

## Buried in the rubble of communism

*Michael Burawoy*

---

In any given state socialist country, the mode of its collapse lay at the intersection of two forces—struggles within the dominant classes, on the one hand, and struggles between dominant and subordinate classes, on the other hand. The two fed each other in different but complex ways. At one extreme was the Hungarian demolition largely orchestrated from above, and at the other was the popular mobilization that propelled the collapse of the GDR and Czechoslovakia. The overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime involved open civil war but it was also engineered from above. Each collapse was deeply affected by the unfolding dynamics of the others, overdetermined by the Soviet Union. In trying to make sense of this most dramatic and unexpected sequence of events commentators have tried to reduce them to a single principle—yearning for democracy, hatred of communism, economic decline—whereas it is better seen as the result of the interaction of different players within a single transnational political field. Be that as it may I am more concerned with the possibilities introduced by the collapse of communism and how these were swept aside in a market euphoria. I will illustrate a few of these possibilities from my own experiences.

Between 1985 and 1988, I had been making annual pilgrimages to Hungary's biggest steel mill, the Lenin Steel Works in Miskolc, where I worked as a furnaceman in stints of several months at a time. Although we bore state socialism on our shoulders, we in the October Revo-

lution Socialist Brigade barely noticed its collapse. In 1989 I was in Hungary during the second half of July when the buzz in Budapest was all about the changing fortunes of the different political parties, and how long communism could last. The drama was spurred on by the symbolic public funeral of Imre Nagy—the reform prime minister killed after the 1956 revolution—at which the FIDESZ (League of Young Democrats) leader, Viktor Orbán, triumphantly and bravely declared the burial of communism. Indeed, it was the beginning of an end, symbolized by the death just two weeks later, of János Kádár, the architect of 1956 reform communism. The funeral for Nagy may have become a political rally in Budapest, but it did not have the same resonance at the Lenin Steel Works, where workers were worn down by the relentless rotation of shifts, buried in family life, angry about rising prices, cursing managerial ineptitude.

It was only in 1990 that things began to open up as privatization loomed. Our shop steward, having already resigned his post and handed in his party card the previous year, became actively involved in a movement to resurrect the factory councils of 1956 as a way of regaining control over the Lenin Steel Works. This was already too little too late as the erstwhile managers of socialism became the entrepreneurs of capitalism overnight, buying out—or more likely appropriating—the most productive parts of the sprawling steel works subsidized by the infrastructural loss-making departments that were still in the

hands of the state. Money flowed out of the coffers of the state into the pockets of the new entrepreneurs.

Instead of working that spring, I followed János Lukács, my collaborator and friend, who was trying to arouse interest in the idea of ESOPs (Employee Stock Ownership Plans) as a way forward from state socialism that would benefit workers. We visited such great companies as the huge Raba works that made railway coaches and Herend, the famous porcelain factory. In this early period of spontaneous privatization there was much interest in the possibilities of worker ownership. Lukács had even managed to persuade the conservative MDF party to support legislation that might favor such an alternative. In the end it all fizzled out as privatization was centralized to be overseen by Western accounting firms. Foreign capital dictated the terms of transition and, to be sure, their plans did not include different forms of worker ownership and control!

I left Hungary for a short trip to Russia in May 1990 to give a series of lectures to some 150 Soviet sociologists, on a ten-day business-vacation (*komandirovka*) on a boat traveling along the Volga. The boat lived up to its name, *The Gogol*. These were momentous times in the Soviet Union. In February the party had given up its constitutional monopoly of power, and then the Baltic republics began taking measures to secede from the Soviet Union. On *The Gogol* we were treated to the televised debates in the Russian parliament—normally an irrelevant charade—that was trying to elect Boris Yeltsin, archrival of Gorbachev, as president of Russia. The boat was a floating laboratory of perestroika as I was treated to story upon story of the surreptitious privatization of the economy through what was called the cooperative movement. Even sociologists had formed their own cooperatives, and with their opinion polls they helped stir up what was an effervescent civil society. Then I was regaled with accounts of the militant mineworkers of Vorkuta, who together with the mineworkers in Siberia and Ukraine would bring the Soviet Union to its knees the following year.

I was desperately in search of an opportunity to do what I had been doing in Hungary, to find a way onto the Soviet shop floor as a worker, which I would, indeed, rather miraculously achieve the following year in the faraway arctic town of Syktyvkar. What better place to find contacts than on *The Gogol* from among sociologists who, it turned out, were glorified personnel officers from enterprises across the Soviet Union, including military enterprises. The expedition was a risky venture, as the party was not totally defunct, and the journey ended badly as recriminations were made against those who had spent too much time talking with me and the three other Americans. For me, however, it was an extraordinary adventure, so different from my previous orchestrated trips to the USSR, and I made friends with whom I pursued the fate of the Soviet collapse for the next decade.

If that were not exciting enough, I had previously agreed to visit South Africa that same year in July. I had not visited South Africa since 1968, abiding by the academic boycott called by the African National Congress (ANC). But now a rapprochement was being worked out between the ANC and De Klerk's government. Nelson Mandela had been released from prison in February and exiles were returning in droves. Always politically alive, South Africa was now heating up as struggles in the townships were coming to a head. I attended the launching or rather the relaunching of the South African Communist Party at the football stadium in Soweto. It is hard to forget the drama of that afternoon, as the heroes and heroines of the liberation struggle, for so long in hiding, were introduced one by one to the expectant crowd of some 40,000.

Ironically, I spent my time in South Africa giving lectures on the demise of the Communist Party and of state socialism in Eastern Europe. This was hard for the party stalwarts to hear, but already Joe Slovo, then general secretary of the Communist Party, had launched a refreshing debate about the history of the communist movement at home and abroad. But here too the idea of socialism would take a beating as the new ANC government that took office in 1994 would begin a program of privatization and open

borders to international competition that would displace workers and informalize work. Indeed, leaders of the ANC would rewrite history and deny that the liberation movement ever had a commitment to socialism.

The years 1989 and 1990 were times of openings and optimism. For most the optimism lay with the burial of Marxism, whereas for me it lay with the revival of Marxism. In 1989 I wrote a piece called “Marxism is dead: Long live Marxism.” Now that Soviet Marxism was dead, all sorts of Marxism could flower unimpeded, and new visions of socialism—such as those embedded in the cooperatives of Hungary, the Solidarity movement of Poland, the upsurge of civil society in perestroika Russia, the working class mobilizations of the anti-apartheid struggle—could flourish. In practice the collapse of state socialism was swept up in the tsunami of a renewed neo-liberalism. Any alternative visions were buried in the rubble of communism. The end of communism, we were told, demonstrated

that there was no alternative to capitalism. We, therefore, will have to wait for ever-deepening marketization to threaten the very foundations of human existence, posing once again the stark choice: socialism or barbarism.

---

Michael Burawoy teaches sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. During the period in question he was working in factories in Hungary and then in Russia. His latest book is *The extended case method: Four countries, four decades, four great transformations, and one theoretical tradition* (University of California Press, 2009).

E-mail: burawoy@berkelkey.edu.

## Reference

Burawoy, Michael. 1990. Marxism is dead: Long live Marxism. *Socialist Review* 90 (2): 7–19.