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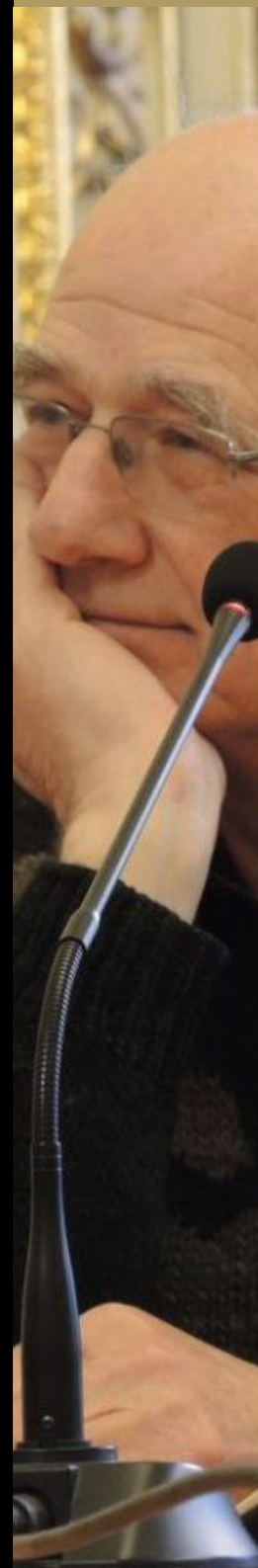
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> Michael Burawoy, a Compass for Sociology in our Times

by **Geoffrey Pleyers**, FNRS and Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, and ISA President (2023-27)



Michael Burawoy on August 28, 2024 in Porto, Portugal. Photo by Geoffrey Pleyers.

Michael Burawoy passed away abruptly on February 3, 2025.

The International Sociological Association (ISA) mourns one of its most influential and inspiring presidents, a remarkable and creative global sociologist, an advocate for a public sociology relevant to the people and civil society, an inspiring teacher who trained generations of sociologists, and an extraordinary human being.

Born in 1947, Michael Burawoy was first trained as a mathematician, until he casually read a book in sociology at Christ's College library in Cambridge. He completed a Master's degree in Sociology at the University of Zambia in 1972, along with his work in a copper mine. He then moved to the University of Chicago, where he obtained his

PhD with a dissertation on Chicago's industrial workers, which would be published as his most substantial contribution *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago University Press, 1979). He would conduct similar extended fieldwork in factories in Hungary and in post-Soviet Russia.

As capitalism and exploitation increasingly relied on the commodification of knowledge, he analysed the impact of neoliberal policies in higher education and how knowledge production was cornered to extend the power of the market and the state. He defended a public sociology that aimed at producing knowledge relevant to citizens, social movements and civil society.

A Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley for 47 years, he left an indelible mark on generations of students. A worldwide traveller, he built a global community of sociologists committed to research and analyses that aim at understanding the world and providing tools to change it. In 2022, he was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Johannesburg and, in 2024, the W.E.B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award by the American Sociological Association.

He will have a long-lasting impact on the way we conceive sociology and its role in society. His work exemplifies how rigorous empirical research can inform and enrich theoretical debates, and vice versa. By integrating local, national, and global perspectives, he has offered comprehensive analyses that resonate across disciplines and inform public and policy discussions. He pleaded "to articulate empirical research with theoretical lenses". He was as passionate about ethnography as he was about theory. He was interested in analysing the actors as much as the structures of society, which he did with a Marxist lens that he contributed to revisiting and diffusing. Throughout his career, from the copper mines of Zambia to his instrumental role in reestablishing W.E.B. Du Bois as a major founder of American and Global Sociology, through to his struggle to defend public education open to students from different social backgrounds, he stood against and analysed injustice connected to race. He was as passionate about books as he was about people, the people he met in fieldwork, in

his class, in academia and in life—four spheres that were never split in Michael's life and work. He was generous as a man, as a teacher, and as a scholar.

Michael was our compass when it came to reminding us why sociology matters in our times and why it is worth devoting so much time and energy to doing and teaching sociology: "Sociology helps students understand how society is collective, the role of race, of class, of gender. Sociology is the scientific study of inequality and the oppression this entails. Sociology studies the very exclusions promoted by the conservative forces. But we study exclusions not to advance them but to recognize and publicize them, and to better understand how they can be contested and reversed." (in Miami, March 10, 2024).

Michael left us at a time when we most needed his leadership, his energy, his tireless work to help us understand our world, his example as an extraordinary teacher, his faith in relevant public sociology, his openness to a truly global dialogue, his in-depth and rigorous sociological analyses based on months of ethnographic fieldwork working in factories, his quest for social and epistemological justice, his indefatigable struggle for peace and justice in Palestine and in other parts of the world, and his unique energy, commitment and enthusiasm.

Michael's leadership, commitment and passion leave a profound mark on the ISA and the global sociological community. As the founder of [Global Dialogue](#), ISA's online magazine, which celebrates its 15th anniversary this year, he sought "to foster international debate and discussion

on contemporary issues through a sociological lens". As ISA Vice-President for National Associations (2006-2010) and then ISA President (2010-2014), he travelled the world to share his enthusiasm for the relevance of critical and public sociology in our times. He inspired thousands of sociologists with his analyses and convictions and touched them with his kindness, generosity and integrity.

He leaves a global community of sociologists in a sudden mourning and facing a huge void. After a first [online tribute to celebrate his life and legacy](#) on Saturday, February 8, further tributes were organized at the ISA Executive Committee Meeting in Johannesburg in March and the ISA Forum of Sociology (July 6-11) in Rabat, Morocco, in addition to initiatives taken by ISA Research Committees, Working Groups and Thematic Groups.

Michael Burawoy's contributions will continue to shape how sociologists understand and engage with the world. We invite you to listen again to his [Presidential address at the 2014 ISA World Congress](#) in Yokohama, in which he offered his vision for sociology, global dialogue, and justice. We will open access to [the article of this address](#) and his other [contributions in Current Sociology](#).

Michael has not only left us a celebrated work. He also dedicated his energy to building spaces and tools to bring sociologists together, the ISA being one of them. Only together may we live up to maintaining and developing his legacy, animated by the firm conviction that sociology matters in these challenging times. ■

Please direct correspondence to Geoffrey Pleyers at:
<Geoffrey.Pleyers@uclouvain.be>