Working in the workers' state

JOHN FEFFER

WHEN THE BERLIN WALL collapsed, few East German workers mourned its passing. As regimes crumbled throughout Eastern Europe in 1989, the working class did virtually nothing to defend the proletarian order, preferring instead to fight against the systems supposedly constructed in its name. Why was the proletariat so eager to relinquish the historic role that communism imagined for it?

The truth is that Soviet-style communism never sat particularly well with the workers of Eastern Europe. From the uprisings in East Germany (1953) and Hungary (1956) through to the Solidarity mass movement in Poland in the 1980s, the proletariat challenged the fiats of the new ruling class only to be repressed back into the factories.

True, workers across the region made some incremental economic and political gains. But the system was by no means rigged in their favor, Marxist rhetoric notwithstanding, and this lack of connection between theory and practice did much to undermine communism's legitimacy.

Although many observers of the Soviet system recognized the irony of disgruntled workers in workers' states—and really, who but the most unreconstructed Stalinist could miss it?—few bothered to investigate the reality of the communist workplace. How raw was the workers' deal? What impact, if any, did Marxist-Leninist ideology have on the factory? Were Soviet-style enterprises as inefficient as universally imagined? Can anything constructive be learned from the experience of communism-in-practice?

In the early 1970s, Hungarian sociologist Miklos Haraszti tried to answer some of these questions with his pathbreaking study of the Red Star Tractor Factory. Haraszti's eye-opening account of his tenure on the shop floor and the rigors of the communist piece-rate system gave the lie to the old adage that "they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work." These Hungarian machinists certainly worked, harder in fact than their Western counterparts.

In other respects, however, Haraszti's analysis reinforced certain seemingly well-established facts: workers believed not a word of the state ideology and routinely skirted workplace regulations, the enterprise was run incoherently, and the economic system extracted the same old surplus value, only under a new and different name.

Now, as "real existing socialism" fades from existence, along comes another sociological study that calls into question many of Haraszti's conclusions and, in so doing, challenges our understanding of industrial organization. Moreover, *The Radiant Past* is a Marxist study. Marxist? In the past, Marxists have been more interested in comparing capitalism's dismal realities to socialism's utopian ideal, conveniently leaving to one side the substantially less-than-perfect conditions in the East.

But U.S. sociologist Michael Burawoy is by no means a hidebound Marxist. His thinking has always been flexible enough to tackle challenging questions rather than avoid them with arcane theories and citations. And like Haraszti, he has not shrunk from getting his hands dirty. For his 1979 book *Manufacturing Consent*, Burawoy spent months in a South Chicago machine shop, sweating and toiling to keep up to speed, trying to figure out why his coworkers worked so hard.

For *The Radiant Past*, Burawoy has been more ethnographically bold, travelling to the distant land of communism—and the even more mysterious territory of the communist working class—to test his workplace hypotheses. Together with Hungarian sociologist Janos Lukacs, Burawoy has synthesized his findings into a slim study whose size belies its scope.

Exploring their subject from all angles, the two authors attempt a comprehensive description of several Hungarian workplaces from the mid-1980s, with Burawoy contributing a fascinating diary of his shop-floor experiences and Lukacs offering a closely observed anatomy of middle management. Eager to situate their subject in the larger context, they then go on to compare an American firm with its Hungarian counterpart, explore the relationship between reform in Poland and in Hungary, tentatively address the reasons for communism's collapse, and describe the role of the workplace in Hungary's transition to capitalism—all in the space of 175 pages.

The Radiant Past
Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism
By MICHAEL BURAWOY and JANOS LUKACS
University of Chicago Press, 1992

Unraveled stereotypes

These varied tasks are held together by one mission: the elaboration of a counter-instance. In sociology-speak, a counter-instance is a case study that challenges a prevailing theory and serves as the basis for a new understanding.

Burawoy and Lukacs want, in other words, to use their careful observations of several U.S. and Hungarian workplaces to unravel the stereotypes prevailing on both sides of the former Cold War divide: of communist workers as lazy do-nothings or heroic exceeders of production quotas, of communist workplaces as buzzing hives or stagnant shells, of communist societies as useless anachronisms or the penultimate stage before perfection. The two authors discover, not surprisingly, that dissolving false assumptions concerning the work of communism affects our understanding of the work of capitalism as well.

For while the geopolitical iron curtain has fallen, a conceptual divide still remains between capitalism-in-practice and communism-in-practice. Western triumphalism has

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fact only sharpened that divide. The relationship between the two systems, the authors of *The Radiant Past* maintain, was never so vulgar as to be adequately expressed by the discontinuities of walls, curtains, and chasms. The Cold War's sparring partners shared certain traits, and differed from one another in unexpected ways.

The two systems, for instance, suffered from similar defects of industrialism: an exclusive emphasis on growth, an avoidance of environmental questions, an inexorable ratcheting up of productivity levels at the expense of workers. At another level, the two sides produced inverse images. Thus the ruling ideology remains hidden under capitalism, but was made explicit under communism. Western workers cooperate with management through their trade unions and obscure their own exploitation; Eastern workers were daily forced to swallow the state ideology like a particularly unpleasant horse pill, which only made them more conscious of communism's defects.

Nor were the enterprises themselves so easily pigeon-holed. State socialist firms have been accused of poor productivity, labor inefficiency, lack of technological innovation, and chronic shortages, whereas, Burawoy and Lukacs argue, these problems are equally characteristic of U.S. companies. This insight leads the authors to perhaps their most provocative conclusion. The centralized American corporation studied resembled a socialist government, while the socialist firms appeared to operate according to more classically capitalist principles.

The value of *The Radiant Past* lies in precisely this contrariness, this puncturing of tired Cold War-influenced analyses of the way work is done under different economic conditions. Such scholarship has more than mere historical value. The lessons of the communist workplace remain critically important as the former Soviet bloc struggles through a difficult transition whose endpoint is unclear and unknown. Burawoy and Lukacs correctly note that the very elements of the Hungarian transition deemed most capitalist-oriented (e.g., privatization) often contribute the most to preserving the previous order. Those institutions seemingly wedded to socialism, such as the workers' councils, promise to be more effective instruments of transition. At a time when capitalism has become the postcommunist world's new utopian project and the workers of the region have once again become the exploited majority, such analytical iconoclasm is especially welcome.

Accuracy and myths

The Radiant Past is certainly iconoclastic, but is it accurate as well? Were communist firms as efficient as their U.S. counterparts? And how generalizable are the authors' conclusions based on the limited number of enterprises studied?

In its descriptions of the two Hungarian firms, one a machine-tool shop and the other a steel works, *The Radiant Past* strives for a composite truth built from different layers of analysis. But the accuracy is highly restricted. Because of the priority given heavy industry under communism, steel and machine-tool factories will naturally be more productive and generally better run than other sectors of the economy. Since heavy industry was only part of the communist economy, any conclusions based on it will have dubious

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applicability to the agricultural, service, or extractive sectors.

Do the authors actually apply their conclusions more generally? Although consistently denying that they are generalizing to the economy as a whole or even to the great majority of enterprises within the economy, Burawoy and Lukacs nevertheless base their myth-bashing on the slender evidence of their handful of case studies (and some corroborating evidence in the footnotes). If deconstructing old myths were the only goal of *The Radiant Past*, then the location of the single counterinstance would perhaps be sufficient. But the authors also advance alternative theories, the substantiation of which requires additional (though at this point archeological) work.

In terms of structure and argument, *The Radiant Past* is mildly disorganized, in part because of the different styles of the authors, in part because the collapse of communism raised a whole new set of problems for the study. Instead of smoothing the various forms of their analysis (case study, political inquiry, polemic, diary) into one seamless narrative, Burawoy and Lukacs have opted for the cobbled-together approach. Though perhaps an honest method of following the moving target of Eastern Europe's economic transition, such an approach yields a set of interesting observations rather than a fully satisfying account.

It is no longer sufficient to point out the discrepancy between communism in theory and in practice that alienated workers from the workers' states. Studies of the work of communist nations—and the role workers play in the current transitions—must cut much deeper. Because it attempts just such an analysis, the work of Burawoy and Lukacs deserves a careful reading, despite stylistic and methodological drawbacks. An engaged and generally engaging piece of sociology, *The Radiant Past* is one of the rare books about communism whose relevance is heightened rather than diminished by the end of the Cold War. □

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