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REAL UTOPIA OR ABSTRACT EMPIRICISM?

Comment on Burawoy and Wright

IN 'A TALE OF TWO MARXISMS', his stimulating critique of the life-work of Erik Olin Wright, Michael Burawoy raises a crucial question for the left.¹ What is the relationship between capitalist development and the project of socialism? In the classical Marxist schema, the competitive and unplanned nature of capitalist investment meant that manufacturing overproduction would result in periodic, and perhaps worsening, crises. At the same time, capitalism was producing a new class, the industrial proletariat, with the capacity to establish another form of social production based on democratic planning—and with a keen interest in so doing. The scientific analysis of capitalist development was thus intimately linked to the socialist political project. The factory and, later, the large corporation contained the cell form of the planned society to come, while the working class provided the social muscle for its achievement.

The strong point in this account has always been its explanation of the rhythms of capitalist production; its weak point was its sociology of class formation. As Bernstein observed in 1899, capitalist society does not simply produce class polarizations, but a host of intermediate positions as well. Subsequent thinkers, from Sorel to Wright and Burawoy's 'sociological Marxism' and beyond, have pondered whether these layers could unite in an anticapitalist coalition.² Yet as Burawoy points out, Wright's interventions in this discussion were somewhat paradoxical. Rather than producing a new synthesis of class analysis and socialist politics, the two demarcated different phases of his intellectual career: class theories and empirical investigations of increasing scale and complexity preoccupied Wright through the seventies and eighties; the ambitious international

project of *Envisioning Real Utopias* and its satellite volumes consumed his energies over the next thirty years. In this cursus, class analysis and real utopias seemed to have little to do with one another.

This poses what Burawoy correctly identifies here as the central conundrum of Wright's work: the move 'from a class analysis without utopia to utopia without class analysis.'³ What is missing, Burawoy argues, is 'any consideration of the dynamics of capitalism', which might have enabled Wright to conceptualize the links between the two. In his conclusion, Burawoy asks what theoretical resources might help in the endeavour of linking 'real utopias' to capitalism and suggests that Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation* (1944) could be a good place to start. How should we assess this analysis? Burawoy is absolutely right in his assessment of the central question posed by Wright's work—how to link class analysis with 'utopia'—and I would agree that the solution lies in an account of capitalist development. However, I have several doubts about Burawoy's attempt to solve the 'conundrum' Wright leaves us with. These centre around Wright and Burawoy's conceptualization of 'real utopias' and Burawoy's deployment of Polanyi.

How real?

The first problem is to clarify what exactly is meant by 'real utopia'—both the nature of its 'reality' and its existence as an alternative social form. According to Burawoy, the term refers to 'actually existing organizations, institutions and social movements which operated within capitalist society, but followed anticapitalist principles'—'concrete phantasies' that exemplify the possibility of a post-capitalist future, and which might form the basis of 'a counter-movement to the commodification of everything.'⁴ How do we decide whether a particular institution or social movement is anticapitalist or not? Neither Wright nor Burawoy are particularly explicit; but they seem to suggest that

¹ Michael Burawoy, 'A Tale of Two Marxisms', NLR 121, Jan–Feb 2020, pp. 67–98.

² 'Sociological Marxism' was the term Burawoy and Wright gave to their common political and intellectual project, beginning in the early 2000s. See Michael Burawoy's extended statement, 'For a Sociological Marxism: The Complementary Convergence of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi', *Politics and Society*, no. 31, 2003, pp. 193–261.

³ Burawoy, 'A Tale of Two Marxisms', p. 69.

⁴ Burawoy, 'A Tale of Two Marxisms', pp. 84, 88, 93.

any organization run on non-profit principles can be described as anticapitalist. In Wright's terminology, these involve social empowerment; in Burawoy's, decommodification.

It's worth underlining the mode of conceptualization at work here. For both Burawoy and Wright, the capitalist or anticapitalist character of an organization can be defined in terms of its 'principles'. The one institution for which this approach is entirely appropriate is the political party. Since parties aim to use state-power to achieve their goals, something at least can be learned about them from studying their programmes or 'principles'. But, strikingly, parties are mostly absent from Burawoy's list of potential candidates for real utopia, and entirely absent from Wright's. This is particularly surprising in Burawoy's case, given the centrality of Gramsci to his understanding of Marxism; the *Prison Notebooks* clearly identify the party as the key agent of socialist transformation.⁵

Instead, non-party institutions dominate their analyses of 'real utopias'. Here the problems with their conceptualization become clear. In extracting the 'principles' of Wikipedia, participatory budgeting, Mondragon or the university, they are in fact proceeding in a highly abstract way. For 'actually existing' institutions 'actually exist' in capitalist society, and their capitalist or anticapitalist character is determined by their relationship to the whole of which they are a part. It can only be determined by putting them in the context of capitalist society, and asking whether they serve to reproduce that society or not. The attempt to define a 'real utopia', however specified, in abstraction from a notion of society as a whole, faces intractable methodological difficulties. It is a version of what Parsons called, following Whitehead, the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', or what Lukács termed 'reification', the process of conceptual 'isolation and fragmentation' from the 'whole life of society'.⁶

In this case, the term 'real utopia' is applied to an abstracted part of society—an institution—when properly speaking it refers to a totality of social relationships. An analogy may clarify the problem. Calling

⁵ See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York 1971, p. 147, where Gramsci insists that the protagonist—the Modern Prince—takes the form of the political party.

⁶ See Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of Recent European Writers*, Glencoe IL 1937, p. 29; and Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Cambridge MA 1971, p. 91.

an organization ‘anticapitalist’ just because it isn’t oriented toward profitability or doesn’t run on market principles is a bit like calling orange peel ‘anti-orangist’ because it is oily and bitter, as opposed to juicy and sweet. The mistake is to isolate the parts whose relationship constitutes the thing one refers to as ‘an orange’, whose bitter peel protects the juicy flesh. Similarly, the non-profit public schools and universities that Burawoy cites may function to reproduce capitalism by providing free or cheap knowledge and high-skilled labour. Among Wright’s examples, the Basque Country’s Mondragon cooperative network, though imbued with social-Catholic values, became a capitalist firm (with a somewhat peculiar structure) through the compulsion of the market.⁷ Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre soon became a matter of achieving democratic popular consent for limited municipal budgets. Wikipedia, conceived by the Ayn Randian Jimmy Wales, successfully mobilizes unpaid labour to provide a public good, but can hardly be said to pose a threat to capitalist property relations. This is not to say that there is nothing to be learned from these experiments in making, ruling and knowing; quite the contrary. But we should be careful not to dress them up as more ‘anticapitalist’—more radically pre-figurative—than they actually are.

This has implications for how utopia should be conceptualized as well. To be ‘real’, a utopia must surely approximate to a utopian society—a total alternative system of production and reproduction. Of course, few of the most celebrated utopian experiments—the seventeenth-century Jesuit Missions in Paraguay, nineteenth-century Owenite and Fourierist settlements—were entirely disentangled from the broader social relations of their time; yet some achieved a certain degree of autonomy. Where else might one turn for concrete evidence of non-capitalist social orders? Here sociologists face an embarrassment of riches, a massive and still largely unexplored terrain of knowledge about alternative ways of organizing human existence: ancient and early-modern city states and republics, indigenous polities and communes, farming communities on the nineteenth-century American frontier; the multiple forms of state socialism. None of these is an exemplar to be imitated, but they are instances of actual social practices from which a great deal can be learned.

⁷This point is sharply made by Marion Fourcade, ‘The Socialization of Capitalism or the Neoliberalization of Socialism?’ *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 369–74, 372.

If the programme of real utopias is to take its realism seriously, it will require a comparative and historical sociology of non-capitalist *societies*. This is what links the project to the great ambitions of classical sociology, especially Weber's. For he, more than sociology's other founders, understood the sheer variety of social types, and consequently the highly peculiar character of modern capitalism. Real utopias should begin by demonstrating through comparative and historical analysis that capitalism is only one possible configuration of human society, and no more likely to prove immortal than any of the rest.

Polanyi's gaps

While Burawoy is right to argue that the conceptual link between class analysis and socialism, or 'real utopias', should be sought in the dynamics of capitalist development, it is less evident that Polanyi's work is the place to turn.⁸ Written in the late 1930s and early 40s, in exile from a Europe convulsed by Nazi terror, *The Great Transformation* sought to provide a *longue durée* explanation for the crises of the 1930s, with a compelling appeal to human social needs. Polanyi's capacious vision saw economic development from the early nineteenth century to the 1920s as a long wave of marketization: the self-regulating market that liberal economic policy had unwisely unleashed now threatened, with the Crash and Great Depression, to annihilate 'society'.⁹ The market's relentless quest for profits absorbed the traditional factors of production—land, labour, money—turning them into commodities. Yet these were not true but 'fictitious commodities', Polanyi argued, since they hadn't been produced for the purpose of exchange; their commodification now risked undermining their reproducibility. The turmoil created by this historic transformation of traditional—reciprocal and personal—economic relationships then produced counter-movements in the 1930s—America's New Deal, Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy and Germany—which aimed, in their own ways, to re-embed economic relations in society, a necessity if humanity were to avoid 'civilizational collapse'.¹⁰ Polanyi's political

⁸ Politically, *The Great Transformation* is best characterized as an imaginative and ambitious attempt to provide a social-historical foundation for Polanyi's blend of Christianity, Popular Frontism and guild socialism, taking aim against economic liberals and Marxists alike; this *ni-ni* perspective helps to explain its appeal to the Anglosphere academy today.

⁹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Boston 1958, p. 249.

¹⁰ See Gareth Dale, *Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left*, New York 2016, p. 126.

project sought to construct a democratic-socialist form of re-embedding, for which he saw hopeful signs in Roosevelt and Stalin.

Polanyi's set of fictitious commodities makes for an elegant and effective metaphorical framework, applicable to an almost infinite range of historical situations. 'Land' can be read as enclosed pastures, urban real estate, tar sands, nature in general, the Anthropocene. 'Money' can refer to the gold standard, bimetallism, the fiat dollar, credit default swaps, the minimum wage or student debt. 'Labour' can indicate dispossessed peasants, artistic endeavour, servitude, trade unions, labour power (as human capability) or, as in social reproduction, domestic drudgery, childbirth and shopping. More recently, 'knowledge' has been added as a fourth fictitious commodity, comprising digitalized data, personal financial records and so on. So adaptable, so capacious and multi-purpose have *The Great Transformation's* categories proved to be that neo-Polanyians could be tempted to think they've been relieved of doing any conceptual heavy lifting themselves and can simply fill in the master's boxes. That is not the case with Burawoy, of course, as we shall see.

Like many latter-day Polanyians, Burawoy discreetly abandons much of Polanyi's account. His borrowing, which sets out to 'appropriate and reconstruct' *The Great Transformation*, discards Polanyi's central argument, that marketization was driven by liberal economic policy, and more or less dispenses with his key categories of 'market' and 'society'. In Burawoy's re-writing, Polanyi's single wave of marketization is replaced by three long waves of capitalist development—roughly speaking: nineteenth-century post-bellum, belle époque and post-war—each of which engenders a crisis of overproduction. The crisis then 'calls forth' a wave of marketization as a (temporary) capitalist fix, expanding or deepening the commodification of the fictitious commodities, through new acts of dispossession. For Burawoy, each wave of marketization is focused around a particular 'fictitious commodity'; the latest iterations are financialization, climate change, labour migration and global data flows. These dispossessions in turn 'call forth' new counter-movements—local, national or global—whose agents include classes (peasants, wage labourers), but also cross-class coalitions and groups defined by their position in racial or gender relations. Whether or not these counter-movements prove to be anticapitalist is another matter, as he notes.

Burawoy's re-workings do much to enrich *The Great Transformation* as an account of capitalist development, linking—potentially—to a socialist

project; but they cannot entirely compensate for the conceptual holes in Polanyi's story. The first of these is the neglect of production. The specifically capitalist phenomenon of competitive investment in labour-saving technology to increase output per unit of labour time, spurred by the need to cut costs in order to expand market share, plays no role in Polanyi's account of the crisis. Yet the problem of overproduction on a world scale—particularly acute from the twenties on, as the capitalist powers recovered from the Great War, and only exacerbated by their 'golden fetters'—was a central factor in the Crash and Great Depression. Polanyi never fully grasped that it is the hyper-productivity of capitalism, not its mode of economic integration that underlies its crisis tendency. Burawoy does see this; in his account, overproduction is at the root of capitalism's profitability crises, to which marketization is the response. Yet strikingly, Burawoy never proposes any political strategy focused on production—replacing the anarchy of competitive private capitals with investment determined by social need, for example. Instead of the socialization of production, he calls for de-commodification. But this addresses a symptom of capitalist crises, not their cause.

A second problem is Polanyi's relative neglect of class and ideology. In *The Great Transformation*, classes figure as mere expressions of common economic interest; cultural life-worlds appear only at the level of society as a whole. The central conflict did not take place between capital and labour but between 'society', conceived as an organic unity, and the 'market'. This helps to explain why Polanyi was unable to account for why the counter-movements he described took such radically different political forms. Roosevelt's New Deal was essentially a project of capitalist recovery; Soviet Russia, a collectivist industrialization programme, advanced at breakneck speed by coercive expropriation; the Nazi project, a reactionary attempt to break the geo-political bonds of the English-dominated world order. Polanyi indeed specifically rejected the attempt to ascribe 'any preference for socialism or nationalism' to 'concerted'—i.e., class—'interests'. Fascism, the product of highly specific class and international struggles, appeared to him as 'an almost instantaneous emotional reaction in every industrial community'.¹¹ Burawoy, of course, doesn't identify with any of this. But nor does he advance any independent explanation for the different political colouration of left and right counter-movements. Instead, Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony is brought in as a *deus ex machina* to convert decommodification into

¹¹ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, pp. 141–2, 145, 238–9.

a socialist movement.¹² But how well can this idea—founded on a historical understanding of class experience and ideology—be applied to a world whose sole division is between ‘society’ and ‘market’?

A third absence in *The Great Transformation* is the international state-system. Despite his strikingly cosmopolitan biography (Budapest, Vienna, London, Vermont, Ontario), the world of geopolitics—and particularly of competing imperialisms—remained beyond Polanyi’s intellectual grasp.¹³ Apart from a few observations on the politics of the gold standard, his magnum opus has nothing to say on the matter. The Great War struck him, as his debates with Lukács reveal, as a ‘bolt from the blue’.¹⁴ Hostile to the Bolsheviks, he lauded the USSR’s turn toward a conservative geopolitics in the 1930s, culminating in Stalin’s suppression of any revolutionary attempt in Spain.¹⁵ Polanyi’s world-political outlook was a virtually perfect inversion of the New Left. While this latter movement sought to overcome the sterility of the Cold War by recovering the revolutionary politics of the teens and twenties, Polanyi combined an uncritical adulation of both the American and Soviet behemoths with a derisively dismissive attitude toward the ‘Old Bolsheviks’.

And Marx?

In sum, although I agree with Burawoy on the need for a theory of capitalist development, I remain puzzled about why Polanyi would be the best resource for this. What of Marx? For Burawoy, classical Marxism’s ‘allergy’ to utopian thinking is taken as read, while Engels’s *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* is ‘compelling’ but ‘wrong’.¹⁶ The surprising omission here is Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which arguably surpasses Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* in its concreteness. The great advantage of Marx’s approach here was that it defined socialism as

¹² Burawoy, ‘A Tale of Two Marxisms’, pp. 93–4.

¹³ Here I disagree with Burawoy’s claim in ‘For a Sociological Marxism’, p. 239, that ‘Polanyi has more to offer us here than Gramsci who remains steadfastly rooted in the nation state’. On the contrary, Gramsci interpreted the interwar period by analogy to that of the Napoleonic era, in which the politics of each national state must be understood not only in terms of its own class struggle, but also in terms of its position vis-à-vis the revolutionary power—France in the 19th century; implicitly, Russia in the 20th. See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 119–20.

¹⁴ Dale, *Karl Polanyi*, p. 65.

¹⁵ Dale, *Karl Polanyi*, p. 181.

¹⁶ Burawoy, ‘A Tale of Two Marxisms’, pp. 83–4.

a type of society: one in which democratic decisions, rather than those of private individuals aiming to increase their rates of return, determined the pattern of investment of society's surplus. Certainly, Marx's sketch raises as many questions as it answers. What sorts of systemic conflicts would arise here? Would there be any impetus towards upgrading the forces of production? Would it matter if there were not? But these questions involve concrete relations and choices, rather than abstractions such as 'anticapitalist institution' or 'counter-movement'.

This brings us to a simple question. What is the purpose of re-describing the socialist project in terms that confusingly equate it with a variety of patently non-socialist institutions and outcomes, just because these seem to be in some way tangible? The problem of socialism doesn't strike me as a lack of vision; the goal is human emancipation in every dimension, as it has been from the start. The problem is political: the need for a collective will. Re-describing present-day institutions as if they were 'partly socialist' has only a soporific function. Socialists would be better served, in my view, by a comprehensive investigation of their opponents' resources and an unremitting analysis of the system's weak links. This, it seems to me, is the most useful way of honouring the memory of Erik Olin Wright.

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