

# Michael Burawoy's Path: From North to South, and Back Again

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crs)**Gay Seidman** 

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As anyone who has met Michael Burawoy can tell you, he remains very, very British – from his unflinching loyalty to Manchester United, to his very British ‘flat cap’, to his consistent repetition of ‘bloody brilliant’ as the highest compliment he can offer to his dozens of grateful advisees.

But despite his early British socialization (or, perhaps, because of it), I want to argue that it was Michael’s confrontation with Britain’s imperialism that truly sparked his sociological imagination, and has served as the cornerstone of his extraordinary career. As Michael acknowledges, the insights he gleaned from his early experiences in former British colonies reshaped his view of class dynamics and the role of the state, raising questions he has continued to explore in different contexts across the globe. Why do workers consent to exploitation? Why do democratic states allow racial hierarchies to shape class dynamics? Why is racial capitalism so persistent, long after working-class citizens have gained real voice in independent nations? Moreover, I would argue, Michael’s ongoing engagement with activists and scholars in the global South has helped shape his insistence on a question that for him, may be even more immediate: how can sociologists contribute to meaningful social change?

As a college student in the late 1960s, Michael began to travel the world, heading first to Southern Africa, then India, then Southern Africa again. He had already been drawn to politics during a trip to the US, but these trips to the global South turned the young Marxist math major to focus on questions linked to colonial legacies and racial capitalism, questions more likely to be raised by activists hoping to change the world than by sociologists shaped by the classical canon.

In 1966, after his first year at Cambridge, Michael spent a few weeks in South Africa, and then hitchhiked up through to Tunisia, becoming increasingly interested in educational policy in post-colonial settings. A year later, he traveled to India, to run a field experiment on how well students understood texts that had been translated into India’s different languages – a project he says forced him to recognize that even after independence, national elites might protect their own interests ‘while reproducing and even deepening social and economic inequalities’ (Burawoy, 2021, 51).

Those summer trips – from observing life in remote Zambian villages, to his linguistic field experiment in India – were just the beginning of Michael’s long career as an intrepid globe-trotter, and as a keen and curious observer. After graduation, Michael immediately embarked on further travels, first working briefly as a journalist in South Africa, and then once again heading north to

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Zambia. In Johannesburg, he connected with a group of young anti-apartheid activists and intellectuals, including Eddie Webster and Luli Callinicos, who would remain lifelong friends. In Zambia, he would encounter scholars whose sociological inquiries reflected experiences that were very different from the world described by Parsonsian functionalists – including both scholars he met in person, like Jaap van Velson and Jack Simons, and sociological work that most likely would not have been included in any Cambridge sociology courses at the time, by authors like Franz Fanon and Walter Rodney. When he enrolled in the University of Zambia's brand-new master's program in sociology, Michael joined in (and wrote his master's thesis about) campus protests – protests that would be repressed by the newly independent Zambian government, a move Michael would later attribute to the governing elite's colonial socialization, and its fear that any attempt to break with the country's former colonial power would undermine its possibility of 'development' as defined by modernization theory (Burawoy, 1976a).

But while his on-campus experiences introduced him to new questions and new theorists, Michael's off-campus experiences in Zambia were probably even more important in shaping his sociological gaze, and especially, sharpening his interest in questions that were very different from those asked by Weber, Durkheim, or even Marx. Soon after he arrived in Zambia in 1968, Michael took a job in the personnel office of country's biggest mining operation, where he observed a persistent pattern: the racial hierarchies baked into the copper mines' labor processes under colonialism persisted, years after independence. As Michael and the small group of Zambian students who worked with him observed, whenever a Black miner was promoted, the white supervisor and his most competent staff members would all be promoted or moved to a different section of the mine – leaving the new Black mine captain with neither the resources nor the power that the previous white mine captain had relied upon (Burawoy, 2021: 71).

Published in 1972, *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines: From African Advancement to Zambianization* was Michael's first academic publication, and his first engagement with what he would later term 'public sociology'. Drawing more on Fanon and Marx than on Weber and Durkheim, Michael asked why, even after the Zambian government had nationalized the copper mines, the country's copper mining operation still depended on two multinational companies to run the mines' day-to-day operations – and why, years after nationalization, the government had done almost nothing to address either the country's continued dependence on copper exports, or the working conditions of most Black mine-workers.

Most shockingly, perhaps, Michael observed that years after Northern Rhodesia had become independent Zambia, 'there still exists a wide gap between the income received by expatriates and by Zambians doing the same jobs'; expatriates (i.e. white foreigners, mostly from South Africa and Britain) received additional pay as 'inducement allowances' (Burawoy, 1972: 21). Some educated Zambians had been given office positions after the company was nationalized, but they rarely intervened significantly in production processes, instead leaving those decisions to expatriate mine supervisors. As one miner told Michael, 'Independence has changed very little on the mines. Though there is nationalization and Zambianization, all these are superficial because white men control everything' (Burawoy, 1972: 76). Other miners he interviewed were perhaps even more cynical, arguing that politicians and union leaders had reduced miners' wages and bonuses, while the country's new elites were 'all amassing great wealth for themselves from the copper produced by the sweat and toil of the workers' (Burawoy, 1972: 81).

But while workers may have focused on individual selfishness, Michael's own conclusions about what happened to Zambianization focused more on the interaction between government policies and the structure of capitalism. Although the government had reshaped its own bureaucracy, hiring educated Zambians for top posts, it had allowed mining companies to leave racial hierarchies on the mineshafts intact. As Michael concluded,

In summary, the reluctance to apply pressure to Zambianize the mines may be explained by the Government's orientation towards the mining industry as a profit-making organization upon which the country's economy is founded. The Government has repeatedly insisted that the mines be run on a profit-making basis and that efficiency and productivity take precedence over Zambianization. (Burawoy, 1972: 111)

When *The Colour of Class* appeared in print in 1972, it prompted a national debate over the slow pace of change, especially the failure of the mines to address the obvious racial hierarchies (Burawoy, 2009: 46, 2021: 67–75). As Michael would reveal years later, when he finished the manuscript, he shared it with the government official in charge of Zambianization, who, like Michael, was an expatriate. Much to Michael's surprise, the official urged him to publish it. As soon as it appeared, Zambia's leaders and mining company executives began to speak openly for the first time about the need to address racial inequities in the mines – an experience that certainly prompted the young Marxist to pay more attention to the role of the state in the workplace, and perhaps also contributed to his subsequent embrace of what he would label 'public sociology'.

A decade later, in *The Politics of Production* (Burawoy, 1985), Michael summarized the lesson he took from the furor that followed publication of his report, especially highlighting the different dynamics of a post-colonial labor regime from its colonial predecessor. The colonial state might have forced Indigenous communities to enter wage labor, but paid little attention to what happened at the worksite, because those Black workers were colonial subjects, not citizens. The function of colonial administrations, Michael argued, had been 'to establish the supremacy of the capitalism mode of production' – in Zambia's case, through dispossession and tax policies which forced Indigenous people to work for wages on white-owned mines or plantations. But once independence was granted, the state's role changed.

Democratic post-colonial states cannot ignore dynamics at the workplace, Michael argued, because former colonial subjects became active citizens, with both structural power and political voice; the state could not let protests at the country's major enterprises disrupt production of the commodities on which the entire economy depended. Even today, post-colonial Zambia remains dependent on the copper industry for more than 80% of its exports; after Michael's description of the mining companies' racial dynamics went public in 1972, the Zambian government began to push the mining companies to change, by passing new labor laws, creating institutional patterns of collective bargaining, and giving workers' unions some voice.

For Michael, that realization – that democratic states might respond to workers' protests by opening new channels for workers to express demands, but also constrain their ability to block production – came as something of a surprise, raising questions that he would continue to pursue in his next project, an ethnographic study of a Chicago factory. Although today, most discussions of *Manufacturing Consent* focus on his remarkable insights into the experiences of workers on the shop floor – especially, his description of how workers create and enforce informal rules to control the pace of production – Michael also emphasized the role of the state, plant managers, and even union leaders in creating and enforcing rules that protected union members, while limiting any disruption of production – an argument with clear parallels to the lessons he had drawn from the Zambian copper mines.

The American government (which Michael calls the 'global' state in *Manufacturing Consent*) is 'involved in organizing struggle – in confining them within limits or repressing them – so that they do not threaten capitalist relations of production'. Inside the factory, he suggests, the 'global' state is less directly involved, but its collective bargaining institutions push the company, factory managers and union leaders to form an 'internal state', adopting rules and 'constraints on managerial intervention' that offer workers 'a very limited but nonetheless critical freedom in their adaption to

the labor process' – thus manufacturing consent while also maintaining production (Burawoy, 1979: 197–199).

Interestingly, Michael also used his Chicago experience to rethink what he had seen in Zambia 10 years earlier. In an oft-overlooked appendix to *Manufacturing Consent*, Michael suggests that tensions between international pressures and citizens' demands had pushed Zambia's post-colonial state to play a much more visible role in ensuring workplace compliance:

The Zambian government, in the pursuit of development and its class objectives, has taken over the ideological whip, admonishing the labor force for its 'absenteeism', 'lack of patriotism', and so on; it has also outlawed strikes and has coopted, and, where necessary, forced the compliance of once-militant union leaders. The transformation from a colonial state, based on white supremacy, to a 'nation' state, based on universal suffrage, represents a consolidation of the apparatus subordinating the worker to the dominant class. In the fifteen years before independence, union-led strikes occurred with some frequency in the copper mines; since independence, they have become increasingly rare. Those that have occurred have tended to be wildcat strikes, easily ended by the intervention of the ruling party. (Burawoy, 1979: 213)

Management, he concluded, 'is no longer alone in justifying the imposition of punitive sanctions and harsh discipline' (Burawoy, 1979: 213).

Some years later, in a pointed critique of world system theory, Michael would later draw on these lessons to stress the importance of class dynamics and internal workplace politics in understanding why post-colonial politics tend to prevent labor activists from disrupting production. Returning to his Zambian experiences once again in *The Politics of Production*, Michael would point out that the dynamics he observed in Zambia had shaped the vision of trade unionists as well as politicians. New industrial legislation protected workers' rights, but also limited them: works councils became 'a mechanism for the regulation and absorption of class struggle at the level of the firm'; new labor legislation made collective bargains legally binding, and subject to ratification by an industrial court (Burawoy, 1985: 245)

Working within this new framework, Zambia's new trade union leaders viewed members' long-term interests as dependent on the mining company's success; they accepted the mine's hierarchical organization, and proved reluctant to challenge persistent inequalities, or to object to new state-imposed restrictions on labor protests.

In the post-colonial era the state has increasingly intervened to regulate relations between capital and labour: to enforce compulsory arbitration, outlaw strikes, detain leaders, monitor union organization, impose wage freezes. The state circumscribes the terrain of class struggle within industry by shaping the institutions that regulate that struggle, the political apparatuses of production. The post-colonial state has sacrificed its independence, becoming ever more closely allied to capital. (Burawoy, 1985: 210)

But Michael's time in southern Africa also raised other questions, prompting him to think more pointedly about the role of the state in creating supplies of laborers, especially for low-waged work. While still living in Chicago, Michael began draw on scholars like Harold Wolpe, Giovanni Arrighi, and John Saul, to ask what South Africa's racialized pass system might tell us about the role of the American state in sustaining a stream of low-paid migrant workers – and, especially, in preventing their families to join them in the United States. Might the social dynamic that produced a stream undocumented workers coming to work in California's farms and factories have any similarities to apartheid's strategic efforts to push men from across southern Africa to work in South Africa's mines, live in single-sex dormitories and send remittances to their families in rural areas across the region?

In his remarkable 1976 *AJS* article, ‘The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor,’ Michael drew on South Africa’s system of circular migration to ask new questions about America’s reliance on circular migrants from Mexico (Burawoy, 1976b). South Africa’s long history of dispossession and legal restrictions forced Black South African men to seek work in ‘white’ areas, leaving their families behind in the rural ‘native reserves’; peasant families had little choice other than to send family members to work for low wages, both because they had to pay taxes, and because the land in the ‘native reserves’ was inadequate to support the hundreds of thousands who were forced to move there. However, wages would remain low, not only because Black workers could not legally form unions, but also because the pass system blocked families from joining the mine-workers. White employers could assume that the meager wages they paid would be supplemented by family labor, while the South African state could off-load any responsibility for education, health care or pensions, since under apartheid, Black miners and their families were limited to services in the nominally separate ‘bantustans’.

Were there similarities to circular migration from Mexico in the 1970s, when most undocumented migrants were single men working in the United States, leaving their families behind to work on peasant farms, dependent on remittances? In his comparison, Michael focused on California – where, ironically, he would soon move as a young faculty member. As in South Africa, he argued, Mexican migrant workers had no choice but to accept lower wages, because they had no citizenship rights or legal protection in the United States – not unlike Black South Africans, who were treated as foreigners under apartheid. As in South Africa, migrant workers in California had no right to bring their families to live closer to the workplace; their families remained behind in rural peasant communities, scraping out a living. Because their wives and children continued to grow food at home, he argued, their labor effectively supplemented workers’ remittances; as a result, employers in California, as in apartheid South Africa, could hire migrant workers for less than the ‘family wage’ that citizens would have demanded, and that sociological theorists might assume was necessary for the reproduction of the working class.

While low wages clearly benefit employers, Michael pointed, the ‘receiving’ state also benefits from circular migration, by pushing the cost of reproducing the labor force onto the ‘sending’ state. Because families were forced to stay behind, both South Africa and California were relieved of the obligation to provide social services: schools, hospitals, pension funds, and disability payments were all left to the workers’ home state. As in the Chicago-Zambia comparison, Michael used this contrast to highlight an overlooked aspect of circular migration: the ‘receiving’ state, as well as employers, benefits from workers’ lack of citizenship rights, including the right to assert rights or demands; unlike citizens, migrant workers in both countries were far too vulnerable to demand either higher wages or better protections, from either the ‘receiving’ state or from local trade unions.

Michael’s comparison also highlighted the role of California’s state officials: by turning a blind eye to undocumented workers after the end of the ‘bracero’ program, they allowed the state’s employers to exploit a ‘cheap’ labor force. That argument continues to resonate today: apartheid may have ended in South Africa, but long after Michael’s piece was published, undocumented workers continue to serve as a widely recognized, but almost entirely unregulated, supply of labor to California’s farms and factories; home communities continue to depend on remittances, and ‘sending’ states continue to be seen as responsible for providing education, healthcare, and other support for families who remain behind.

In the mid 1980s, Michael began to explore a different landscape, as the Polish workers’ uprising in Gdansk drew his gaze to eastern Europe. He also began develop the idea of the ‘extended case method’, putting ethnographic research in conversation with larger theoretical claims, and opening more space for sociologists studying the world beyond the US borders to question broad

generalizations based on what they observed on Chicago's streets. But soon the world's tectonic plates shifted in two different directions: the Soviet Union collapsed, and the African National Congress was unbanned in South Africa – and the world changed.

In South Africa, the end of apartheid opened the doors to democracy, and hope. Years later, Michael described an extraordinary moment in history, when he was invited to speak in South Africa a few months after Mandela's release, to an audience of South African sociologists who were still stunned by the possibility that apartheid might end in our lifetime:

June, 1990 South Africa. Nelson Mandela had been released from Robben Island in February, Freedom fighters had returned from exile, including such noted (and brilliant) Marxist sociologists as Jack Simons and Harold Wolpe. Unions and civics were galvanizing African urban society. The South African Communist Party (re)launched itself with a tumultuous send off in Soweto. Throughout the country the air vibrated with impending freedom, even in and through the violence that continued, unabated. I was there addressing the multi-racial Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa on the fate of socialism – after the Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) but before the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991). Just as Soviet sociology had joined hands with an erupting civil society, so South African sociology had become inseparable from the struggle against apartheid. It was a moment of glasnost and perestroika all round, in which sociologists were united in a common project – to repel authoritarian states. (Burawoy, 2003)

I was lucky enough to be in the room that day, and I still remember the sense of euphoria and possibility: the end of apartheid was near, and South Africa might be heading toward a democratic future. Could we imagine an elected government committed to redistribution, land reform, backed by a militant labor movement? Could the people in the room help to reshape South Africa's post-apartheid future?

By contrast, the situation in the former Soviet bloc looked increasingly dismal, as Michael warned a packed audience at an American Sociological Association meeting that same year. Like everyone else in that audience, I gasped when Michael began his presentation by announcing 'Marxism is dead. But if Marxism is dead, so is sociology'. Happily, he immediately reassured us; the struggle was only beginning, he pointed out, concluding, 'The end of communism, far from being the end of socialism, opens up debate in the West and the East, in the North and the South, about what we might mean by socialism' (Burawoy, 1990: 13). Both lectures laid out new challenges for sociologists. What was driving these rapid changes around the world? What theoretical frameworks might help us understand the possibilities, and limits, of these upheavals? What role should sociologists play in shaping and understanding the world?

As he grappled with these questions over the next decades, Michael would return again and again to Southern Africa, engaging with the region's intellectual community, and highlighting dynamics that had often been overlooked in the classical sociological canon, from the way class dynamics are shaped by state policies, to the centrality of race and gender in shaping capitalist relationship.

Often, those efforts also pushed him to rethink his own work. In *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations*, Michael returned yet again to the Zambian mines, suggesting that he should have paid more attention to the way transnational pressures limited local elites' options (Burawoy, 2009: 52). But even more frequently, Michael has focused on South Africa, repeatedly returning to work with a sociological community deeply committed to scholarship linked to activism.

Since the mid 1990s, Michael has been an energetic collaborator in projects at the University of the Witwatersrand's SWOP unit (now called the Society, Work, and Politics Unit), working closely with old friends and scholars, especially Eddie Webster, whom he had met on his second trip to

South Africa in 1968. Eddie and his wife, historian Luli Callinicos, have been lifelong friends of Michael's, serving as models of the kind of activist-scholars that Michael would later term 'public sociologists'.

In 2010, at a celebration of Eddie Webster's career, Michael described Eddie's career as mixture of intellectual independence and activist engagement that he believed reflected the 'sociology of the South'. Eddie's lifelong engagement with the anti-apartheid movement and South Africa's labor unions, he wrote, offers a model for engaged, but critical, sociological research: scholars can both contribute to, and learn from, social activism, while still retaining an independent and critical perspective (Burawoy, 2010):

What marks Webster's sociological practice is not just hyper-activity, but the intimate connection between his academic and his public lives: the one inseparable from the other. The Webster windmill takes in the winds of change – social, political, and economic winds – and turns them into a prodigious intellectual engagement. As the winds intensify the windmill accelerates, generating ever higher voltage sociology. Sparks fly, igniting the political will as well as the sociological imagination of all those around him, and thus feeding more energy into the windmill. We are not here talking so much about the personal career of Eddie Webster as the way his life comes to be embedded in movements and organizations. While such engagement is by no means confined to the Global South, nonetheless the turbulence of social transformation creates a fluidity between the university and the wider society – rarely observed in the North – encouraging deep involvement, often at great personal risk. (Burawoy, 2010)

Although years later, in his extraordinary intellectual memoir, *Public Sociology* (Burawoy, 2021), Michael would suggest that it was his experiences as Berkeley's department chair that prompted him in the early 2000s to begin exploring the concept of 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2021: 161), I think there is no question that Michael's interactions with South Africa's sociologists were equally important in shaping his increasingly explicit insistence that sociologists can, and should, intervene in public debates, engaging and learning from activists on the ground, while also retaining the kind of critical perspective needed to pursue empirically grounded and independent research.

In contrast to the academic ivory towers of the global North, Michael argued, sociology from the global South 'more easily recognizes its own place in society', prompted by a history of domination and struggle to add a 'political imagination' to the sociological imagination described by C. W. Mills, 'forged through collective and collaborative practices with groups, organizations, and movements beyond the academy'.

Over the next decades, Michael would move even further afield, drawing on new experiences and new friends from Brazil to Russia and Hungary, asking new questions, and exploring new approaches. At the same time, Michael began to draw much more explicitly on scholarship from around the world, often highlighting new questions about the dynamics of gender and social reproduction, about how racial hierarchies that persist in post-colonial settings, and about the way powerful global forces shape and constrain local choices (Burawoy, 2009). Increasingly, he argued that global sociological debates would be greatly enriched by including voices from the global South, a campaign that became even more visible when Michael served first as president of the American Sociological Association, and then as vice president and president of the International Sociological Association (2006–2014). In all these roles, Michael worked ceaselessly to incorporate new perspectives, bringing scholars from the global South to association meetings, creating new opportunities for scholars from around the world to participate in conferences and workshops, including inviting Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the former Brazilian president and sociologist, to serve as a keynote speaker for an ASA conference.

Perhaps one of Michael's most important (and least-recognized) projects as president of both organizations was his effort to literally create new opportunities for sociologists from around the world to be heard. The ASA's journal *Context* was created shortly before Michael became president, and was designed to create a space for sociologists to publish short, readable articles, making new sociological research accessible to both academic readers and a broader public. Later, when he was elected president of the International Sociology Association, Michael took that project to a different level, creating the web-based, multilingual *Global Dialogue*. Sociologists around the world can enlist colleagues and friends to submit sets of short articles on specific topics, or from specific sites; those articles are then translated and published in English on the web, but they are easily translated into other languages, allowing sociologists around the world to participate actively in conversations across geographic and linguistic boundaries (see <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/>).

Throughout this campaign, Michael has repeatedly amplified theorists whose work engages directly with legacies of empire, colonialism, and racism (e.g. Burawoy and Von Holdt, 2018). In 2020, during COVID and in the context of the George Floyd protests in the United States, Michael put the work of W.E.B. Du Bois at the center of his famed undergraduate social theory course – a move Michael says transformed the way his students engaged with the discipline. Du Bois' 'attention to racial oppression in the context of capitalism led him to a global sociology', Michael writes; that shift also 'brought reflectivity to the center of sociology – not to question science but to advance its science', as Du Bois 'abandoned the confines of professional society to develop critical policy, and public sociology, aimed at an expanding audience, within the academic field and part of the world beyond' (Burawoy, 2021: 210–211).

Michael's own work makes clear that his experiences in Southern Africa, and his interactions with activist intellectuals, repeatedly prompted him to explore dynamics that he might otherwise have overlooked. As his comments about Du Bois suggest, that early confrontation with post-colonial Southern Africa prompted new attention to marginalized voices, but it also pushed him to listen to voices that were exploring questions about a capitalism that has been shaped by colonialism – a perspective that arose from his exploration of sociological processes in different contexts, and from his interactions with sociologists engaged in, and actively trying to transform, the world they live in.

Almost exactly 50 years after he published *The Colour of Class*, Michael has become even more explicit about the lessons we can learn from the world beyond Europe and North America, as he urges sociologists to take up 'the alternative practice of critical engagement' to avoid becoming irrelevant, pointing to the 'sociology of the South' as a model:

I believe the North is following the South. As North and South face common problems of increasing inequality, pandemics, global warming, precarious migration and refugees, finance capital, so critical engagement has to become the defining trope of sociology globally – that is, if sociology wants to maintain its relevance. This applies not just to sociology, but to all the social sciences . . . . Under the rubric of critical engagement, founded on the awareness that we are part of the world we study, social science not only shifts its priorities towards communities of suffering, but also traces the source of that suffering to the global forces of capitalism. (Burawoy, 2022: 263)

Of course this call reflects Michael's commitment to social change, and to the discipline, which those of us who have known him will recognize. But although the shy young Manchester United fan would almost certainly never acknowledge it, his own contributions have played a large part in the shift, beginning from the moment that the intrepid young traveler decided to go from the north to the South. As a living model of 'critical engagement' in sociology, Michael will undoubtedly continue to raise new questions and offer brilliant new insights into the dynamics of racial



capitalism and decolonization everywhere – from north to south, and back again, with empirical rigor, humor, and generosity, as well as wisdom and clarity.

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