

Labour Studies, Social Unionism and Engaged Academics: Strategies and Struggles in Canada

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Michael Burawoy (2004, 2008a, 2008b) provides an eloquent and moving call to action in his many works on public sociology. Encouraging sociologists to fight for and with those whom they use as their subjects, Burawoy envisions a better world in which academics are closely engaged with marginalised communities and their struggles against exploitation and oppression. In 'The Turn to Public Sociology: The Case of US Labor Studies' (this issue), Burawoy focuses specifically on the ruptures, transitions and shifts within and among those who study workers and their organisations, sometimes trailing, other times echoing, and still others times exhorting American workers and the American labour movement itself. I have no problem supporting projects aimed at deepening the ties between knowledge production and struggles for social justice. Canada's labour movement and labour studies programs have been shaped by these struggles within and against the American reality; however, they have a distinctive trajectory requiring distinctive analysis and solutions. This analysis highlights some of the tensions in Burawoy's project to reinvent contemporary sociology as engaged, aligned and activist.

Labour Studies in Canada has largely avoided the preoccupation with the professional sociological knowledge production that Burawoy criticises. In part, the explicit, public alignment of Canadian Labour Studies exists because it is not based exclusively or even predominantly in one discipline but has sufficient autonomy to define its own ground. Labour Studies in Canada is rooted firmly in interdisciplinary studies, with major schools drawing on roots in economics (University of Manitoba), political science / political economy (York University), anthropology, sociology, history, psychology and women's studies (University of Windsor), and appointments across the breadth of social sciences in Canada's largest labour studies program at McMaster University. Unlike the sociology of work or industrial sociology, labour studies in Canada unabashedly claims a normative base, rising out of a commitment to understand paid and unpaid work from the

perspective of working people and their struggles for equity, fairness and justice. Given this highly engaged context, it is somewhat superfluous to suggest that Canadian Labour Studies adopt a more public ethos.

The same cannot be said of the sociology of work or industrial sociology in Canada, which, with a few notable exceptions, remains highly professional as per Burawoy's (2008a, 2008b) schema, focused almost exclusively on building knowledge for other sociologists. Indeed, one of the problems with the professional approach to sociology is the way it over claims the ground of sociology, absorbing so-called sub-disciplines (such as Labour Studies), vigorously patrolling the boundaries of sociological knowledge, and repudiating those adopting more interdisciplinary or applied approaches. Burawoy's attempts to shift these academics to a more critical and engaged position deserves wholehearted support and resources, though the project is unlikely to roll out rapidly or smoothly.

Many of the most significant differences between the Canadian and American union movements parallel the way that Labour Studies has developed differently in the two countries. In his article published in this issue, Burawoy argues that the first rupture in American Labour Studies / sociology occurred when Harry Braverman (neither a sociologist nor an academic) published his famous book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Burawoy asserts that a second transition occurred in the mid-1990s as American academics began to explore the question of how to renew and revitalise the failing labour movement. Since that time, many scholars have provided analyses of changes within the labour movement and arguments for those seeking to resist the decline of this once powerful social movement (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Milkman and Voss 2004; Bronfenbrenner 2003; Voss and Sherman 2003, 2000; Katz 2000; Moody 1997).

In Canadian Labour Studies, Braverman held similar importance, and indeed labour process studies and debates continued throughout the 1990s and to the present day, providing working people with ways to name their realities and support their struggles. Like the US, unionisation of the public sector in the 1970s marked a turning point for the union movement, though with some notable differences. Public sector unionisation was far more widespread in Canada than in the US (currently at 74 per cent compared to 35 per cent in the US), and it marked the first step in the feminisation of the labour movement and the rapid growth of national Canadian unions. For various historical reasons, Canada permits unions from the US to set up branch plant 'international unions' in Canada. Although international unions are often seen as a progressive force within the political landscape of the US, they tend to be on the right wing of the labour movement in Canada, pushing the movement backward and hampering activism and organisation.

In the early 1980s, the Canadian portion of a number of American unions joined a breakaway trend, separating from their US parent unions and founding national Canadian unions. This move to independence has continued since the 1980s, with more than 70 per cent of union members now belonging to a Canadian union (Statistics Canada 2008). Arguably this has permitted the development of a union movement that is more progressive and left-leaning than was previously possible. At conferences of international unions, I have often heard it said that the shift to the left has had positive impacts for US international unions as well, pushing them beyond their usual business unionist agendas and opening up spaces for activists' voices and reform agendas. On the other hand, some often note with regret that after the departure of the Canadian wing, some American unions became spent forces, brokering concession agreements, unable or unwilling to mobilise against the rapid-fire assault of what Burawoy terms 'third-wave marketisation'.

While absolutely pivotal to the movement in Canada, the defection of Canadian members from international unions is not a notable or studied event in American Labour Studies. Is the decrease in Canadian membership actually irrelevant to the situation in the US, and if so, why do some US unions hang onto Canadian membership so aggressively? Does this confirm Burawoy's contention that sociology of work is not grounded in the struggles of those they study? Or, does this lack of scholarly attention reflect more complex questions, such as how to analyse imperialist relations enacted by progressive social movements operating within and between two developed, Westernised countries? It is an understatement to note that imperial relations within US unions in Canada is not well analysed in the literature. Little or nothing exists beyond union documents and articles in the popular press.

Many academics adopt Burawoy's positive evaluation of international unions (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Bronfenbrenner 2003; Voss and Sherman 2003, 2000), seemingly unaware of their incursions into other countries and struggles. For example, in the last few years, much has been written about the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) successful organising drives among low-wage workers in the US. Union recognition provided these marginalised workers with a voice and a way to address workplace and community concerns. Interestingly, an independence struggle undertaken by a large portion of the SEIU members in Canada took place approximately at the same time as the recent SEIU organising drives in the US. The struggle for a national Canadian voice met with harsh retaliation from the US parent union and one of the bitterest chapters in recent labour history ensued, locking local labour councils and provincial federations into deeply divisive debates. Government-supervised representation votes enabled most of the Canadian unionists to leave the SEIU; however, the struggle rocked Canada's national labour body, the Canadian Labour Congress, to its core. The

SEIU's efforts to represent marginalised workers in the US are laudable, but should not eclipse their attempts to silence dissident voices in Canada and their increasing interventions in other countries. Currently, the SEIU is providing direct funding to labour organisations in a number of countries, accompanied by political and organisational direction. Those asking where the money is coming from and what agendas are being advanced, are asking exactly the right questions. The silence on these issues within US Labour Studies speaks to the question of whether or not American sociology has the capacity to generate a truly anti-imperialist, public critique (Lal 2008).

Though some continue unchanged today, international American unions in Canada prior to the independence movement in the 1980s tended to focus almost exclusively on business unionist approaches — servicing members and winning demands at the bargaining table. In contrast, the national Canadian unions adopted a social unionist approach (Kumar and Murray 2003) — representing their members at the bargaining table as well as within the wider political arena on a host of social and economic issues, and speaking for the broader working class and its allies on issues such as the environment, social programs, violence against women, health care, immigration, and world peace and international issues (Ross 2007; Black 2005). National Canadian unions have been at the forefront of struggles for universal child care, as well as for fair trade, shelters for victims of domestic abuse, and expanded services for homeless people. Although important examples exist among private-sector unions, this model has been particularly important to public and non-profit sector unions where the membership is significantly or predominantly female and increasingly racialised. The provision of care is often part of these jobs and workers tend to expect their unions to be concerned and active on social justice issues (Baines, forthcoming). Interestingly, social unionism has also been important in hospitality where the lower rungs of job classifications are filled with recent immigrants seeking better lives for themselves and their children. The move away from American-run unions and towards social unionism likely underlies some of Canada's relative success in holding its overall union density at 30 per cent.

Social unionism also buffered and slowed the impacts of neoliberal restructuring, or third-wave marketisation, with unions providing active leadership and resources in defence of social programs and Canada's relatively developed social welfare state (Schenk 2003). For a time, union and community activism also ensured the continuance of agreements, such as the Auto Pact, aimed at protecting Canada's manufacturing jobs. Social unionist approaches on the local and national levels is seen as one of the reasons why density in the Canadian labour movement is higher than other OECD countries (Schenk 2003; OECD 2003).

A concern for social justice and closer community ties likely kept Canada's social unionists more in touch with shifts in the labour force, such as the rise in

precarious and temporary employment (Pupo, Duffy and Glenday 1997), assisting in the development of strategies to organise and defend these workers. Higher unionisation among part-time workers (22.9 per cent) is seen as another reason why density remains higher in Canada (Riddell and Riddell 2001). These workers are predominantly female, in retail, hospitality, community services and the lower echelons of school, university and college education. Social unionism's appeal to women and its connections to feminism may also have lessened membership losses at various points in the third-wave marketisation process. The participation rate of women in unions continues to grow in Canada, more than quadrupling since the late 1970s. At 30 per cent density, the proportion of unionised women surpasses that of men at 29.3 per cent density (Statistics Canada 2008). Women also outnumber men outright, constituting more than 50 per cent of the union movement, though rarely holding upper-level elected or staff positions (Yates 2002, 2006).

Though it was once capable of mounting an active defence of social programs and trade protections, Canadian social unionism is not a uniform or fully integrated approach. Many argue that the model of social unionism has become increasingly institutionalised to the point where it is the 'official' discourse of most Canadian unions, though no longer incorporated beyond the upper layers of union bureaucracy (Baines forthcoming; Ross 2007). While some unions put resources and staff time into building long-term social change campaigns, many simply speak to policy issues at official events and meetings. Even for those who commit concrete resources, social unionism can be a top-down exercise in which union officials and staff are active on social issues but little or no focus is given to sustained, grassroots organising (Black 2005).

On the more optimistic side, some union locals and communities continue to expand the definition of social unionism, developing new ways to activate members around common and society-wide issues. For example, union locals in non-profit agencies have been particularly active around social issues that affect the clients and communities they serve. These experiments blur the boundaries between union member, client, manager, volunteer and political activist, uniting disparate individuals and concerns into broad coalitions and campaigns (Baines, forthcoming). Resembling fluid social movements more than bureaucratic business unions, these initiatives provide new models for union renewal and community sustainability (Ross 2007; Yates 2002; Tufts 1998). Interestingly, the non-profit sector is an area in which union density has been increasing on a consistent basis for some years, bringing in new members, mostly women and increasingly racialised.

These models are very different from the old model of unions based around defence of the white, male breadwinner. However, the old model has not relinquished its grip on the union movement without a struggle. This struggle extends to the priorities of unions and how they operate on a day-to-day basis,

whether they support grassroots mobilisations or see them as threats, as well as how willing they are to join with fellow unionists who are more in touch with and part of mobilisations in the community. As many authors and commentators note, reversing the stagnation in union density numbers must go well beyond bringing new members into the labour movement (Black 2005; Reiss 2005; Katz 2000; Yates 2002; Tufts 1998; Moody 1997). It must go deep within the movement to shift the culture of unions, including their day-to-day practices and priorities, and open the doors to new members and their broad social needs and concerns.

Changing the Social Science Research Process: Catalytic Validity

Though academics are often loath to articulate concrete changes in the everyday world, preferring to operate at the level of critique and theory, changes in the political economy of universities and the academic world are required if engaged, public knowledge building is to become a reality. Currently there are few institutional incentives to sustain public sociology or other forms of activist research, and many disincentives. Universities provide credit for peer-reviewed journal articles and research grants. Activities that detract from these core activities are not encouraged. The political economy of research and institutions needs to change if engaged research is to become the central model, or even a credible alternative, within the larger academic endeavour. Perhaps the most likely and direct way of making these changes is to address research grant requirements. In an era in which credible, arms-length research grants are increasingly difficult to access, it may seem far-fetched to call for changes in their criteria. However, recent and very promising examples exist. Reflecting a growing emphasis on improved practice, health researchers sought out ways to ensure that research went beyond academic audiences to the wider community. They lobbied and argued and persuaded until eventually a measure called 'knowledge translation' was introduced to all major health and medical research grants in Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2008). This requirement now exists in many countries. Currently, Canadian health researchers must include a section in their funding proposals showing how they will transfer their findings back to the community and other audiences. They are required to provide ways to measure the impact of these transfers and can even request funds to do so. In short, this measure has been incorporated directly into the way that health research is understood, undertaken and evaluated.

Unfortunately, the notion of knowledge translation is not unproblematic. In particular, most of the impact of knowledge translation is not immediate or discrete (that is, it overlaps with other forces to generate change). As such it is difficult to measure or even identify (Baines 2007; Sinding, Gould and Gray 2007). Moreover,

ensuring that research results are used in ways that facilitate far-reaching and ongoing social change requires long-term commitment and resources. Most researchers, their employers and granting agencies are only interested in short-term professional practice and policy impact rather than longer-term community empowerment and mobilisation (Baines 2007; Sinding, Gould and Gray 2007).

Perhaps in the social sciences, a better question than whether knowledge is translated might be, 'what changed as a result of this research?' (Lather 1986) — what changed in the course and process of the research, how were participants in the research empowered or informed in order to make social change, and in what ways were the interests of less powerful people advanced. Patti Lather (1986) calls this 'catalytic validity' and argues that researchers should pursue rigour as well as relevance, producing social knowledge that is helpful in the struggle for a more equitable world and can be measured as such. Incorporating measures such as catalytic validity into research requirements carves out a space for engaged academics to build activist ties with communities and provides institutional credibility for these time-consuming, resource-intensive activities.

I incorporated this measure into a study I undertook with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canada's largest public-sector union, a few years ago (Baines 2007). This measure of validity in essence gave me permission to produce research that the union could use to advance the needs of its members and the larger community. It also encouraged me to produce accessible materials for popular consumption, rather than just peer-reviewed journal articles. A news conference we undertook with the union resulted in a flurry of articles, TV spots and radio shows that spread our message farther than the usual academic audience. I presented materials from this study on numerous occasions, generally in popular, interactive formats. I have often had the humbling experience of having working people, usually women and often women of colour, come up and thank me for putting their experience into words and promoting change on their issues, as if I did not benefit from doing the work as well. This kind of interaction is always an amazing moment of validity testing for me, though one that is not recognised in the literature.

Currently, engaged researchers often exploit their own labour in order to share findings with social groups and join their struggles for social justice. The formalisation of measures such as catalytic validity would legitimise engagement with social causes and remove it from a discretionary activity to a regular expectation of researchers and scholars. The impact would be enormous and is much needed in today's increasingly polarised world.

Other Engaged Ways of Working

For years, Canadian academics have documented the struggles and successes of the labour movement. New developments and crises in the labour movement cause a flurry of activity among academics, and all kinds of scholars are drawn to discuss and debate the relative merits of various actions and strategies. Some of these academics approach the issues from the comfortable position of advancing their own careers without actually engaging in the real-life struggles of working people, often providing critiques that demoralise, alienate and destroy hope. These academics are interested in using the data provided by the lives of working people to test classic theories and debates in sociology or economics. They rarely produce research that can be used by social movements, focusing their entire struggle on discussions within learned journals and at academic conferences. Similar to Burawoy's (2004, 2008b) notion of professional sociology, Jim Stanford (2008) calls these scholars 'disengaged academics'. These academics rarely leave the safety of academia to face the people whose lives they influence, analyse and sometimes harm.

Similar to public sociologists though extending far beyond sociology's disciplinary boundaries, engaged academics (Stanford 2008) are drawn from a number of disciplines and work closely with working people and the organisations that represent them. While they may produce research that extends debate on classic, and sometimes obscure, debates in the academic literature, they also produce research that can be used as ammunition and inspiration in the struggles of working people. Some engaged academics have spent part of their lives as front-line workers and draw on their contacts and experience to build a research agenda that addresses workplace themes and concerns. Other engaged researchers have put the time into making the connections necessary to working within movements, not just documenting them from outside.

Like Burawoy's notion of a public sociologist, the term 'engaged academic' prompts questions such as, 'what kind of engagement and with what publics?' Burawoy (2004) asserts that the values of democratic socialism underlie public sociology, while Lal (2008) sees this as insufficient and argues for a critical, counter-hegemonic public sociology. Democratic socialism seems a limited vision for a far-reaching social justice project, unless it is clearly differentiated from current regimes claiming to advance social democracy. Lal's notion of counter-hegemony, however, leaves activists as perpetual outsiders, never moving to a position where hegemony can be built around justice and equality. Fraser (1997) provides a useful ballast for engaged, public academics and a more sustainable vision. She argues that redistribution (of goods, services and resources) as well as recognition (affirming and equitable identities for all) are needed to address today's social problems, and

that solutions must be developed through participatory measures that balance these two themes. This requires a broader framework of equity, fairness and social justice. Engaged academics should be wary of publics advancing agendas that do not incorporate aspects of redistribution and recognition and that remain closed to thorough-going debate about these issues. Thus, in order to understand them better, engaged academics might choose to study anti-choice union groups or union locals championing the cause of logging companies. However, the anti-equity agenda advanced by these groups makes them hostile to redistribution and recognition and not a public that academics need support. In fact, engaged academics may do the opposite, using their research and resources to challenge publics, including union groups, that advance socially or environmentally destructive agendas.

Stanford, an economist employed by the Canadian Auto Workers, recently wrote an article highlighting five things that academics can do to build helpful, engaged research relationships with unions, and five things that unions can do to build helpful, research relationships with academics. His model focuses entirely on the engaged researcher who does not simply conduct research *about* working people but also *for* working people (Smith 1990).

Stanford's five points for academics include:

1. *Commit to the popularisation of knowledge as a weapon.* Report and convey knowledge in a simple, concise and accessible manner, including annotated bibliographies, popularised empirical or policy discussions, and very short articles for campaign newsletters or other forums. Remember most union members have not attended post-secondary education and do not have enough energy at the end of a day to wade through difficult texts. Seven hundred and fifty words or less is optimal, pitched at a high school literacy level or less.
2. *Engage in public debate as a credible but partisan expert.* Engage in the battle of ideas at the level of the popular media, think tanks, and public debates. Offer yourself as someone who can and will speak to social issues.
3. *Consult with movements as you conduct research.* Research findings can provide concrete evidence to support claims for social justice. Consult with movements as you develop new projects, commit to popularising your findings, and mobilise knowledge within social campaigns and activities.
4. *Teach people to become activists, inside universities and out.* Encourage students to understand social movements and to take part in their activities. Build lively and engaged debate within the university classroom, and offer to conduct seminars, teach-ins and longer courses for unions and social movements. Invite your students along to activist events; it makes a great learning opportunity and builds bridges between students and workers. When

presenting to social movements, concentrate on simple, pragmatic kinds of information that help activists press their case.

5. *Give back to the movements you study, do not take from them.* Remember union dues are the only source of union finance and they are collected from an increasingly pressed workforce. Do not turn to unions to fund purely academic research projects or pay hefty consultation fees. Academics hold a privileged position in society and despite an intensification of their workload, they still have more options and resources than most groups. Academics know how to mobilise intellectual, logistical and financial resources and should use this skill set for social movements and for those with less access and privilege.

Canada's social unionist approach places emphasis on building the internal research capacity within some unions by developing a two-prong approach. The first prong involves long-term, strategic research projects and the second prong focuses on immediate research projects for bargaining, grievances, arbitrations, and so forth. University and institute researchers are drawn in from time to time to think through or undertake specific projects. Unfortunately, cash-strapped unions increasingly turn to academics and consultants for one-time projects and policy briefs rather than employing full-time research staff. Though understandable, this strategy lessens unions' capacity to contribute or lead larger debates and social struggles. Stanford offers these five points for unions to consider in building more in-depth and sustainable research strategies:

1. *Invest in building relationships with progressive academics.* Do not just assume these relationships exist because a given academic has done a study in a particular area. Building relationships and goodwill with academics is a good investment and should be a priority even for unionists who feel they do not have the time. These relationships can enhance the long-term capacity of all of those seeking to effect change.
2. *Respect the constraints faced by academics, including their need for intellectual independence and freedom.* In order to survive, academic researchers have to publish in peer-reviewed journals. Their research needs to be independent and they cannot be expected to suppress difficult conclusions or be overly partisan. However, they can produce research that is 'scientific' and credible and that still take sides in social justice battles.
3. *Imagine and develop relevant research topics, and organise access to research subjects and opportunities.* Gaining access to research participants and research sites is one of the biggest challenges for researchers. Participants in social movements who are willing to share their research ideas as well as provide access to research sites are invaluable to researchers. This kind of exchange can open the door to long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

4. *Provide engaged academics with opportunities for meaningful input to your movement.* Invite progressive academics to provide workshops or give talks at conferences and meetings. Most researchers get credit from their universities for transferring findings to the public, and progressive researchers will likely leap at the chance to present their work to an engaged audience. However, academics need to remember that ultimate decision-making authority lies with the leaders and members of a given movement, no matter how helpful the academic's advice and findings.
5. *Keep fighting for change.* Struggles for change attract academics. Academics like to study and analyse these movements, often using them as the basis to develop and extend critical theory. Social movements perform a service for academics when they provide good examples of social change and offer fresh, new ideas for academics to borrow, validate, critique, extend and debate. It is a win-win relationship that feeds back into itself, helping to propel knowledge, theory and social struggle to new heights.

Conclusion

Bob White, one of Canada's most respected labour leaders, recently published an article, entitled 'Innovate or Die' (White 2007). White was challenging the Canadian labour movement to address the challenges posed by third-wave marketisation or face the same downward trajectory experienced by the American labour movement. Neither engaged researchers nor the best of public sociology can solve this dilemma for the labour movement. We can, however, respond to labour movements' need for high quality research, new ideas and sustainable activism. Whether voluntarily exploiting one's own labour as part of a long-term, engaged research project or adhering enthusiastically to funders' requirements for knowledge translation, there are many ways to combine more traditional academic work with the more applied, deeply satisfying and utterly humanist work of building a new, exciting and innovative labour movement.

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