

INTERVIEW

# The state of socialism

*Sociology professor Michael Burawoy recently visited South Africa as a guest of the Association of Sociologists of South Africa. Burawoy, professor at the University of California, is the author of *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes Under Capitalism and Socialism*, a seminal work on the relationship between production and politics. In this interview with Eddie Webster, he discusses the state of socialism and the future of socialist movements in South Africa*

**M**ichael Burawoy's most significant contribution to Marxism has been to theorise the non-economic aspects of work, in which he has developed an analysis of the 'political and ideological apparatuses of production'.

His interest developed while he worked on the shop floor as a machine operator in Chicago in the early 1970s.

'I tried to understand why my fellow workers were working so hard, straining themselves to make rates that only marginally increased their earnings. From here I posed the broader question: How is consent organised in the capitalist workplace? 'My conclusion', says Burawoy, 'was that the American industrial relations system has a legalistic character which means worker struggles remain confined to the enterprise and do not spill over into other enterprises or the community.'

'In the unionised sectors of industry, there is what I call an "internal state" within the workplace which is constituted, on the one hand, of workers as individuals with individual rights and obligations (almost citizens of the workplace) and, on the other, of workers as a collectivity, a unit, for collective bargaining purposes.

'Grievance machinery regulates conflicts over breaches of the contract of employment by workers as individuals, while collective bargaining alters the contract.

'I call this internal state a "hegemonic" regime of production because it organises a class compromise in which the interests of capital are presented as the interests of all. Workers consent to managerial domination in exchange for material concessions linked to profit levels.

'So what we find is that relations between production and politics under advanced capitalism are institutionally separated.

In order to find out for himself what it is like to work in a 'workers' state, Burawoy has travelled to Hungary regularly since 1982.

'I have worked in champagne and textile factories and a machine shop very similar to the one in Chicago. Since 1985 I have spent three spells - about a year in all - as a furnaceman in a steel mill', he explains.

'The essential difference from capitalist societies is the

fusion of production politics and state politics. I call the production regime there "bureaucratic despotism". It is bureaucratic because the state appears at the point of production in the form of the triple alliance of management, union and party and despotic because there are no countervailing institutions for workers which would moderate the effect of the triple alliance. Workers' bargaining power depends, on the one hand, on their skill and position in production, and on the other, on the relationship between the enterprise and the state.

The latter is analogous to the relationship between the enterprise and the market under capitalism.

**Q: Are there any other distinctive features of production under existing socialism?**

**A:** In a centrally-organised economy enterprises operate under soft budget constraints. That is, they are protected against bankruptcy.

Their success is not measured by economic criterion of profits but the political criterion of expansion.

Enterprises therefore develop an inexhaustible appetite for investment goods as well as material and human supplies for which they bargain with central planners. This causes shortages. And shortages beget hoarding which leads to further shortages.

If an enterprise is to be effective, therefore, its work organisation must be sufficiently flexible to adapt to these shortages, or what you might call supply constraints - unreliable technology, scarce or

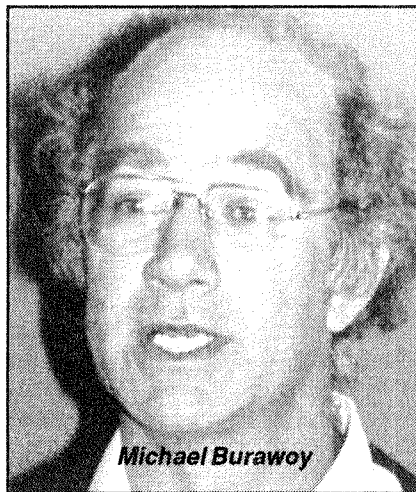
deficient raw materials, and even inadequate labour supplies.

Self-organisation on the shop floor is therefore widely practised, particularly if it does not challenge the political interests of middle management.

This contrasts with a capitalist firm which faces demand constraints in a context of surpluses. Whereas deskilling and expropriation of control from the shop floor can enhance the effectiveness of the capitalist enterprise, it can create chaos in the socialist factory.

**Q: How does this affect the consciousness of workers?**

**A:** Shortages, combined with the fusion of production politics and state politics, leads workers to develop an unusually heightened consciousness of the systemic logic of state socialism.



Michael Burawoy

## INTERVIEW

But they also develop a critique of that system for failing to live up to its ideals for the following reason: where exploitation and oppression has a visible perpetrator - the state - ideology is necessary to legitimate the socialist order as being in the interests of all.

Ideology socialism takes on a powerful reality of its own through rituals celebrating the supposed virtues of socialism. It pretends to be just, efficient and democratic.

Workers therefore become acutely conscious of injustice.

In advanced capitalism, ideology is more variegated, diffused and ultimately marginal to the reproduction of the economic order and workers don't develop the same critical consciousness.

**Q: Has such a critique of state socialism led to a demand for a more democratic socialism in eastern Europe?**

**A:** Although there are clear signs of such demands in the recent strikes by Soviet miners, the most obvious example is the Solidarity movement of Poland in 1981/2.

To be sure the discourse of Solidarity was anti-Marxist, anti-Soviet, but its project was socialist. That is, its ostensible goal was a democratic socialism, a society that would be run by workers in the interests of all.

It was no accident that the first nationwide working-class revolt in history took place in a state socialist society, a society which inculcated the values of socialism - justice, efficiency and democracy - through their non-observance.

**Q: How would you explain the subsequent developments in Poland and Solidarity in particular?**

**A:** After the generals took over in 1981 Solidarity went underground. It resurfaced seven or eight years later having lost the close connection between the leaders and the led.

The leadership sat down with the Jaruzelski regime to forge an historic agreement. During these talks there was no continual returning to the people with fresh proposals.

A complicated arrangement was hammered out in which elections would guarantee the continuing reign of the Communist Party. Solidarity won a landslide victory - although the rules still gave the majority of seats in the lower house to the communists.

What upset the appletart was the defection of two small parties from their traditional alliance with the Communist Party. This changed the balance of power in favour of Solidarity eventually, almost against its own will, Solidarity found itself in power.

In order to meet the acute economic crisis, Solidarity has pursued the most austere policies for introducing market capitalism.

This has been possible only because of the credibility it inherited from the past.

Even so it has faced considerable resistance from Solidarity groups which control many of the enterprises and now, not surprisingly, it is splitting up - inevitable for a working-class movement which assumes power with the object of destroying the social and economic guarantees of state socialism.

**Q: Doesn't the experience of Solidarity - and developments**

**in eastern Europe as a whole - suggest that your argument is simplistic?**

**A:** No, not simplistic, optimistic. I say the breakdown of state socialism could lead to working-class struggles for a democratic socialism.

I underestimated the way state socialism in general, and bureaucratic despotism in particular, atomised and demobilised the working class.

Contrary to popular wisdom and with the exception of Rumania, the regimes of eastern Europe did not collapse from popular struggles from below, although of course such events as the migration of East Germans precipitated changes.

In my view the regimes collapsed from above. The dominant class lost its self-confidence, its will to govern in the name of socialism.

**Q: How did this happen?**

**A:** The yawning gap between ideology and reality, between the promises of socialism and their actual non-realisation, not only led to distinctive working-class opposition but had a corrosive effect on the ruling class, particularly in the increasingly educated and professional fractions of the nomenclatura.

Instead of trying to bring reality into conformity with ideology, as they had done in the past through repression and then through reforms, they abandoned the old ideology of socialism and propagated the virtues of markets, profits and free enterprise.

You see this in all the countries of eastern Europe, but particularly powerfully in Hungary.

For example, during the March and April election there, anti-communism was the dominant discourse of all the parties - even the reformed Communist Party.

The outcome of those elections was a victory for two anti-communist parties -

the ruling Hungarian Democratic Forum, which is a broadly national populist party, and the leading opposition party of Free Democrats which calls for the immediate transition to free market capitalism.

**Q: So what is the basis for your optimism?**

**A:** It is slender. But there have been some interesting developments during the last few months.

In Hungary the anti-communist discourse precluded the emergence of a working-class party and so workers have begun to organise themselves into workers' councils. These embody the radically democratic working-class consciousness inherited from state socialism.

**Q: How many workers' councils are there and what is their significance?**

**A:** At this point there are not many. When I was in Hungary in the middle of June there were about 160. But their importance lies in what they represent rather than in their immediate strength. Without a political party to represent their class interests, workers have drawn on their own resources, particularly in production.

They are organising themselves against official trade unions which have not supported their interests.

The councils also reflect the separation of production politics from state politics.

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## INTERVIEW

With the programme for the privatisation of state property enterprises are being encouraged to draw up their own privatisation plans. This turns the enterprise into a field of autonomous politics.

**Q: How does this privatisation work? Who will be the new owners of state property?**

**A:** There are not many buyers. The old bureaucratic class is turning its political capital into economic capital.

With the assistance of foreign capital it is trying to become a new bourgeoisie, very much along the lines to be found in other countries such as South Africa and Brazil. But it is far from clear that they will be successful.

As we see most vividly in East Germany, the transition to capitalism may prove to be a disaster. It is not simply a matter of socialist inefficiency because what counts as efficiency under state socialism leads to its opposite under capitalism.

Eastern Europe's much touted Third Road may be a Third Road to the Third World.

At the same time some of the workers' councils are demanding credit facilities to buy up their enterprises through 'employee stock ownership plans' (Esops), out of future profits.

**Q: What implications does the collapse of existing socialism - or state socialism as you call it - have for the theory of Marxism?**

State socialism is just one form of socialism. It arose in the Soviet Union under the most difficult of circumstances.

Its collapse does not imply the failure of all forms of socialism. Rather, we should take this up as a challenge, an opportunity to reconstruct Marxism.

**Q: You are suggesting that existing socialism generated a particular kind of Marxist-Leninism and are offering an alternative, more democratic, Marxism. What kind of concepts or writers can one draw on?**

**A:** Many branches of Marxism have been neglected and others need reinterpreting. Take, for example, Lenin. There is the Lenin of 'What is to be done?', and 'Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism'.

But then there is also the Lenin of 'State and Revolution'.

This is often dismissed as the work of a utopian or, in its disdain for bourgeois rights, regarded as sowing the seeds of despotism.

But we should take it more seriously.

The radicalism of his democracy reflected his fear that a new bureaucratic class would emerge to replace the old dominant class.

Only by going beyond bourgeois democracy and dismantling the repressive apparatus of the state, subjecting elected representatives to instant recall and paying officials a worker's wage could a new class of bureaucrats be prevented from emerging.

Rosa Luxemburg applauded the courage of the Bolsheviks, but was at the same time critical of their failure to take bourgeois democratic rights seriously.

Trotsky offers some of the most powerful critiques of what he believed to be the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party into a bureaucratic caste.

Gramsci insisted that a socialist movement must conquer the trenches of civil society outside the state. For him socialism only arises when civil society subordinates the state to popular will.

**Q: In South Africa we are entering a period of transition in which many believe socialism is the only alternative to apartheid-capitalism. What lessons can be drawn from the experience of eastern Europe and this democratic Marxist tradition you have identified?**

**A:** State socialism systematically destroyed the independent power of the working class in the name of Marxism.

Democratic socialism has to continually institutionalise and rebuild the organs of an autonomous working class.

This is such an important lesson that I think Marxism should abandon the idea of socialism as a classless society. We have to reformulate the meaning of (democratic) socialism as a two-class society in which the subordinate class supervises and controls the leading class.

This would require a radical democracy which goes beyond but rests upon a bourgeois democracy.

The relationship between these two forms of democracy is not one of stages: first struggle for bourgeois democracy and then for radical democracy. For, by itself, bourgeois democracy systematically demobilises subordinate classes.

We have seen this in western Europe during the last 50 years and we see it in eastern Europe today.

In this regard South Africa is fortunate since lengthy struggles have created autonomous realms in civil society and in the workplace before the installation of bourgeois democracy.

It will be important to continue to consolidate and expand them during and after the formal democratisation process toward majority rule.

**Q: Would this entail a mixed economy such as the New Economic Policy adopted by the Soviet Union in the early 1920s?**

**A:** Certainly, that is one possibility. But I myself have not given up on the idea of nationalisation as a goal.

State ownership of the means of production in eastern Europe turned out to be the basis of a new form of class domination. That does not have to be the case, particularly if there are institutional mechanisms for society to supervise the ways in which surplus is centrally appropriated and redistributed.

**Q: But has not the experience of nationalisation in Africa been similar to that in eastern Europe?**

**A:** In the case of Zambian copper industry, which I studied some 20 years ago, nationalisation was clearly a tool of class domination.

I remember vividly how President Kenneth Kaunda used nationalisation to lambast the miners: 'The mines are now yours', he told them. 'You are no longer being exploited and, therefore, you must work harder. Drinking, absenteeism and strikes will not be tolerated'.

By itself nationalisation is not unambiguous in its class implications. The political context within which it takes place is obviously critical. The Zambian context did not favour it as

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## INTERVIEW

a socialist measure, although it was presented as such.

When, however, nationalisation takes place in the context of a powerful and independent working-class movement, organised across industry in the workplace and in the community, then the implications of nationalisation are very different.

**Q: Aside from what you have just said, there must be other obstacles which have to be overcome in any nationalisation exercise. I'm thinking of the question of skills and the international economy.**

**A:** This is precisely where my interest in production and politics began.

Between 1968 and 1972 I studied how the multinational copper corporations, particularly Anglo American, were responding to the new Zambian government.

I became very interested in the two questions you've raised - Africanisation and vulnerability to the global economy.

The legacy of colonialism was stark. At the time of independence the mines were owned and controlled by whites who were mainly expatriates. The government was committed to Zambianisation of managerial personnel but there were only 100 Zambians with university degrees and 1 200 with secondary school certificates. It also depended on copper for 90% of its foreign exchange and therefore treated the mines, and the white managers in particular, with kid gloves.

Zambians were nevertheless promoted into higher positions. But the whites they displaced were often also promoted into new positions created for them.

To accommodate the white interests for the retention of the colour bar, that is, that no black have authority over any white, and at the same time create the impression of successful Zambianisation, huge irrationalities were introduced into the organisational structure.

The ranks of managers increased and tensions developed between blacks and their new black supervisors who lost the authority of their white predecessors.

**Q: What about the dependency on the international price of copper?**

**A:** To be sure the international context posed considerable external constraints on the Zambian government.

But I should also like to stress that the ideology of 'neo-colonialism' was used to mask or deflect attention away from the continuing internal class domination. Still, dependency on the price of copper which was outside the control of the government proved disastrous.

Soon after nationalisation the price of copper plummeted and the government was saddled with compensation on an industry which no longer guaranteed profits.

**Q: Does that mean that in a country like South Africa, where two-thirds of our foreign exchange is drawn from gold, a commodity which is subject to international control by the capitalist system, that the prospects for successful nationalisation are equally unlikely?**

**A:** Based on my limited knowledge of the South African mining industry I can only suggest that rather than nationalise the mines one should bleed them - taxing them and using their resources to build a national economy less dependent on the world economy and in that way move toward a collectively controlled society.

Still, there is the question of whether the mining houses, so long as they are in private hands, can be relied upon to improve the appalling conditions in the mines - the antiquated system of migrant labour, compounds and racial despotism - and if they

did so whether they would continue to be profitable.

Without getting into a discussion of CST (colonialism of a special type), I would characterise them as 'colonial despotism'. They are despotic in that management has arbitrary power over workers. They are colonial insofar as the basis of that power lies in the unequal distribution of rights by race, enforced through specific racial apparatuses of production.

The longevity of these apparatuses has organised a structural dependence on a racial division of labour and a racially-organised labour market, that racial despotism will outlive the abolition of colonial apparatuses of production.

It appears that the structures of apartheid are being abolished precisely when they are superfluous to the reproduction of racial inequalities.

As a goal 'non-racialism' is of incontestable virtue, but there is a danger that it will discourage the introduction of powerful countervailing measures necessary to destroy the continuity of racism into a post-apartheid society.

**Q: Is there anything about politics and production in South Africa which makes socialism more likely?**

**A:** Well, as I've just been saying, I believe that racism is and will continue to be an indelible part of South African capitalism even without apartheid.

Because racial identity is such a powerful mobiliser of collectivities, the recreation of capitalist domination as racial domination can forge solidarity across workplaces.

There is another factor. South Africa is relatively unique in that its relatively advanced economic base has engendered powerful working-class struggles before democratisation.

In this context democratisation can further escalate demands which capitalism patently cannot meet.

The jury is still out on whether there is a feasible South African socialism - 'socialism of a special type' - that could address these demands without falling into anarchy.

Certainly, in South Africa there is a history of a close connection between intellectuals and the working class movement, necessary to forging alternative visions of the future.

**Q: In Poland there was also a close connection between workers and intellectuals in the formation of Solidarity. What makes you think that the liberation movement in South Africa will not fall into the same trap as Solidarity, assuming office but then being unable to engage with state power effectively?**

**A:** Solidarity developed a theory of the self-limiting revolution in which the object was not to seize state power but to direct the state from below.

While there were pragmatic reasons for such a theory, namely, the threat of Soviet intervention, there was also the genuine fear that seizure of power would set in motion dynamics which would undermine control from below.

Events in Poland have overtaken the vision of a self-limiting revolution, but in South Africa the situation is more auspicious. An ANC government could deliberately institutionalise a socialist opposition to itself in the form of the Communist Party and Cosatu.

In this view the Communist Party would be more effective out of power. In an alliance with Cosatu, it could propel a government toward redistributive socialism by mobilising pressure from civil society, from the community and workplace.

Moreover, with socialism in opposition, destabilisation by international capitalism or a coup from the right would be less likely. •