

DEBATE

Remembering Michael Burawoy (1947-2025)

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On Monday, February 3, 2025, the world lost Michael Burawoy, a brilliant scholar of the sociology of labor, political sociology, and social theory, in a hit-and-run car accident near his home in Oakland, California. As the global community that he helped to construct learned the shocking news, the internet was flooded with comments mourning the loss, and recognizing the impact of Michael's many contributions on the discipline, as well as on the lives of his students, colleagues and friends.

Over the course of his career, Michael published more a dozen books, and dozens of articles, contributing to the sociology of work, political sociology, and social theory, as well as to public debates about the relationship between scholarly sociology and activism. During the nearly 50 years that he served on the University of California at Berkeley faculty, Michael advised more than 80 doctoral students, chaired his department twice (1996-8, 2002-2003), served as president of the American Sociological Association (2003-4), and then served as president of the International Sociological Association (2010-2014).

Michael's contributions were widely recognized during his lifetime. He received the ASA's W.E.B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship in 2024, which came on top of the ASA Marxist Section's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2020, and the Berkeley Citation, one of the university's highest awards in 2021.

Those who knew Michael in his earlier years probably would never have predicted that he eventually would become one of the world's most visible sociologists. Born in 1947 to Hungarian Jewish refugees who fled to Britain as the war loomed over Europe, Michael majored in mathematics at Cambridge, and, as a rather reserved

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young nerd, probably would not have seemed likely to emerge as the energetic, engaged scholar-activist and community-builder that so many of us remember.

But after taking a few college courses in sociology, Michael decided to explore the world, heading off to Africa after he graduated in 1968. What began as a gap-year adventure ultimately would become the cornerstone for Michael's lifelong interest in labor studies, and also, in theoretical debates about class, race, and social change – especially after he became engaged with a group of sociologists and anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, whose friendship and conversations would deepen his interest in Marxist theories, and in the region's racialized migrant labor system.

Traveling north, Michael enrolled in the University of Zambia's brand-new sociology master's program, and also took a part time job in the personnel office of Zambia's major copper-mining company. In the first of what would become a career-long series of ethnographic workplace studies, Michael later published *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines* (1972), analyzing the dynamics that maintained the mine's racialized labor system, despite independence, and even though the mining company had been nationalized by a new government which claimed to be committed to ending colonial-era segregation. Michael's clear description offered remarkable insight into why change was so slow, pointing to persistent pressures that led the new state, and organized labor, to collaborate with the South African-owned company that still ran the mine.

The report prompted a heated debate in Zambia – and also raised larger questions about work, politics, and social change, which Michael continued to explore for the rest of his life. With a master's degree in hand, Michael moved to the University of Chicago to pursue a doctorate under the supervision of William Julius Wilson. For his dissertation, he worked as a semi-skilled machine operator in a South Chicago factory; in the book based on his thesis, *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), Michael described the way workers' compliance, and resistance, was shaped by the informal norms and explicit pressures – not only from fellow workers, but also from the company, the union, and the state. Still viewed as a classic work in labor studies, Michael's focus on specific details of what he called the *labor process* – the daily experiences of workers, shaped by the specific context in which they find themselves – was immediately recognized as a major contribution, and continues to have enormous impact on labor studies today.

In 1976, Michael joined the faculty at UC Berkeley, and by the late 1980s, he had expanded his approach, adding theoretical, historical and comparative analyses, as well as ethnography, to his repertoire. Over the next four decades, Michael would explore an extraordinary range of issues around the world, from migrant labor in California, to changing labor relations in post-communist Hungary and Russia, to surging popular protests in post-apartheid South Africa.

But, as anyone who met him could see, Michael's interest in sociology, and the world, extended far beyond the workplaces he studied. By the early 1990s, he was still doing ethnographic work, but he also began to write more specifically about methodology, insisting that qualitative methods offer a very different kind of insight. Prompted in part by his concern that the work of his graduate students and junior scholars would be dismissed by more positivist social scientists, Michael began making the case for what he came to call the *extended case method*. Ethnographers, he argued, can use their observations in specific contexts to highlight dynamics which have might been overlooked by classical theories, or to explore how different histories, and different contexts, might shape social processes in ways that classical theories might never have predicted. Instead of using general social theory to analyse reality, specific cases could be used to challenge classical theoretical assumptions, and perhaps, to change the way we understand the world.

Like many of Michael's insights, he always attributed the emergence of this new framework for thinking about the impact of single cases and of qualitative work, to his interactions with his students, at both the undergraduate and graduate level. As many of his former students pointed out at the retirement celebration hosted at Berkeley in 2023, engaging with Michael often proved lifechanging – for undergraduates, but perhaps even more for his dozens of doctoral students, who counted on Michael not only for insights, warmth, and humor, but also for thoughtful mentorship, his detailed feedback and generous support. Michael's deep, energetic commitment to teaching was always an important part of his work, and it had enormous impact on those around him; as his colleague Mara Loveman described in a moving tribute after his death, the intensity with which he listened, and responded to, students' comments and questions, both in classes and in private, was remarkable: throughout his career, he insisted that he learned as much from his students as he did from them, often suggesting that students' questions were what made him rethink old assumptions, and pursue new directions in his own work.

And although Michael always enjoyed having time to himself, he was also remarkably sociable, always willing to share ideas and discuss projects with his colleagues and friends. His graduate students could count on him for detailed and thoughtful comments, including in the regular workshops he hosted for his advisees; he created a space where students could share drafts of their work, benefit from each others' insights, and also, learn to offer constructive criticisms.

Of course, Michael's energetic engagement with the world went far beyond the classroom. Especially as he became involved in the leadership of both his own department and broader sociological associations, and as he built ever-stronger relationships with sociological communities from South Africa to eastern Europe, to Brazil and beyond, Michael pushed the discipline to recognize the value of that broader engagement. Ever the globe-trotter, he built an extraordinary network of

friends and collaborators, creating a network of sociologists who shared his activist leanings, and who were involved in movements for social change as well as scholarly research, including well-known scholar-activists like his close friends Erik Olin Wright and Eddie Webster.

As a young Marxist, Michael had always been sympathetic to activists, but as he became more visible in the discipline, Michael began to use his position and his visibility to defend junior scholars, increasingly urging the discipline to recognize the value of what he called *public sociology* – that is, sociological projects that do not simply study the world, but try to change it. Insisting that if sociology does not engage with, and contribute to, the real world, the discipline loses its bearings, and its purpose, he argued that instead of assuming that engaged scholarship would be biased, academia should respect scholars' involvement and concern; while scholars need to be open to what Weber called *inconvenient fact*, Michael also pointed out that scholars' engagement can also open the possibility of new insights, and often leads to significant intellectual contributions.

Another side of his campaign to promote *public sociology* stemmed from his desire to make the discipline more relevant to public policy debates. During his presidential terms at both the ASA and the ISA, he helped to create new spaces where sociologists could publish short, readable summaries of their work, supporting the creation of the ASA journal *Context* and the ISA journal *Global Dialog* as sites that might make academic studies more accessible to broader publics, as well as to other sociologists.

Importantly, he also insisted that these projects should also work to expand the discipline's perspective – especially, to bring in sociologists whose work might otherwise have been overlooked, often because they reflected the experiences of the global South, or because they focused on more marginalized corners of society.

Over time, these projects led Michael to become even more insistent that sociology, and sociologists, need to be engaged in the real world, rather than simply engaging with the classic theoretical canon. That vision is perhaps spelt out most clearly in what is effectively Michael's intellectual autobiography, *Public Sociology* (2021) – summarized in a line he claimed was an *adaptation* of a line by C.L.R. James and Rudyard Kipling: "What do they know of sociology, who only sociology know?" Describing how his understanding of sociology, social theory, and the relationship between theory and reality changed over the course of his career, Michael repeatedly emphasizes how events in the real world prompted him to take up new questions, and to explore new theoretical directions.

In the concluding chapters of *Public Sociology*, Michael describes one of those shifts – one that was perhaps both predictable, and completely unexpected. While he always loved biking, hiking, and watching Manchester United soccer matches, Michael was also a workaholic, always interested in new topics and issues. No one who knew him would have expected him to simply relax and retire after he retired

from Berkeley in 2023. So perhaps it should not be surprising that when students asked him to teach a course on the revered activist and scholar WEB Du Bois, Michael became immersed in revisiting Du Bois' work; especially during the protests that broke out after George Floyd was killed, he became firmly convinced that sociology needed to shift away from classical theory. The discipline will only remain relevant, he writes, if sociologists engage directly in the challenges of the present – while also trying to identify, and construct, paths that might lead toward a more just and humane society.

Taking up the challenge that he had posed to the discipline, he continued to work on several projects in the years after he retired. In the lecture series and articles in which he discusses Du Bois's contributions, in an edited collection honoring the work of Erik Olin Wright on *real utopias* and in the papers he was working on just before he died, he repeatedly reminded readers that sociologists cannot pretend they are neutral as they study the world that they inhabit. As he wrote in an unpublished paper, a week before he died, "as Max Weber (1949) maintained – contrary to faulty interpretations – social scientists cannot conduct their investigations without taking a standpoint. To study the 'infinite manifold' that is the world we need to select in order to interpret. Moreover, social scientists are no different to anyone else, their actions as researchers are guided by the values they adopt. To refuse to take a stance is a stance itself, a stance in favor of the status quo."

Less than a week after the shocking news of Michael's death spread around the world, more than 300 people logged on to pay tribute to him in an event organized by the ISA. Colleagues, former students, and close friends joined in, mourning his loss, but also celebrating Michael's energy, his insights, and his generous mentorship. The words that Sari Hanafi, a former ISA president and close friend of Michael's, posted on the ISA website will resonate with all who knew him:

"Michael, you were not just a theorist. You reshaped the very practice of sociology, making it urgent, engaged, and alive. Your ideas do not die. Your presence does not fade. You are not gone; you are inscribed in every struggle for truth, every act of intellectual courage, every fight against injustice. I grieve this immense loss. But I do not say goodbye."

Or, as an old saying puts it: Michael's memory will always be a blessing. He will be sorely missed, but even those sociologists who are not lucky enough to carry memories of his warmth, his energy, and his generosity, will be inspired by his work, for decades to come.