

PREFACE TO THE CHINESE EDITION OF *The Politics of Production*

Michael Burawoy

It is both humbling and flattering to be asked to write a preface to the Chinese edition of *The Politics of Production* first published 35 years ago. What value could there possibly be in such an ancient book? Is there a way of bringing it up to-date? Can its ideas be stretched into the present?

Let us start by casting our minds back to 1985. At that time Marxism was enjoying a renaissance within Western social science. I was very much with the program (and I still am), but not in a mechanical or doctrinaire fashion that saw eternal truths in the writings of Marx or some other classical Marxist. No, the idea was to reconstruct Marxism to tackle the anomalies it faced in examining and transforming an ever-changing world. If Marxism claimed that ideas change with society, so Marxism must itself evolve. If Marxism claimed to inform the transformation of the world, as that world changes so Marxism must change too. Scattered across departments, across universities, across national borders, there developed a community of Marxists intent upon reinventing Marxism. It engaged different issues in different places and drew on different strands of the Marxist tradition. In some places it was more theoretical, in other places it was more oriented to practice.

In the United States Marxism was more confined to the academy where it created quite a rumble, especially in sociology. Of the many issues we tackled, much energy was devoted to two. The first was a renewed interest in the organization of work, what Marxists called the labor process. It was an interest stimulated by the publication of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* (1974) that returned us to Volume I of *Capital*. Looking over the twentieth century, Braverman argued that the distinctive trajectory of work lay in the separation of mental and manual labor, the separation of conception and execution, giving capitalists both greater control and more profit. Through the deskilling of work, capital could both regulate work more effectively but at the same time cheapen the cost of labor. The second set of issues focused on the state and its relationship to capitalism, an interest galvanized by the debate between Ralph Miliband who saw the state as an instrument of the capitalist class and Nico Poulantzas who saw the state as a structure with a relative autonomy, necessary to protect capitalism against capitalists as well as against labor.

The Politics of Production sought to connect these two separate concerns - work and politics. Against labor process theory I argued that there's more to production than work, that it contains its own mode of regulation, its own politics that shaped struggles in production and beyond. Against state theory I argued that the state does not have a monopoly of politics, that there are patterns of domination in production that are essential if the state is to be at all effective. In other words, politics at the site of production mediates the relationship between state and labor process. This politics of production, I argued, had its own "internal state" or, what I call the "political and ideological apparatuses of production," that is simultaneously both the object and regulator of class struggles.

The conceptual innovation arose at the intersection of theory and practice. Armed with Marxist theory acquired as a PhD student at the University of Chicago, I took a job as a machine operator in South Chicago at Allis Chalmers, one of the three big manufacturers of agricultural and construction equipment in the US. This was to be the research for my dissertation, although it was also the source of my subsistence. In those days blue collar workers in union shops were actually paid rather handsomely. With overtime I could boast a higher income than some of my teachers at the university.

At Allis Chalmers I was amazed by how hard my fellow machine operators worked and I wondered why they were breaking their backs for capitalist profit. Braverman may have mapped out change in the objective configuration of work, he didn't address the subjective response of workers. Why did they work so hard, given the meaningless tasks of deskilled work? The answer didn't seem to be coercion, that is the economic whip of the market, the fear of job loss - as Marx had said when writing about 19th century capitalism. And it didn't seem to be monetary incentives as the economists would say. The story that I tell in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) was more complicated. The objective constraints were not as limiting as Braverman presumed, they left space for workers to endow their work with meaning. To alleviate the arduousness and boredom of the work day they constituted work as a game with its own distinctive rules, collectively recognized and enforced.

But there's more to production than work. To assure the conditions of the game there have to be regulatory apparatuses. Three are of especial importance in eliciting the dedication of workers. The first is the *internal labor market* which allowed workers to bid on jobs that go vacant. Those with the greatest seniority and relevant experience would win the job. In this way, the longer workers stayed at the plant the higher their position and the higher their wages. Second, workers are also constituted as individuals with rights and obligations enforced through the *grievance machinery*. If management violated conditions in the contract, workers could pursue their grievance through the union hierarchy. Third, the union negotiates a *collective agreement* which allows for increased wages and improved benefits, dependent on the profitability of the plant. Both individually and collectively workers had every reason to work hard without the continual intervention of coercion.

Adapting Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony that he applied to macro-politics, I called this the hegemonic regime of production that organized the consent of workers. This production regime, I argued, distinguished advanced capitalism from early, competitive capitalism. The package of high wages, substantial benefits, and job security meant managers could no longer coerce workers into hard work, they had to persuade them. I didn't realize that things were just about to change with a state led offensive against the working class that would leave workers and their unions prostrate before the market – directed by a new regime of “hegemonic despotism,” that I anticipated in *The Politics of Production*.

But my critics argued – this is just one factory, how can you generalize to the whole of advanced capitalism? This set in motion a research program that compared regimes of production in different advanced capitalist countries. Sweden, Japan, England all exhibited variants of the hegemonic regime – the variation depending on state regulation of production and

welfare guarantees beyond production. To establish the characteristics shared by all hegemonic regimes I compared them with Marx's 19th century account of despotism in production. I showed how Marx offered but one type of despotic regime but there were others – depending on the labor process on the one side and the form of 19th century state on the other. From historical sources I discovered a variety of regimes in the early textile industries of the US, England and Russia – the company state, patriarchal and paternalistic regimes all resting on a market despotism – conceived with a view to understanding not only the conditions of their existence but their consequences for class struggle.

My critics claimed again that this is nothing to do with capitalism. They said, it's simply a function of industrialization. So then I returned to research I had conducted in the Zambian copper industry (1968-1972), and pointed to the existence of another form of despotism – colonial despotism that continued into the post-colonial period, one might say the reproduction of the colonial within the post-colonial. But my critics were not satisfied; Africa after all represented a case of backward industrialism. It was becoming clear what I had to do – study factories in a socialist society and demonstrate that they exhibited really different production politics. I had always looked longingly at China, but I knew that was beyond my capabilities. Besides I had become infatuated with the Polish Solidarity movement of 1980-1981 that sprung as if out of nothing to attempt the reconstitution of state socialism. I applied for leave and packed my bags but I was too late – General Jaruzelski had beaten me to it, declaring Martial Law on December 13, 1981. Solidarity went underground only to reappear a very different animal at the end of the decade - now to negotiate the transition to capitalism.

After waving good-bye to Solidarity, I was rescued by my friend and colleague-to-be Ivan Szelenyi. He invited me to accompany him to Hungary in the summer of 1982 – he was returning from exile for the first time since 1976. My curiosity had already been piqued by Miklos Haraszti's (1977) lyrical account of his trials and tribulations working in a Hungarian machine shop. He described machine operators doing what seemed to me to be impossible, operating two machines at once. How could this be? I had thought that the one right socialist workers had secured was the right to not work hard! After that first inspiring visit with Ivan – ten days that shook my world – I decided to make Hungary my next venture. But how to get a job in a socialist factory – a sacred arena in the workers' state, protected from native researchers never mind critical Marxists from a foreign land. Still, these were times of reform, so undeterred I went off to Hungary in the summer and Fall of 1983. Through a network of friends, I found work in a champagne factory and a textile shop on a cooperative. And then in 1984 I would make my entry into a machine shop similar to the one at Allis Chalmers in South Chicago and Haraszti's in Budapest. From there I graduated to the Lenin Steel Works in Miskolc, the heart of Hungary's working class, where I worked as a furnace man in three stints between 1985 and 1988.

So, I replied to my critics, I've been to state socialism and saw for myself its distinctive politics of production – a bureaucratic form in which management, union, and party collaborate as extensions of the state. This is truly different from the hegemonic and despotic production regimes of capitalism. Moreover, this bureaucratic regime had real consequences, caught

between a distinctive labor process and a distinctive state. In contrast to a capitalist economy, suffering from systemic crises of overproduction, the state socialist economy is one of shortages - shortages of labor, raw materials, machinery, etc. Coping with the exigencies of shortages on the shop floor requires a flexible work organization, it requires workers to have minimal collective control over production, often frustrated by arbitrary bureaucratic managerial intervention.

That's the side of the labor process, what about the state in state socialism? Unlike capitalist society where exploitation is mystified (obscured), under state socialism it is transparent and thus has to be justified (legitimated). Hence ideology is so much more important. The party state, like any state, claims to represent the common interest, it boasts that socialism is efficient and egalitarian. Yet all around them workers see inefficiency and inequality. In effect workers call on the party state to realize its own promises. They embraced socialist critique, calling out the hypocrisy of the state. This failure of legitimacy leads to periodic outbursts of collective action, which in turn can lead to the open display of force, through show trials, guns, tanks and executions. This is the nature of state socialism where coercion and consent alternate historically rather than coexist as in a hegemonic regime where consent is protected by the armor of coercion, itself the object of consent.

I thought this might harbor a future democratic socialism of the sort I intuited from the self-limiting revolution of Solidarity. But this discursive invocation of socialism by Hungarian workers was skin deep; they held a deeper cynicism toward any future for socialism. Indeed, their critique led them to capitalism not democratic socialism. When in 1989 state socialism collapsed, there were workers who fought to resuscitate the councils that harked back to the 1956 Revolution against communism. There were some who wanted to assume ownership of their own factories, but they were a small minority. The majority were ready to take their chances on capitalism, not realizing that this would mean plant closures, the end of welfare guarantees, the end of free education, the end of a *relatively* egalitarian society. My fellow workers didn't realize how good they had it under communism, no longer the radiant future but the radiant past – the title of a book I wrote with János Lukács (1992).

By 1990 it was clear that Hungary was moving full steam ahead for capitalism, so I made my way to the Soviet Union in the twilight of perestroika. It took some preparation to enter the hidden abode of Soviet production but together with Kathryn Hendley we made it into Kauchuk (Burawoy and Hendley 1992), a famous Soviet rubber plant in Moscow. Now here was a production politics with a difference. We witnessed a veritable civil war: on the one side, there were the Chief Engineer and the General Director who were attached to the Soviet planning system and the integrity of the Soviet Union; while on the other side was the labor collective led by a group of young engineers and technicians who were fighting for a market economy and Russian independence with Yeltsin as their hero. There were regular dramas in which leaders of each side would appeal to workers for support. This was the beginning of 1991 when the harsh winter and economic disarray in the country at large were creating even greater shortages than usual. As in Hungary, managers were trying to feather bed their way out of the enterprise by

spinning off lucrative cooperatives, drawing on company resources to make a killing on the side. Here was a plant in organic crisis, a divided management and a system of dual power.

In April of that fateful year I went North to the Arctic to join my friend Pavel Krotov in his home town, Syktyvkar, the capital of the Komi Republic. There we inveigled our way into Northern Furniture, a young enterprise producing wall systems – a necessary adornment of every Soviet apartment. I became a machine operator – now drilling holes in wood rather than steel – while Pavel spent time with the managers. Unlike Kauchuk, Northern furniture was doing very well with its monopoly of wall systems, benefiting from materials and consumers being close at hand. The enterprise was able to barter the wall systems for items in short supply, including meat, alcohol (then under severe rationing), sugar as well as places in a children’s summer camp down south (Burawoy and Krotov 1992). For the time being Northern Furniture was in good shape. I left in June and by the end of the year the Soviet Union was no more. When I returned the following year the factory was in darkness.

Disaster followed me wherever I went. When I began working in the copper mines in 1968 the price of copper was high and the industry was flourishing. Soon after I left in 1972 the price of copper began to fall and it continued to do so for two decades. The now nationalized industry went into decline. Zambia faced structural adjustment, and eventually had to re-privatize the mines, whereupon, as bad luck would have it, the price of copper ascended again. When I worked at Allis Chalmers in 1973-1974, the company was doing well, indeed it was a model company. But, then, after I left decline set in. By 1986 it closed down to be absorbed in the surrounding urban decay of South Chicago. The area became a ghetto for largely poor African Americans displaced from the demolition of public housing. Hungary’s Lenin Steel Works faced the same fate as did the industrial landscape of Russia. I decided I had better not travel to any more countries and I spent the next decade with my friends in Syktyvkar following the demise of the Soviet economy and the suffering of its workers – a descent never before seen in peace time. My production politics turned toward the female dominated family, which became the fulcrum of economic survival through its relation to the state (Burawoy, Krotov and Lytkina 2000).

I began my research on state socialism in search of a distinctive production politics. No sooner had I found it, than it dissolved. My critics turned on me again: my exception proved their rule. Everything converged on capitalism, state socialism couldn’t survive. But they forgot China! The demise of the Soviet Union was as steep as China’s ascent. I could only participate in China’s amazing growth vicariously through the work of my students. Professor Shen invited me to visit from time to time, although he wisely kept me away from any factories, instead feeding me sumptuous banquets. Yet while industrial workplaces were disappearing in advanced capitalism and the post-Soviet world, they were expanding in China, giving *The Politics of Production* a new lease on life. China was able to attract capital from the West and build up its own industrial capital in large part because it created new forms of bureaucratic despotism, built on the bodies of migrant labor.

My knowledge here is not firsthand but limited to a few books and dissertations in English which examined the Chinese production regime. These include Pun Ngai’s (2005) graphic description of what it meant to live under such a production regime and Ching Kwan

Lee's (1998) elaboration of such politics in South China by comparing them with the production politics of Hong Kong – and roundly criticized me (as have many others) for not recognizing the gender dimension of production regimes. In her next book *Against the Law* Lee (2007) undertook a comparison within China between its rustbelt and its sunbelt, contrasting the gender despotism of the latter and the company despotism of the former and their corollary types of struggles. Production politics gets channeled into the legal arena where, as Xiuying Cheng (2010) shows, protestors get lost in a bureaucratic labyrinth – a diversionary production regime.

China's party state understood something Russia's nomenclatura didn't: a successful transition to capitalism required a legal, social and political support structure. The party state should not be destroyed but recreated to supervise a transition to capitalism (Burawoy 1996). In contrast to China's evolutionary trajectory, Russian dreamed of a Bolshevik transition to capitalism, a revolutionary transition based on the wanton destruction of everything connected to communism. Only when the cancerous remnants of 70 years of communism had been destroyed would a market economy spring to life – like a phoenix out of the ashes of the past. But it turns out that the market road to a market economy is a rocky one.

I had been stationed in Northern Russia where the miners of Vorkuta, along with those in Siberia and the Ukraine, staged the strikes that would bring communism to its knees. Having torn up the party constitution and set up their own autonomous regime of production, they discovered that capitalism had limited use for their expensive coal. One by one mines closed down and one of the richest coal fields began to wither away. I asked those who remained behind, "What went wrong?" "It shows," they said, "You can't build capitalism on the foundations of 70 years of communism." For all the declared intent, the transition to capitalism was not revolutionary but involutory. Rather than leading to economic expansion, exchange undermined production in a process of primitive disaccumulation – plant closures, asset stripping, retreat to subsistence agriculture. This was not to be Karl Polanyi's Great Transformation but instead a Great Involution (Burawoy 2001). It has taken Russia a long time to arrest the precipitous fall and begin to claw itself back, way behind the expansive China.

As China's growth machine gained momentum it sowed the seeds of its own transformation. The system of migrant labor provided cheap labor by externalizing costs of labor force renewal back to the rural areas where families could live from subsistence agriculture (Burawoy 1976). In China the hukou system prevented families from settling in the cities, instead encouraging the migration of single men and women to work in such sectors as construction and electronics. The production regime enforced connections back to the rural communities where agrarian reform engineered through the household responsibility system bore the brunt of support for old and young, where local authorities provided pensions and education. With increasing demand for labor, China's state capitalism outgrew the system of migrant labor upon which its sunbelt industries had depended. The hukou system slowly broke down as migrants flooded into the huge urban concentrations, expelled from the rural areas where a new pattern of accumulation was developing. Supporting labor force renewal had become too costly, so local authorities looked for new sources of revenue. One source has been the creation of industrial districts that become a hub for the production and sale of a single product. Lina Hu

(2013) examines an industrial district made up of household “factories” in Hebei Province where they produce bags for global distribution. Julia Chuang (2020) studies the expropriation and sale of land in Sichuan Province for building new “rural” cities. This new model of accumulation based on the commodification of land has begun to displace the old one based on migrant labor.

While internal industrial growth drove the export of consumer goods and increasingly capital goods, it also led to the search for raw materials. Thus, Ching Kwan Lee (2017) followed Chinese capital to the copper mines of Zambia, coincidentally the ones I had studied 40 years earlier. China tried to transplant its bureaucratic despotism to Africa, unleashing struggles from Zambian miners who thought it all looked like a replay of colonial despotism. But the Zambian government soon realized they were better off with Chinese capital – in contrast to footloose international capital that took flight when the price of copper fell. China stuck around because it was as interested in copper as in profits, and built up an uneasy and unequal collaboration with the government to regulate a production regime that could assure a steady outflow of copper.

In comparing countries, I have emphasized how the state creates, destroys, maintains and always regulates production politics. But what about changes from the side of the labor process? What about the gig economy and the new category of worker – the independent contractor – who uses their own means of production to deliver consumer services – books, food, transportation, plumbing, and so much else. Strangely enough the idea of the “game” has now come into its own (Wu 20128). Gig workers organize their own games with and against the incentives supplied by management, hidden in their platforms. Indeed, software engineers become experts in gamification. As before the game induces workers to compete, but not so much with one another but against themselves and, thereby, reach new heights of productivity (Griesbach et al. 2019). These are dynamic games in which changing algorithms call for new strategies. In an era of precarity when wages are below subsistence, this work attracts part timers in search of a wage supplement that they can take up at any time they wish – the atomization of production politics with invisible managers, invisible co-workers, just a succession of anonymous customers (Milkman et al. 2020)

But there is a more conventional labor process directing the gig economy. As Ben Shestakofsky (2017) has shown creating the incentive system, advertising jobs, attracting clients involves more than just software engineers, but computational and emotional labor carried out by armies of workers in labor processes scattered but coordinated across the globe. Once again the mythologies of automation have been punctured. These labor processes are accountable to the company’s headquarters, itself accountable to the logic of venture capital that first wants evidence that the company is viable and will eventually produce profit. With each new phase of a company’s growth software engineers have to redesign the algorithms that dictate the service relation between customers and clients.

At the center of the gig economy is the smart phone that has become the iconic instrument of production of our age, an extension of our selves, ever more essential to our existence. It not only makes life possible, it records our every movement, our every purchase, our every communication, our likes and dislikes. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has poignantly described, we each become our own labor process, spontaneously and enthusiastically producing

data - data that is aggregated and distributed to surveil our lives, and simultaneously mined and exploited for the profit of states or corporations, for surveillance or advertising as the case may be. Here we have the climax of Braverman's separation of conception and execution generating a novel production politics that collapses into the labor process itself, self-induced or corporate induced games, regulation without regulation, operating as seamlessly as Foucault's panopticon. This atomistic production politics dovetails well with cultish politics, the leading example being Trumpism itself in which the tweet is its own unfalsifiable truth, equally important in the organization of social movements, whatever the political color.

As I tweet or google away, I fuel the profits of Google, Amazon, and Alibaba as well as Microsoft and Apple, providing the foundations of a new economy. Here too there's a labor process behind the labor process, a production politics behind production politics, just think of Foxconn's army barracks in China where thousands of workers are disciplined through apprenticeship schemes to produce the iPhone (Chan, Seldon and Ngai 2020).

But there are limits to the digital revolution. There is an underside to the digital revolution. Nowhere is this clearer than in the response to COVID-19 that shows how society relies on in-person services without a digital interface. Essential workers – nurses, doctors, grocery clerks, school teachers, drivers, agricultural workers, domestic workers, meat packers and so on – have to endanger their own lives in order to keep the rest of us alive. These are the workers who are not able to operate from their homes, but have to come to work where they have greater or lesser protection, where they interact face-to-face with their clients, customers, patients. They are an underclass, often marked by their race, their gender, their citizenship status. Often the most precarious workers in the first place they cannot afford to not go to work, and so they become most vulnerable to the virus and spread it among their families. It's almost impossible for them to quarantine. The labor process may stay the same but its mode of regulation has been transformed, it has become more coercive, sometimes latent, sometimes blatant, spreading its effects.

A new class structure is being formed – a division between stay-at-home professionals, experts, administrators who zoom to work and front line workers compelled to turn up at their dangerous workplaces without adequate protection or insurance. Braverman's separation of conception and execution crystallizes into a class division, a latent class antagonism, although in the United States it has begun to follow political party lines. Digitalization is laying the foundations of a new class war, breaking out here and there – teachers, gig workers, renters, bus drivers, not to mention the war against the police. Labor and life have become inseparable.

Digitalization also gives us the imagination of an alternative world, a future world of collective self-regulation based on peer-to-peer collaboration in which essential work is distributed across the population to reduce the length of the working day. This may be the only way forward – a collective self-regulation, necessary to tackle the challenge of climate change in the age of pandemics. Of one thing we can be sure, the idea of such a socialism will never disappear before its capitalist stimulant disappears.

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