surrounding the separation of mental and manual labor has also sparked discussions on concepts such as value, abstraction, and domination in capitalist societies, drawing insights from thinkers like Georg Lukacs (1971 [1923]) and

Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978). Harry Braverman (1998 [1974]) elevates this debate to a scientific inquiry, examining how technological advancements, particularly Taylorism, constitute the labor process and politics. While Burawoy acknowledges the significance of both philosophical and scientific studies of the labor process, he breaks with them, for instance, engaging and critiquing Braverman's study of the labor process to explicate the lived experiences and political consciousness of workers on the shop floor. Whereas Marx comprehended production as social relations, Burawoy aims to explore alienation and subjugation and workers' nuanced experiences and actions.

When Burawoy was immersed in crafting *The Politics of Production*, there was a prevalent tendency to treat the state as an entity with its organizational structure and interests. Influential studies of revolution shifted the analytical focus from class struggle to state actions, including the military, wars, and political upheavals, as evidenced in a work by Theda Skocpol (1979). The theorization of the state was also popular among Marxists, who saw it as a coercive apparatus serving the interests of the ruling class (Miliband, 1983) or as possessing a degree of autonomy from individual capitalists, capable of reproducing capital accumulation even through concessions to workers (Gramsci, 1971; Poulantzas, 1978). However, Burawoy sought to steer clear of functionalist traces in these Marxist analyses of the state. Instead, he embraced Althusser's conceptualization of a structured whole of the economic, the political, and the ideological. Althusser's framework recognized the state's relative autonomy and ideology while underscoring the pivotal role of material conditions in shaping social transformation, thus moving away from a linear and predetermined view of history. Reinterpreting Althusser's notion of structural unity through a sociological lens, *The Politics of Production* explores the systematic institutional dynamics of class politics. In the book, the structured totality encompasses the varied regimes of production relations that arise from the complex interactions between the state and the economy across different manifestations of capitalism, be it competitive or monopolistic, as well as across capitalist, socialist, and colonial contexts. Burawoy's exploration revealed diverse production regimes in the industries that even shared similar labor processes, challenging deterministic economic and scientific paradigms and highlighting the intricate interplay of forces shaping socio-economic structures.

In *The Politics of Production*, four key factors—labor process, market competition, reproduction of labor power, and state intervention—determine production regimes. Examining the state intervention in factory regimes (direct or indirect) and the institutional relationship between factory and state apparatuses (separated or fused), Burawoy presents a framework organized into 2×2 tables. Four distinct production regimes emerge in this framework: market despotism, hegemonic regime, bureaucratic despotism, and collective self-management, each exhibiting its own nuanced variations. Market despotism, illustrated by Marx's analysis of the cotton industry in England, involves the state exerting indirect control over production through market protection, surveillance, and enforcing repressive laws. In this production regime, the state and factory apparatuses remain separate, compelling workers to rely on their factory employment for their and their families' sustenance. In contrast, hegemonic regimes in developed capitalist countries like England and the United States involve direct state intervention in production through legal and political regulations on wages, working conditions, and union representation. Despite separating state and factory apparatuses in market despotism, the state safeguards union bargaining and its outcomes. In England, bargaining takes place at national and regional levels, though the resulting agreements typically lack legal enforceability. In contrast, in the United States, bargaining occurs at the plant level under bureaucratic procedures, resulting in legally binding contracts.

The transition from despotic to hegemonic regimes is far from linear, as hegemonic despotism emerged amid the coercive tactics employed by companies in the 1980s. Workers faced the ultimatum of accepting wage cuts or confronting unemployment under the looming threat of capital flight and plant closures. This new form of despotism observed by Burawoy is now a new normal with

the global reign of neoliberal capitalism. The echoes of despotic regimes resonated in the production landscape of colonial Zambia, persisting even after the country achieved liberation. Long preceding the emergence of postcolonial studies, Burawoy, following in the footsteps of Franz Fanon, underscored the stark reality that the mere establishment of an independent nation-state did not dismantle capitalist social relations. In the process of 'Zambianization', factory managers were replaced with individuals of black descent. However, these new managers lacked the authority of their predecessors and ultimately succumbed to the directives of the company state. They governed the factories through personal favoritism rather than adherence to established rules, thereby shifting the dynamics of the 'color bar' without eradicating its entrenched structures.

While utopian socialism envisions the reunification of production conception (mental labor) and execution (manual labor) through collective self-management, Burawoy characterizes the production relations within existing socialist countries of his time as bureaucratic despotism. Within the International Socialist tradition, Marxists have categorized 20th-century socialism as state capitalism. This perspective views socialist regimes as resembling welfare capitalism for several reasons, including the state's prioritization of rapid industrialization and exploitation of workers (Cliff, 1974 [1955]; Harman, 1991), as well as the growing autonomy of enterprises within a planned economy (Bettelheim, 1976). In her acclaimed book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss (2000) also interprets socialism and capitalism of the 20th century as twins that share elements of modernism and mass utopian culture. In contrast, Burawoy defines socialist regimes of the 20th century as 'state socialism', contrasting their bureaucratic despotism with the hegemonic production regime prevalent in Western state capitalism. He draws examples from factories with similar piece-rate systems to illustrate this distinction. For instance, while workers in a US factory were guaranteed a minimum wage, their counterparts in Hungarian factories lacked such assurances, forcing them to prioritize productivity for survival, even at the expense of breaking the rules and safety regulations. Despite possessing knowledge and perhaps doing mental labor, Hungarian workers focused on maximizing production rather than contemplating alternative organizational methods. Promotions and job transfers in Hungarian factories were contingent upon one's relationship with the foreman and the party, illustrating a hierarchical structure. Burawoy's analysis aligns with Trotsky's vision of the Soviet Union's revolution being betrayed but not overthrown, with the future hinging on the actions of the workers. However, Burawoy's approach neither burdens the working class with the sole responsibility of emancipating humanity nor dismisses their significance. Instead, he examines the interaction between the state and capitalist production, elucidating how these dynamics shape workers' experiences within different production regimes.

Burawoy's analysis posits that production relations are more than just economic interactions; they are profoundly political due to the state's intervention, which he argues is neither autonomous nor always aligns with capitalist interests. This perspective challenges traditional class struggle and Leninist paradigms. The class struggle paradigm underscores the effects of objective laws of capital accumulation on shaping class consciousness and actions. However, Burawoy contends that production relations include broader political and ideological dimensions beyond mere economic organization. For him, different production systems engender diverse dynamics of accumulation and struggle. In contrast to the Leninist quest to seize state power to implement socialist policies and the pursuit of legal, political, and social rights by socialist democrats, Burawoy maintains that class relations alone cannot shape state politics. He critiques these paradigms for overlooking the significance of production politics in shaping social democracy's practice. Within the context of social democratic politics in advanced capitalist countries for the past decades, there has been a shift away from efforts to transform production apparatuses and promote self-management toward endorsing state policies. Burawoy would argue that abandoning transformative endeavors in favor of state-led initiatives exposes a significant blind spot in contemporary Marxist theories and praxis.

III

Burawoy's intervention, originating nearly four decades ago, remains contemporary amid ongoing debates within Marxism and critical theory regarding the political. The theorists of the May 68 generation, particularly Althusser's students who rejected Leninist politics under the shadows of Stalinism and party bureaucracy and instead embraced the Maoist tendency, continue to exert influence in reimagining politics within neoliberal capitalism's dominance. In *The Anthropology of the Name*, Sylvain Lazarus (2015 [1996]) challenges the classical class struggle paradigm and Bolshevik struggle, positing them as saturated historical modes of politics. Instead, he theorizes politics as 'thoughts', emphasizing politics not as being subordinate to organization, ideology, party, or external factors but as emanating from an 'interiority' of individuals who declare their enemies and separate themselves from the prevailing order. By stressing workers' interpretations and declarations, he perhaps seeks to retain a utopian vision of unifying mental and manual laborers in shop floor politics while diverging from linear historical narratives. For Lazarus, class antagonism is not objective but contingent upon consciousness, requiring declaration—a theory that renders politics rare. Badiou also theorizes politics as thought and a rare event. However, they parted their ways. Badiou shifts his focus to the ontology of politics that postulates true politics and its philosophical underpinnings. In contrast, Lazarus anchors politics in workers' actual experiences and interpretations within their production relations. In *Can Politics Be Thought?*, Badiou (2019 [1985]) distinguishes between politics and the political, with the latter referring to state politics such as elections, parliamentary proceedings, trade unionism, and speeches. He theorizes politics as an act of interruption or interpreting thought, rejecting the notion of social bonding and instead emphasizing disidentification with the state's policing. This perspective aligns Badiou with Jacques Rancière (2004 [1995]), who defines politics as a form of 'disidentification' from the state's regulatory mechanisms. Badiou and Rancière dismantle power structures through anarchistic dissociation from the present in their post-political turn. However, they fall short of specifying the mechanism of this dissociation and articulating it with material relations.

In today's neoliberal era, the avowal of state-centric politics remains a prominent theme, echoing various analyses of contemporary left-wing predicaments. Elaine Glaser (2015) outlines the divergent approaches of the left in the United Kingdom amid the influence of post-politics. On the one hand, social democrats continue to prioritize elections and state policies despite the crisis within state apparatuses, namely political parties and culture. On the other hand, 'neo-anarchists' advocate for decentralized forms of organization, rejecting existing institutional frameworks and hierarchical leadership in favor of horizontal relationships and grassroots initiatives, often facilitated by social media platforms. Glaser urges to rejuvenate left-wing leadership and ideology that acknowledges contemporary politics' fragmented nature and offers coherent analyses and guidance. While the concept of ideology may traditionally evoke the power of enlightened intellectuals over the masses, Glaser reclaims it as a framework for critiquing existing social orders and proposing alternative prescriptions. The ascendancy of neoliberalism underscores the urgency of ideological struggle, particularly as the right-wing demonstrates a willingness to engage in such discourse. In this way, fundamental questions about politics have emerged as the allure of spontaneity and the skepticism toward traditional structures challenge the nature of democracy itself. As noted earlier, Balibar (2020), in a similar vein, critiques the focus on state interventions during crises, arguing that the burden of state protections, such as increasing public debts, disproportionately falls on the marginalized and vulnerable. Giorgio Agamben (1998) theorizes modern power as sovereignty that decides who lives and who dies, distinguishing the former as Zoe ('the qualified life') and the latter as bare life (the biological state of being). In contrast, Balibar emphasizes the importance of understanding social relations in shaping political dynamics. He rejects the notion of the excluded and vulnerable as a natural state of bare life, instead explaining it as a result of

‘denaturalization’ through ‘total subsumption’ to capitalism. Defining the state as an ‘authority’ rather than sovereignty, Balibar calls for an inquiry into how the logic of state authority interacts with the logic of social solidarity. Balibar’s emphasis on social relations contrasts with Badiou’s concept of politics as a rupture from the social.

The concept of the social has undergone significant retheorization in recent decades, particularly within affect studies, which have exerted influence especially on feminist and black studies. The objective of affect studies—liberating individual subjectivity and action from economic determinism and traditional class and party paradigms—seems similar to the rethinking of the political by Althusser, his students, and Burawoy. Still, what distinguishes affect studies is its emphasis on emotions and the body, dissociating consciousness and action from conventional organizational mobilization and vanguard leadership. Here, materiality encompasses not so much economic or production relations as the corporeal and performative aspects of bodies. Experience is situated within the realms of emotion and embodiment. Affect studies contribute to understanding the neoliberal present regarding insecurity, risk, vulnerability, care, and compassion. These concepts broaden the scope of modern politics, identifying these experiences as new arenas for resistance against capitalist oppression, which extends beyond the confines of work into the realms of emotions, bodies, and all facets of life. This is all the reason why affect studies should not be taken lightly.

Still, there is a risk in affect studies of universalizing emotions and ethics. Its exploration of capitalism’s affective domination aligns with the notion of the Hegelian expressive totality, a concept from which Burawoy distanced himself due to its neglect of political dimensions and mechanisms. Does affect studies portray capitalism as a universalizing force that homogenizes society into affective and bodily states, akin to the perspective of the Frankfurt School? What is lacking in this perspective is an analysis of concrete hierarchies and inequalities, as well as the mechanisms for transforming such social relations. Isn’t it that we come to a full circle on the political, meeting Burawoy again at the end of post-politics? To illustrate the efficacy of Burawoy’s approach in the era of post-politics, let us consider the case of South Korean politics concerning precarious workers and their struggles.

IV

At the heart of South Korea’s neoliberal capitalist system lies a stark division within the labor market between regular workers (*chōnggyujik*) and irregular workers (*pi-chōnggyujik*). Employed without the stipulation of contract periods, regular workers benefit from high wages, union representation, and advocacy by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). In contrast, precarious workers, termed irregular workers, comprise part-time, short-term contract, and subcontracted employees who endure unsafe working conditions, low pay, absence of benefits, and sudden terminations. Their unions, which are increasing gradually though minimal, are not supported by KCTU. Although strides have been made in narrowing the disparities between regular and irregular workers regarding national pension, health insurance, and employment insurance, the wage gap persists, with irregular workers earning at best about 70% of their regular counterparts’ wages, even when doing the identical work on the same factory floor. While regular workers negotiate wages collectively through labor bargaining, their employers determine precarious irregular workers’ wages individually. Tragically, the majority of workplace fatalities in recent years, eliciting public outcry and mourning, are irregular workers employed in construction sites, subway platforms, or factories.

Scholarship on irregular workers in South Korea generally follows three approaches. First, there is a trend of the analysis focusing on state policies and laws regarding precarious employment, often tracing them back to the neoliberal restructuring demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) following the 1997 financial crisis. The IMF requirement provided an opportunity for democratically elected governments, including those regarded as progressive, and capital to achieve what

had eluded them for years—diminishing the power that labor had amassed following the intense workers' struggles in the immediate aftermath of the political liberalization of 1987. Some observers attribute the failure of promises made by progressive administrations, most recently the Moon Jae-in government (2017–2022), to a lack of comprehensive reform plans and expertise in macroeconomics within the cabinet. Second, studies examine KCTU's exclusion of irregular workers, citing reasons such as bureaucratization, factionalism, and the dominance of hardline metal unions (Cho, 2011). Finally, another notable trend in the study of irregular workers has been examining the self-interest of regular workers, who seek to preserve their high wages, benefits, and job security. This focus also draws attention to their hostility toward irregular workers and their lack of class consciousness in South Korea, where political consciousness coincides with higher education and income levels (Cho, 2012; Lee, 2010). For instance, Hyundai auto workers implemented a rule in 2011 prioritizing the hiring of the children of long-time workers, a practice replicated in other sectors. Conspicuously absent in the literature on precarious irregular workers is the study of their own experiences. Scholars have focused not on experiences but on the repertoires of their protests (hunger strikes, suicides, protests at great heights, prolonged sit-ins lasting months or even years, and such arduous rituals as walking miles while performing three-step bows) across sectors of shipbuilding, telecommunications, railway, and electronics spanning for decades.

In *Against Abandonment* (2025), Jennifer Jihye Chun and Ju Hui Judy Han fill this significant void in the studies of South Korean irregular workers by providing in-depth ethnographic accounts of these workers' experiences, emotions, and solidarity actions. Existing studies have examined each of the protest repertoires mentioned above as singular. In contrast, Chun and Han integrate these repertoires, theorizing them as the variegated form of the protest that 'refuses precarity'. The book offers detailed narratives of the often deadly and overlooked protests, shedding light on their historical contexts, complexities, and unforeseen developments. Chun and Han elucidate how precarious workers perceive their layoffs as 'abandonment', leading to feelings of exclusion and social death characterized by the loss of dignity and rights. These workers engage in prolonged and perilous struggles, enduring deprivation of necessities such as food and safety to reclaim their dignity and rights. Central to these protests is the notion that work is not merely a job but a source of dignity. Workers fiercely defend their rights and dignity as human beings in response to unfulfilled promises of regularization and abrupt layoff notifications. The authors illustrate how these struggles, while defensive in nature, paradoxically challenge the existing order and prompt reflections on fundamental human rights. Through their analysis of social interactions among workers and activists, marked by emotional support and solidarity, Chun and Han redefine solidarity as rooted in affective and bodily connections rather than traditional forms of organization and leadership. With their compelling account of the complexities and contradictions within the struggles of South Korean irregular workers, they illuminate the transformative power of affective solidarity in confronting structures of inequality and precarity.

The turn to affect as a strategy by the left in South Korea denotes a significant departure from traditional modes of political engagement, especially following the decline in the influence of Marxist-Leninism. In the current political landscape, liberal democratic institutions (political parties and civil society organizations) face a crisis exacerbated by identity politics revolving around historical memories of the colonial period. With entrenched conflicts between pro- and anti-Japanese viewpoints, South Korean political parties fail to address pressing issues such as deepening inequality, unprecedented household debts, housing crises, and unemployment. In response to these challenges, some scholars have revisited pivotal historical moments, particularly the shift from shop floor activism to party politics in the early 1990s (Baek, 2022; Park, 2024). While the shop floor struggles of the 1980s focused on raising workers' revolutionary consciousness, the decision to transition to party politics—likely a Gramscian strategy to build hegemonic leadership

over moderate liberals—aimed to establish a national labor party capable of effecting systemic change. However, this strategy has largely faltered due to internal factionalism and political repression. In response to this setback, diverse reactions have surfaced among leftists. While some advocate for a shift toward social democracy, others have embraced an affective approach, aiming to broaden their understanding of the social to encompass marginalized groups such as women, elderly individuals in rural areas, and victims of various disasters.

This turn toward affect emphasizes compassion and accountability, offering a renewed sense of purpose for workers and activists disillusioned by the growing professionalization and compartmentalization of social movements. The paradigmatic features of post-politics have also become evident in candlelight mass protests repeated since the 2000s, during which protesters disavowed such formulas of modern politics as organization, leadership, and ideology in favor of spontaneous and horizontal associations. One of the post-political responses adopted by activists is *tangsajajuüi*—the standpoint that directly affected individuals take the lead. Activists abstain from assuming leadership roles, positioning themselves primarily as supporters. *Tangsajajuüi*, first emerged in feminist movements, has since spread to other struggles, including those of precarious workers and victims of disasters such as the Sewöl ferry tragedy. It problematizes victimhood while legislating victims' rights for the first time in South Korean history. However, *tangsajajuüi* is a form of expressive totality, asserting the total victimization of society by capitalism, homogenizing victims, and codifying their transhistorical rights as a response to this systemic injustice.

Leftists, precarious workers, and various victims in South Korea have converged on state-centrism, demanding the state to address pressing social issues that political parties and existing laws have failed to resolve. Election promises from left-leaning parties often include social democratic solutions such as basic income and cash handouts. Precarious workers who have been laid off unjustly appeal to the state for job reinstatement when their employers and the courts fail to address their demands. Similarly, victims of disasters call on the state to apologize for its failure in disaster prevention measures. For the last decade, protests have culminated in marches to the Blue House, the former official office and residence of South Korean presidents, symbolizing the perceived centrality of the state in resolving societal issues during the neoliberal era. However, the issue of irregular employment cannot be quickly resolved by the actions of an elected president and their government alone. This emphasis on statism amid democratic crises reflects critical observations made by Glaser and Balibar, who call for reevaluating the relationship between the state, the social, and the economic. As mentioned earlier, Glaser argues for a renewed embrace of ideology and leftist critique and vision. Balibar advocates a more profound articulation of the political and the ideological within the economic sphere. These calls are similar to Burawoy's theorization of structured totality, urging a move beyond mere statism toward a more comprehensive understanding of societal dynamics.

Comprehending irregular workers warrants a Burawoy turn, taking production regimes as the basis of comparison. I argue that the disparities between regular and irregular workers in pay, job security, and benefits result from their distinct yet interlocked production regimes in opposition. In Burawoy's schema, regular workers typically operate within a hegemonic production regime, whereas irregular workers find themselves in a despotic production regime. Both groups often lack insight into production decisions, perpetuating the division between mental and manual labor. While experts attribute this unequal relationship to factors such as regular workers' self-interest, strategic failures of organizations like KCTU, and inadequate state labor policies, these are not the root causes but rather the outcomes of their oppositional production regimes. Theorizing their oppositional production regimes as a structured totality is essential for understanding the systemic inequalities and injustices experienced by irregular workers in South Korea. Burawoy's theory of production regimes shifts the focus of analysis from economic inequality, as seen in existing studies, to the realm of the political.

During the initial rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and the 1990s, Burawoy observed the emergence of a new form of despotism in urban sectors. This period saw the resurgence of artisanal workshops and sweatshops in advanced capitalist countries, which threatened workers with capital flight and factory closures, compelling them to forgo legal protections such as minimum wages and job security. Consequently, these workers were expelled from the hegemonic production regime and subjected to the whims of the market after losing their rights and union representation. Forty years later, neoliberal capitalism has exerted its influence across all sectors of society, both domestically and globally. In South Korea, the despotic regime experienced by irregular workers intersects with Burawoy's frameworks in significant ways. The IMF's imposition of neoliberal restructuring empowered the state and capital to legalize flexible labor practices that had previously faced resistance from labor. Despite the political liberalization in June 1987, accompanied by significant workers' struggles later that year, this labor offensive against capital was short-lived, encountering police crackdowns and ideological attacks even during purportedly progressive governments in the 1990s and 2000s. The state's direct intervention in legalizing and expanding precarious labor, thereby creating a despotic production regime for these workers, represents a significant shift from earlier forms of despotism. Therefore, the exclusion of irregular workers from KCTU is not merely a moral or organizational issue but rather a political outcome stemming from the institutional relationship between the state and the union. During the neoliberal era, the state and KCTU negotiated agreements restricting collective labor struggle.

In this manner, the interaction of the neoliberal state and KCTU upholds the facade of democracy by expanding the legal rights of individuals and civil society. It is not because of their self-interests and lack of education but because of the structural condition that regular workers develop hostility toward irregular workers. Their job security, high wages, and benefits that their unions safeguarded in the name of democratization are only possible because of the institutionalization of precarious irregular employment, which is crucial for reproducing the pace of the capital accumulation. The protests of irregular workers demanding job reinstatement and rights are not inherently conservative, as often assumed in the literature. Instead, these protests bear their political unconscious, which perceives the current situation as democratic. The intraclass opposition between regular and irregular workers is not insurmountable. Its dissolution can begin if they break free from the political unconscious and cease seeking the state's recognition as a resolution. At the moment, their displays of affective solidarity and performative actions indicate an increasingly self-organized movement. However, the politics of ethics and morality are susceptible to political manipulation and populism. It remains uncertain whether the defensive struggle of precarious workers diverges from nostalgic resentment in the post-industrial era. The question arises of how these workers can transition from the affective task of arousing public sentiment to effectively addressing the reality of contemporary democracy. An adequate account of the interlocked production regimes of regular and irregular workers must recognize that the true face of democratization is the extralegal power of capital that has seized the state by reversing the relationship between capital and the state of the developmental era.

V

Michael Burawoy has constantly revolutionized his own life. During his retirement gathering at Berkeley in April 2023, he summarized the last four decades of his life as a '24-hour sociologist'. For Burawoy, sociology means teaching. As students, we thought he sacrificed his rare hobby of watching Monday Night Football for the weekly dissertation workshop—the Smith Group—held at his home. (I recently learned that actually his first passion was and is for what they call 'soccer' in the US.) Each time, he brought a chocolate cake, often a different one, on his bike from the office. We would start the meeting with it, bringing a sense of calm. We each

presented our chapters and provided written comments in advance on the pre-circulated chapters of others, allowing us to start the discussion by responding to these comments, including Burawoy's. One member volunteered to take notes during the meeting, letting the presenter focus entirely on the discussion. There, I learned how to engage in discussions and why critique should always be constructive, offering solutions or at least proposing ways to rethink issues. It was the best academic training I ever had.

As well known, he took the president position at the American Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association as the platform to spread what he coined as Public Sociology. For decades, he has wrestled with various theories and questions, engaging deeply with pressing issues in politics and social movements. This engagement shapes his discussions with students, as teaching is a site of his public sociology. Over time, his immediate interlocutors have, therefore, shifted from Braverman to Bourdieu, Polanyi, Gramsci, and, most recently, W.E.B. Du Bois, guiding his students along similar paths. While I am unsure if Burawoy plans to write a memoir on his theory and practice or what his current assessment of *The Politics of Production* entails, I am certain that revisiting this book lends sociologists and leftists tremendous value and even new prescriptions for politics. When even the term totality may bring leftists goosebumps these days, I have aimed to demonstrate how his approach to the political remains powerfully pertinent to today's political and theoretical contexts. His mathematically precise intervention in history and politics retains its potency now as much as it did decades ago. Fascism presents a different totality—an unmediated unity of the state and individuals, crystallized around what Theodor Adorno described in 1950 as the 'authoritarian personality', rooted in naturalized notions of the nation and human race, and renewed today (Toscano, 2023). Some may perceive the concept of structured totality as lacking a mechanism for change, mistaking it for systemic reproduction. On the contrary, dialectics is a critical mechanism that moves and transforms structured totality, as theorists from Adorno (1981) to Frederic Jameson (2010) have engaged in a complex array of discussions on dialectics over the past decades. Burawoy brings dialectics into the sociological study of structure, experiences, and politics in tune with Gramsci's dictum, 'pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will'. *The Politics of Production* serves as a guiding beacon within the traditions of critical theory, reminding us of the centrality of the political in navigating the uncertain yet significantly structured paths of experience and action in the era of post-politics.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Rahman Bouzari, Cam Cannon, Kanishka Goonewardena, Ken Kawashima, Abhishek Kodukulla, and Robert Latham for reading Lazarus and Badiou together under Asad Haider's lead.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Hyun Ok Park  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0781-8764>

References

- Adorno T (1981) *Negative Dialectics*. 2nd edn. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Agamben G (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Althusser L (1970) The object of capital. In Althusser L and Balibar E, *Reading Capital*. London: Verso Books, 77–222.
- Badiou A (2019 [1985]) *Can Politics Be Thought?* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Baek S (2022) *1991 Nyŏn Ichin T'oejo Ŭi Ch'ulbaljŏm* (1991, the starting point of the forgotten retreat). Seoul, South Korea: Bukk'omma.
- Balibar E (2015) *Violence and Civility*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Balibar E (2020) Living, learning, imagining in the middle of the crisis. *Lecture at the London Critical Theory Summer School*. Available at: <https://icls.columbia.edu/etienne-balibar-on-living-learning-imagining-in-the-middle-of-the-crisis/>
- Bettelheim C (1976) *Class Struggles in the USSR*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Braverman H (1998 [1974]) *Labour and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Buck-Morss S (2000) *Dream World and Catastrophe*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Burawoy M (1978a) Contemporary currents in Marxist theory. *The American Sociologist* 13: 50–64.
- Burawoy M (1978b) Toward a Marxist theory of the labor process: Braverman and beyond. *Politics and Society* 8(3–4): 247–312.
- Burawoy M (1985) *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes Under Capitalism and Socialism*. London: Verso Books.
- Bytes J (2001) Tales of the Kefir Furnaceman. *The Village Voice*, 10 April. Available at: <https://www.villagevoice.com/tales-of-the-kefir-furnaceman/>
- Cho T (2011) Pi-chŏnggyujik nodongja silt'ae wa pi-chŏnggyujik t'ujaeng (The reality of irregular workers and the struggle of irregular workers). *Hyŏnsang Kwa Insik* 113: 43–74.
- Cho T (2012) *Pi-chŏnggyujik chuch'e hyŏngsŏng kwa chŏllyakchŏk sŏnt'aek* (The Subject formation of irregular workers and strategic choice). Seoul, South Korea: Mail Labor Daily.
- Chun J and Han J (2025) *Against Abandonment: Repertoires of Solidarity in South Korean Protest*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cliff T (1974 [1955]) *State Capitalism in Russia*. London: Pluto Press.
- Glaser E (2015) Post-politics and the future of the left. *Open Democracy*, 9 July. Available at: <https://www.ippr.org/articles/post-politics-and-the-future-of-the-left>
- Gramsci A (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Harman C (1991) The state and capitalism today. *International Socialism* 2: 3–54.
- Jameson F (2010) *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso Books.
- Lazarus S (2015 [1996]) *The Anthropology of the Name*. New York: Seagull Books.
- Lee J (2010) Pi-chŏnggyujik kwa nodong chŏngch'i (Irregular workers and labor politics). *Han'guk Sahoehak* 44(1): 26–59.
- Lukacs G (1971 [1923]) *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Miliband R (1983) *Class Power and State Power*. London: Verso Books.
- Park H (2024) Marxism and the left-right division in South Korea. *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 12(1): 7.
- Poulantzas N (1978) *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: Verso Books.
- Rancière J (2004 [1995]) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Skocpol T (1979) *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sohn-Rethel A (1978) *Intellectual and Manual Labor*. Atlantic-Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Sunkara B (2019) *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Toscano A (2023) *Late Fascism*. London: Verso Books.