

The University in Crisis: Michael Burawoy and the Global Remaking of Higher Education

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This article analyzes Michael Burawoy's account of the university under neoliberalism. It explains his contrast between the market university, the bureaucratic university, and the public university, and shows how higher education has been drawn into market logics, competitive funding, and performance metrics. The discussion places Burawoy's critique within wider debates on academic labor, public engagement, and the autonomy of the institution. The article refers to selected comparative examples that indicate how market and managerial pressures on universities may vary across contexts. It sets out Burawoy's analytical framework, including public sociology as a counterforce to marketization. It also assesses the prospects of a public university in an era of rankings, managerialism, and precarious academic work. By tracing the relation between the university's public mission and market driven reforms, the article contributes to theoretical debates and to an analytical understanding of how universities relate to state and market.

Introduction

Michael Burawoy passed away in 2025 and left an intellectual legacy that continues to shape how we understand labor, the state and civil society. In the final phase of his career, he turned his attention to the university. This shift was not a departure from his earlier concerns. He regarded the university as a strategic site where wider struggles over work, democracy, and the public good become visible. Transformations within higher education therefore offered him a way to trace broader changes in market society and to examine how public institutions lose their social purpose under neoliberal conditions.

For Burawoy, the university cannot withdraw into isolation. It is embedded in society and its relationship with the public has become a decisive question. He argued that universities now face intensifying external pressures and must justify their mission and value in more explicit terms. In this setting the questions of who knowledge is for and what purposes it serves have moved to the center of debates on higher education. These questions informed the conceptual tools he developed for examining the university and for understanding its changing position within civil society (Burawoy 2007).

This article revisits Burawoy's analysis of the university. It reconstructs his typology and crisis framework and examines how market and bureaucratic models have reshaped higher education. It also considers selected examples that show how these pressures interact with different national contexts. The concluding section evaluates the contemporary relevance of Burawoy's idea of the public university and reflects on the conditions under which it might still offer a meaningful orientation. The article argues that market and bureaucratic logics do not operate as separate forces. They often work through a mutually reinforcing relation that produces a fourfold crisis affecting finance, governance, identity and legitimacy. This dynamic erodes the public mission of the university and raises the question of whether a public alternative can still be

sustained.

1. *The University in Crisis: Knowledge for whom and for what?*

The contemporary university, in the analysis of Michael Burawoy, is an institution in profound crisis, a condition he identifies as nearly universal. This crisis is defined by the erosion of the university's historically precarious position as an entity both inside and outside society, at once a participant in its workings and a detached observer of its dynamics. The romanticized notion of the "ivory tower," a space of splendid isolation from worldly pressures, has all but vanished. Burawoy dismisses the idea of a bygone "Golden Age of the University" as a "fool's paradise that simply could not last". The central reality of the 21st-century academy is that it has no option but to engage with the wider society. The dispositive question, which animates Burawoy's entire sociology of the university, is therefore not whether to engage, but "how, and on whose terms?" (Burawoy 2011).

This analytical point of departure is organized around two orienting questions that Burawoy first formulated for examining the division of labor within sociology and later extended to the university at large. These are the questions of "knowledge for whom?" and "knowledge for what?" The first directs attention to the audience of knowledge production and to the tension between work oriented toward disciplinary peers and work addressed to wider publics. The second turns to the aims of knowledge and differentiates between knowledge fashioned for instrumental use as an efficient means to a given end and knowledge shaped for reflexive purposes that open inquiry into the values and goals guiding society and its institutions. Together, these questions sketch a terrain on which the university is pulled in divergent directions. They expose the pressure on the institution to articulate the grounds of its existence and to specify its purpose in a time marked by heightened external demands and scrutiny (Burawoy 2017).

Burawoy's engagement with the university in his later work does not signal a break from his earlier intellectual trajectory. Rather, it follows directly from the questions and commitments that shaped his scholarship from the outset. His early research, most notably in *Manufacturing Consent*, took him into factories in varied political and economic settings including Zambia, Chicago, Hungary and post-Soviet Russia, where he examined how labor was lived under capitalism and state socialism (Byles 2003). From these grounded encounters he elaborated the *Extended Case Method*, an approach that links everyday experience to wider historical and structural formations. This approach rests on the premise of a "reflexive science" that recognizes the researcher as "inherently part of the world we study" and that relies on dialogue with participants to revise and strengthen social theory (Burawoy 2009; 1998). This reflexive epistemology ultimately redirected his critical gaze toward his own institutional location. The university itself became an object of inquiry, to be subjected to the same labor-process analysis and structural critique he had long applied to the political economy of work.

For Burawoy, the university becomes a strategic vantage point from which to apprehend a broader societal transformation that he, drawing on Karl Polanyi, conceptualizes as the "third wave of marketization" (Burawoy 2017a; 2015a). Unlike earlier waves, this current phase is marked by the deep penetration of market

rationality into domains once safeguarded as public goods, and it unfolds not in opposition to the state but through its active orchestration (Burawoy 2005). Just as Burawoy once traced the commodification of labor on the factory floor, he now interrogates the “commodification of knowledge and the increasingly exploitative and extractive use of intellectual and manual labor” within the academy itself (Tuğal 2025). The crisis of the university, then, is not an isolated institutional dysfunction. It crystallizes a wider crisis of civil society, shaped by the tightening convergence of market imperatives and state governance over spheres of life once presumed to be autonomous or protected.

Anatomy of the Neoliberal University: Competing Real Utopias

In Burawoy’s account, the university cannot be understood as a single, unified institution that merely absorbs external pressures. It is better conceived as a site of struggle among “competing real utopias”. Drawing on Erik Olin Wright, he uses this notion to name visions of the future that are not idle fantasies but are “rooted in real tendencies” already at work within the institution. Burawoy locates two dominant and thus “hegemonic” models shaping the neoliberal refashioning of the university and sets them against two alternative visions that underpin his conception of a public university. The first hegemonic model is the *Market or Entrepreneurial University*. Grounded in neoclassical economic reasoning, this model imagines the institution as a “profit center” and a “revenue generating machine” (Burawoy 2017). Its guiding principle is commodification, turning knowledge from a shared public good into a private asset with exchange value (Rose, Dustin 2009). The effects are visible in continual increases in student tuition and fees, the strategic pursuit of corporate sponsored research, the intensified patenting of intellectual property, a trend given new force in the United States by the 1980 *Bayh-Dole Act*¹, and the redirection of curricula toward vocational aims in response to student consumer demand for employable credentials. In this configuration, the university’s mission becomes narrowly instrumental and oriented to whoever is willing and able to pay (Burawoy 2011). The second hegemonic model is the *Bureaucratic or World-Class University*. It is driven by a regulatory rationality that elevates measurement, benchmarking and global rankings to the status of unquestionable authority (Burawoy 2017). This model reshapes academic life through increasingly elaborate systems of oversight and evaluation. Burawoy draws a parallel with Soviet style central management to capture the extent of this top-down governance, exemplified by the United Kingdom’s *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE) which introduced intricate procedures for auditing and scoring faculty research through quantifiable indicators meant to capture “quality” and “impact”. Promising greater efficiency, productivity and accountability, this managerial regime extends bureaucratic control deep into the everyday life of the university. The broader consequence is the homogenization of higher education across national contexts. The Bologna Process in Europe shows this dynamic by refashioning the university into a “tool rather than a motor of the knowledge economy” (Burawoy, 2011) and rewarding institutions that follow a single template of excellence, typically

¹ The *Bayh-Dole Act* (Patent and Trademark Law Amendments Act of 1980) granted universities and other research institutions the right to own and commercialize inventions derived from federally funded research, marking a major shift toward the marketization of academic knowledge (Eisenberg, Cook-Deegan 2018).

modeled on Anglo American norms, with little regard for local histories, missions or intellectual cultures (Burawoy 2017).

Against these dominant visions, Burawoy advances two alternative “real utopias” that together form his ideal of the public university. The first is a *Community of Critical Discourse*. This is an inward facing vision that imagines the university as a lively arena of conversation across disciplinary lines. Its aim is sustained reflexive inquiry that questions the basic premises of research agendas, institutional arrangements and the wider social world in which the university participates. Burawoy treats this vision as the most effective response to the “identity crisis” that marks the neoliberal university (Burawoy 2017).

The second is a *Deliberative Democracy*. This is an outward facing vision that anchors the university within civil society. It envisages ongoing and reciprocal engagement with diverse publics over the values and trajectories guiding collective life. Such engagement is not a one-way delivery of expert knowledge but a “process of mutual education” (Arribas Lozano 2018). Burawoy presents this vision as a response to the “legitimacy crisis” and as the foundation of a renewed public mission for the university (Burawoy 2017; 2010).

These competing models are not abstract ideals removed from institutional life. They point to concrete pathways with far reaching consequences for how universities are governed, how knowledge is produced and circulated, and how the institution relates to society at large.

Table 1. *Comparison of university models in Burawoy’s framework (adapted from Burawoy 2017; 2011)*

Dimension	Market/Entrepreneurial University	Bureaucratic/World-Class University	Public University (Burawoy’s Ideal)
Primary Logic	Commodification	Regulation	Deliberation & Critique
Core Mission	Revenue Generation & Profit	Efficiency, Productivity, Ranking	Creation of Public Good, Critical Citizenship
Funding Model	Tuition, Corporate Partnerships, Patents	State Funding Tied to Performance Metrics	Public Funding as a Public Good
Governance	Corporate, Managerial, “Spiralists”	Bureaucratic, Top-Down Auditing	Collegial, Deliberative, Faculty-led
View of Knowledge	Private Good, Intellectual Property	Quantifiable Output, Metric	Public Good, Reflexive & Critical
View of Student	Customer, Consumer	Product, Data Point	Citizen, Co-producer of Knowledge
Key Threat	Servitude to the Market	Servitude to the State/Bureaucracy	Irrelevance or Populism

A central dimension of Burawoy’s analysis is the relationship between the two hegemonic models. Marketization and regulation are not opposing or mutually

exclusive forces. They often operate in a condition that Burawoy calls “antagonistic interdependence” (Burawoy 2017). They present themselves as distinct pressures yet frequently reinforce one another rather than neutralize each other.

The United Kingdom offers a clear illustration of this dynamic. The Thatcher government’s introduction of the RAE was a major act of state regulation that established an extensive system of bureaucratic auditing across universities. This regulatory regime did not protect higher education from the market. Burawoy (2011) argues that this top-down rationalization became a “vehicle for effective commodification”. By creating a standardized and quantifiable system for assessing the “performance” and, implicitly, the “profitability” of academic departments, the state supplied the tools and arguments that later advanced market-based reforms. Audit culture, through the ranking of disciplines, made it politically easier to justify cuts to fields deemed less profitable, such as the humanities and social sciences, and to replace direct public funding with systems of student fees and loans. In this way the *bureaucratic model* prepared the ground for the *market model* and showed that state regulation can open the door to deeper market encroachment rather than act as a barrier to it.

The Fourfold Crisis Cascade

The combined force of marketization and regulation does not strike the university in isolated fragments. It sets off a systemic and cascading series of crises in which each stage prepares the ground for the next. Burawoy shows across his work that what begins as a financial difficulty expands into a deep institutional and existential deterioration (Burawoy 2017).

The first stage is the *Fiscal Crisis*. It begins with the steady and often sharp withdrawal of public funding by the state (Burawoy 2011). As government support declines, universities face chronic budget shortfalls that push them to seek new sources of income and to reorder their financial priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this situation and revealed how decades of privatization had already weakened the economic foundations of higher education (Burawoy 2021).

The Fiscal Crisis is followed by a *Governance Crisis*. As the university shifts its focus from its educational mission to financial survival, authority is steadily “expropriated from faculty” and concentrated in an expanding administrative layer (Burawoy 2021). This managerial group is often recruited from the corporate sector and brings a corporate mindset that places revenue generation, brand management and cost cutting at the center of institutional priorities (Burawoy 2021a). Burawoy describes many of these leaders as “spiralists”, individuals who arrive with little understanding of academic culture, introduce high profile initiatives to advance their own careers and then spiral upward and onward, leaving the consequences of their decisions to others (Burawoy 2016). The movement from shared academic governance to hierarchical corporate management signals a deep crisis over who directs the university and toward what ends.

This development then produces an *Identity Crisis*. Once financial calculation becomes the primary “arbiter of disciplinary survival,” the university’s sense of purpose begins to dissolve (Burawoy 2021). Distinctions grounded in scholarly contribution give way to competition among departments for student enrollment and

external funding. A slow vocational drift replaces the ideal of a broad liberal education as students facing high tuition increasingly choose programs with direct employment pathways (Burawoy 2021a). The “previously taken for granted assumptions” about the meaning and worth of higher learning lose their hold, leaving faculty, students and staff uncertain about the institution they inhabit. The university’s identity becomes fractured and instrumental, with little shared understanding of its aims beyond market value (Burawoy 2017).

Finally, the internal erosion produces a *Legitimacy Crisis*. As the university comes to resemble a private corporation that charges high fees for what is framed as a private benefit, the wider public grows doubtful of its social worth and its claim to collective support. The notion of the university as a public good that merits taxpayer funding begins to lose traction. With declining legitimacy, political actors find it easier to rationalize further cuts to public funding. This completes a vicious cycle that returns the institution to the very conditions that sparked the Fiscal Crisis and drives it further along the road of privatization (Burawoy 2021; 2017).

2. *The Global Laboratory: Case Studies in University Transformation*

Michael Burawoy’s framework is not offered as a detached theoretical scheme. It is conceived as an analytic instrument for understanding the concrete and differentiated ways neoliberal reforms are reworking higher education across the world. Burawoy stresses that the expansion of market logic unfolds through “combined and uneven” development, interacting with existing national arrangements and producing distinct local crises rather than a single global script (Burawoy 2015). The case studies that follow draw closely on Burawoy’s analyses and related scholarship to highlight the varied expressions of this global transformation.

The American Epicenter: Privatization and Managerialism at the University of California

The University of California system is Burawoy’s most detailed and personally situated case, and it marks an early stage in the unraveling of public higher education in the United States (Burawoy 2011). For many years, the UC system was held up as an international example of broad and affordable access to high-quality public education. Over the past three decades, it has undergone a “secular decline in funding” (Burawoy 2021a). He documents how the state of California’s contribution to UC Berkeley’s budget dropped from about half to only 13 percent during this period, a retreat from public responsibility that had predictable and far-reaching consequences (Burawoy 2011).

The immediate effects of this withdrawal of public funding follow closely the pattern Burawoy describes. The university has been compelled to fill the gap through sharp increases in student fees and Burawoy notes a 30 percent rise within a single year, the reduction of service staff through layoffs and a stronger focus on attracting out of state and international students who pay considerably higher tuition (Burawoy 2011). These measures reshape the composition of the student body and weaken the university’s foundational commitment to educate the residents of its own state.

It is in this setting of fiscal strain that Burawoy introduces the figure of the “spiralists”, a new executive class that exemplifies the governance crisis. These managers often

spiral in from sectors such as finance or government and have limited familiarity with academic life or its norms. Their orientation is directed less toward institutional stewardship and more toward personal career advancement. They design signature projects intended to raise their professional profile, often financed through borrowing, and then aim to spiral upward and onward to more prestigious positions. The institution is left to spiral down as it absorbs the consequences of initiatives created for short term visibility rather than long term academic purpose (Burawoy 2016).

Burawoy's analysis of former UC Berkeley Chancellor Nicholas Dirks provides a concrete illustration of this dynamic. He notes the reported misuse of public resources to support an unusually privileged personal lifestyle, including a security fence costing 700,000 dollars around the chancellor's residence, which came to symbolize a deep estrangement from the campus community. He also highlights the administration's tendency to conceal scandals, including cases of sexual harassment, in order to "protect the Berkeley brand" and safeguard the careers of senior managers. This managerial orientation encourages what Burawoy calls "corporatist emulation", in which costly business consultants are hired to introduce "efficiency" schemes that often produce rising expenses and administrative disorder. The failed "Campus Shared Services" initiative is a case in point. One of the most visible outcomes is what he identifies as "administrative bloat". At Berkeley the number of senior managers expanded fivefold over twenty years and grew to nearly match the number of tenure track faculty whose numbers did not increase during the same period (Burawoy 2016).

The Berkeley case also reveals possibilities for resistance, a vital dimension of Burawoy's public sociology. His sustained organizing with the Berkeley Faculty Association (BFA) shows how faculty can confront these transformations. Through nearly two hundred newsletters, public interventions and rallies he "fearlessly spoke truth to power", making visible the harms produced by defunding and managerial rule. His effort to democratize the process of selecting a new chancellor, including the public endorsement of Robert Reich as an alternative, was a concrete attempt to activate the "deliberative democracy" he advocates. It represented a struggle to reclaim forms of collective self-governance within the university and to reassert a public mission against the encroachment of privatizing logics (BFA 2025).

The British Experiment: Audit Culture as a Precursor to the Market

The United Kingdom stands as Burawoy's central example of the "regulation" or "bureaucratic" pathway of university transformation, which he pointedly names the "Soviet model". The decisive shift came with the introduction of the RAE under the Thatcher government. The RAE generated an "elaborate auditing culture" intended to render the university more accountable and more productive by measuring and ranking the research output of every department in the country. This system of top-down oversight produced a series of perverse incentives and "absurd distortions" that echoed the target driven logic of Soviet planning. Academics and administrators quickly adapted to "game the system." The emphasis on countable outputs, particularly articles in high impact journals, diminished the standing of other scholarly forms, especially books. It also encouraged practices such as publishing slightly revised versions of the same research across multiple venues to inflate publication counts. In addition, the RAE fostered a competitive scramble for "academic celebrities", who were recruited

at high cost in order to raise departmental scores, with damaging repercussions for collegial culture and pay structures (Burawoy 2011).

As discussed earlier, Burawoy's central insight is that this regulatory model was never intended as a final destination and did not offer a real counterweight to marketization. It operated as a kind of Trojan horse. Audit culture produced the very measures of "performance" and "profitability" that the state would later mobilize to rationalize the introduction of market forces. Once disciplines were ranked through quantitative indicators, it became politically plausible to claim that "less profitable" fields, including philosophy and sociology, merited reduced public support (ibidem). This cleared the ground for the *Browne Report of 2010* and the policies that followed, which sharply cut direct "block grant" funding for teaching and replaced it with a regime of high tuition fees underwritten by government backed loans (Holmwood 2011). The cost of undergraduate study was effectively privatized, transferring the financial load from the state to individual students. The British case thus shows how state driven regulation and managerial oversight can prepare the terrain for a fully marketized system of higher education rather than act as a barrier to it.

The Chilean Paradigm: Neoliberalism by Design and Its Discontents

Chile offers a more radical and ideologically distilled version of the market university, functioning as a laboratory for neoliberal restructuring. In contrast to the gradual erosion of public support in the United States or the regulation-first trajectory of the United Kingdom, Chile's market system was introduced rapidly and comprehensively under the Pinochet regime in the 1980s. The reforms were far-reaching and included decentralizing the system, introducing a school voucher scheme, and aggressively expanding the private sector. As a result, private institutions now educate the large majority of students, with more than 80 percent of bachelor's degree graduates enrolled outside the public sector. The state adopted a deliberately subsidiary role and reconceived education as a consumer good to be acquired in a competitive marketplace rather than a public right or collective good (Sharma 2025; Cabalin 2012).

The consequences of this far-reaching experiment have been significant and align closely with the pathologies Burawoy associates with the market university. The system displays marked stratification and deep socioeconomic segregation, producing wide disparities in both access and quality. Chilean higher education is among the most costly in the world, placing heavy debt burdens on students and their families. The absence of effective public oversight in the early decades also allowed serious weaknesses in quality assurance and created room for corruption within for-profit institutions (González *et al.* 2023; Delisle, Bernasconi 2018; Marginson 2014).

Yet the Chilean case is just so important for illustrating the power of those social countermovements which can be generated by marketization, a pattern central to Polanyi's "double movement." The large student mobilizations in 2006 and, with greater force, in 2011 constituted a clear revolt against the commodification of education (Bellei, Villalobos 2024). Protesters directly rejected "free market fundamentalism" and insisted that education be recognized as a social right rather than a consumer good (Cabalin 2012). This surge of civic activism placed the issue at the center of national politics and pressured governments to curtail the most extreme

features of the market model. The introduction of the *gratuidad* policy in 2016, which granted free tuition, was limited in reach and faced implementation challenges. Even so, it marked a notable partial reversal of the neoliberal trajectory and demonstrated the capacity of public contestation to reshape policy (Delisle, Bernasconi 2018). Recent analysis of Chilean higher education reform debates shows that despite cycles of intense contestation, policy change has largely operated through incremental adjustments that preserved core neoliberal principles (Zamorano Figueroa 2021). This reform, however, remained limited in scope and did not fundamentally transform the overall market logic governing the system. The Chilean case therefore exemplifies how countermovements may succeed in altering policy instruments without dislodging the deeper ideological frameworks underpinning the market university.

The South African Counterpoint: A Legacy of Public Engagement

South Africa holds a pivotal place in Burawoy's global analysis. His time there, both before and after the end of apartheid, played a formative role in shaping his conception of public sociology (Webster *et al.* 2024). He presents the South African experience, especially during the anti-apartheid struggle, as a near ideal example of an engaged sociology in sharp contrast to the insular and "hyper professionalized American sociology." In South Africa, sociology did not remain enclosed within the academy. It was entangled with the political and social conflicts of the period. Many sociologists, working within a Marxist tradition, acted as "organic intellectuals" for the liberation movement and sustained active dialogue with labor unions, community groups and human rights organizations (Burawoy 2004). Witnessing "sociologists making social movements" was decisive for Burawoy as it revealed a form of sociology that was publicly significant and politically effective (Cock 2009; Burawoy 2010).

In the post-apartheid period, South Africa's higher education landscape is marked by tensions that reflect the "battleground of real utopias" that Burawoy (2010) identifies. Universities are pulled in opposing directions. One pull demands that they operate as market driven "corporate enterprises" able to compete in a global economy and supply skilled graduates for the knowledge society. This pressure directs institutions toward a neoliberal path. The other pull is grounded in a moral and political claim that universities must advance the public good, address the enduring legacies of apartheid and foster critical democratic citizenship (Reddy 2006). The friction between market driven imperatives and commitments to social justice shapes the contemporary contest over the purpose and identity of the South African university.

This comparative view of the United States, the United Kingdom, Chile and South Africa brings another dimension of Burawoy's critique into focus. It challenges the geopolitical authority of Anglo-American models of the university and of sociology itself. His call for a "public sociology" responds directly to the limits of the professionalized US model, which he "provincializes" by showing that the South African tradition of engaged scholarship offers a credible alternative (Burawoy 2004). In parallel, his critique of the "world-class" university questions a global ideal modeled on the "Great American University", an ideal circulated through rankings and regulatory frameworks such as the Bologna Process, often to the detriment of local missions and institutional diversity (Burawoy 2011). Burawoy's project is therefore

not only a challenge to neoliberalism. It is also a challenge to the forms of intellectual and institutional imperialism that accompany it. He calls for a “global sociology” that does not radiate from a single center but grows from the ground through dialogue between sociologists and their publics in varied local settings across the world (Burawoy 2015a; Burawoy 2010).

3. The Lived Consequences: Precarity, Exploitation and Academic Life in the Neoliberal Academy

The remaking of the university through marketization and regulation is not a distant structural shift. It produces immediate and tangible effects on the daily lives and labor of those within the academy. Burawoy’s analysis, grounded in a Marxist understanding of the labor process, moves from the institutional scale to the lived conditions of work experienced by faculty, staff and students.

Drawing on the same ethnographic attention he once directed to the factory floor, Burawoy examines the university as a site of labor and analyzes the “increasingly exploitative and extractive use of intellectual and manual labor” that characterizes academic work today (Tuğal 2025). He argues that the neoliberal university now resembles the capitalist corporation not only in its systems of governance but also in its treatment of labor (Burawoy 2021a). The continuous pursuit of financial efficiency and cost cutting has driven a far-reaching reorganization of the academic workforce, reflecting the broader neoliberal restructuring of the university (Raimondi 2012; Rose, Dustin 2009).

A central effect of this reorganization is the widespread precarization of academic labor and the emergence of a sharply stratified two tier order. Burawoy (2021a) describes an entrenched split between a protected “upper caste” of tenured research-oriented faculty and a growing “lower caste of dedicated teachers” employed on contingent and insecure contracts. A substantial body of scholarship on the “academic precariat” affirms this pattern and documents a global shift toward short term employment, the growth of zero-hour contracts and the normalization of prolonged insecurity for most academic workers. Precarization is not merely a material process. It also produces significant psychological strain that erodes creative and intellectual work and fosters heightened competition and individualization within academic culture (Hernandez, da Silva Canavarro 2023; Burton, Bowman 2022).

This new labor regime is maintained through practices of outsourcing and deskilling that closely resemble those of the private sector. Universities increasingly contract out service work, including janitorial, clerical and food services, to external firms that typically offer lower pay and fewer benefits. At the same time, they engage in a kind of “insourcing” by replacing higher cost tenure track positions with low paid graduate student instructors and contingent lecturers who carry much of the undergraduate teaching load (Burawoy 2021). This produces a hyper exploited workforce and contributes to the deskilling of teaching, separating it from research and diminishing its status as a professional activity (Burawoy 2015). Burawoy, both as a faculty activist and a union member, consistently defended the rights of these marginalized academic workers and treated their struggle as integral to the broader effort to reclaim the public university.

The Transformation of Teaching, Research and the “Third Mission”

The logic of neoliberalism now reaches into the core activities of the university and reshapes the meaning of teaching, research and public service. Teaching, once understood as the heart of a liberal education, has become increasingly governed by market expectations. As tuition rises, students and their families seek a clear return on what is framed as an investment, which generates what Burawoy (2021a) describes as a “surreptitious” yet forceful movement toward vocationalism. Disciplines are judged by their supposed capacity to secure high-income employment, while the humanities and non-instrumental social sciences lose standing. Within the university’s own prestige economy, teaching is routinely diminished when set against grant supported research, a hierarchy that academics internalize early in their training. Burawoy (2021) highlights the striking irony that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed teaching as the “material basis of the university’s existence.” Without teaching, the institution could not function, a recognition that creates an opening to “recalibrate the unequal relation between teaching and research”.

Research is undergoing a comparable shift, moving from a public good toward a form of private property. This transformation accelerated in the United States after policy changes that encouraged universities to patent and commercialize publicly funded research (Burawoy 2011). These reforms overturned the long-standing assumption that knowledge produced with public funding should remain publicly accessible, creating conditions in which research becomes increasingly instrumental and oriented toward the priorities of corporate sponsors and “policy clients” who finance it rather than toward scholarly curiosity or public need. In this setting, the pursuit of knowledge is subordinated to the pursuit of income, with significant consequences for the university’s capacity to sustain independent and critical inquiry.

The university’s “Third Mission”, its responsibility to serve society, is also being recast under neoliberal conditions (Zomer, Benneworth 2011). Traditionally linked to civic engagement, public outreach, and the cultivation of democratic citizenship, this mission is increasingly absorbed into an “entrepreneurial turn”. In this reconfigured setting, “service to society” is reinterpreted as service to the economy. The third mission becomes aligned with technology transfer, patent licensing, the creation of spin-off firms, and the building of regional “technopoles” (Salomaa 2019). Although some scholars and institutions seek to recover a more genuinely public orientation by advancing ideas such as the “civic university” or even a “fourth mission”, the prevailing pattern is one in which the language of civic engagement conceals a deeper incorporation into market rationality (Petrušenko *et al.*, 2023; Riviezzo *et al.*, 2019). Perhaps the most insidious dimension of this transformation is not the external enforcement of metrics and rules. It lies in the internalization of these logics by academics themselves. As precarious employment and intensifying competition are increasingly normalized, scholars describe a form of neoliberal governmentality in which individuals are conditioned to govern themselves according to market rationality. They learn to «individualize our academic careers and place productivity, accumulation and competition at the heart of our subjectivity» (Perez, Montoya 2018, 4). This produces a striking paradox noted in studies of the academic precariat. Academics feel compelled by a «desire to be part of a university that steadily churns out a precarity that permeates our bodies and our behavior» (*ibidem*). Increasingly,

they adopt and reproduce the “rules of the game”, directing their energies toward personal advancement, optimizing metrics and cultivating individual brands. In the process, they become, often unwillingly, participants in sustaining the very system that exploits them (Burton, Bowman 2022). Such internalization of neoliberal norms renders resistance far more difficult. The struggle is not only against an external managerial class of “spiralists” but also against a competitive ethos that has taken hold within academic life itself.

Conclusion: The Viability of the Public University

Michael Burawoy’s body of work on the university offers a clear and persuasive analysis of an institution at a critical crossroads (Damodaran 2025). His analysis demonstrates how the withdrawal of public funding has enabled the rise of managerial governance, the commodification of knowledge, and the expansion of precarious academic labor, which together form a coherent framework for understanding the global crisis of higher education. By tracing his intellectual trajectory from the shop floors of Chicago and the mines of Zambia to the administrative corridors of the University of California, this article has shown that his critique of the neoliberal university is the culmination of a long-standing effort to grasp the lived experience of labor and the widening reach of market society into previously protected social spheres. The question that remains is one of possibility: faced with the forces he identifies, can the ideal of a public university be sustained, and might public sociology still provide a viable framework for defending and renewing it?

Burawoy’s image of the public university as a real utopia, a site of *critical discourse* and *deliberative democracy*, remains compelling, yet its prospects in the twenty first century appear increasingly precarious. The forces traced throughout this article weigh heavily against it. The structural power of global capital seeking new arenas for accumulation, the homogenizing pull of international rankings, the consolidation of a corporate managerial stratum and the deep internalization of competitive norms among academics together form a significant obstacle to the realization of this ideal (Eggel et al. 2023). The cases of the United States, the United Kingdom, Chile and South Africa show how difficult it is to resist and even more difficult to reverse the advance of marketization. The public university, as Burawoy envisions it, rests on a commitment to knowledge as a public good, a commitment that runs against prevailing economic and political winds. Its future appears to hinge not only on institutional resolve but also on the emergence of a wider social and political counter movement capable of challenging neoliberal hegemony.

In this setting public sociology stands as Burawoy’s principal strategy of resistance. He urges sociologists to move from interpretation to engagement, calling for the defense of civil society and the recovery of the university’s public purpose. Yet the strategy carries its own difficulties². The reach of market rationality has been so extensive that many within academia now participate in the erosion of the very public mission they seek to protect. The aspiration to cultivate dialogue between the university and its publics remains powerful. Still, it is uncertain whether such

² For critical discussions of Burawoy’s approach, see de Lagasnerie (2011), Holmwood (2007), and Inglis (2005).

exchanges can generate the political force required to confront the structural alliance between state and market that is actively dismantling public universities.

The call for a public university and the idea that the university might serve as a safeguard for society appear unlikely to be realized without organized collective action within academic life. The conditions that shape contemporary academia mean that such organizing requires more than awareness or intent. It demands a willingness to face institutional risk and to act with courage.

Recent developments in the United States and Turkey show that the coercive pressures and structural constraints limiting the university's public mission are widening and becoming more explicit. In the United States, state interventions into academic life have intensified, particularly in line with political agendas aimed at reshaping higher education. One prominent focus has been "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) initiatives. During the Trump administration, federal research agencies, including the *National Science Foundation* (NSF), the *National Institutes of Health* (NIH), and the *Department of Energy* (DOE), initiated inquiries into DEI programs and restricted funding linked to them. These actions signaled a growing willingness to subordinate academic freedom to political priorities that do not originate in the market. The Department of Justice investigation into DEI initiatives at George Mason University, justified on claims of discrimination, further illustrates how state mechanisms can be used to curtail institutional autonomy and regulate academic practices under the banner of legal oversight.

This dynamic is not confined to interventions at the institutional level. It now extends to forms of pressure directed at individual academics. Reports of visa denials and cancellations affecting immigrant and politically dissenting scholars point to new transnational constraints on academic mobility and expression (AAU 2025). Concerns have also been raised about politically initiated inquiries into scholars working in fields where there is strong scientific consensus, including climate research. Recent developments at the University of California, Berkeley further illustrate this trend. Federal investigations into foreign funding and the transmission of student and faculty information to government authorities during antisemitism inquiries have heightened concerns about the erosion of academic autonomy and the indirect involvement of the state in academic life (Levin 2025). Political influence over university administrations represents another important dimension of this development. In recent years, universities such as Harvard, Columbia and the University of Virginia have faced external pressure in relation to controversies surrounding DEI policies and allegations of antisemitism. In several cases, such pressure preceded the resignation of senior leaders. The departure of University of Virginia (UVA) President James Ryan after federal-level political intervention stands as one such example (Bellows & Mangan 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest that academic freedom in the United States is becoming increasingly vulnerable under conditions of ideological polarization and indirect forms of state involvement in university affairs.

In Turkey, where universities have not enjoyed strong institutional autonomy and academic life has long unfolded under state oversight, intervention in the academy has become more systematic and deeply rooted in recent years. Large numbers of academics have faced investigations, with many suspended or removed from public service. These actions have sharply curtailed academic freedom and produced a

broader stagnation of scholarly life. The prosecution of researchers whose work addresses public health, migration, security and related sensitive areas, when it is perceived to conflict with state priorities, shows how scientific inquiry can be reframed as a basis for legal sanction. The treatment of *Academics for Peace* offers a further indication of this erosion³. After their 2016 petition opposing state violence, signatories were prosecuted, dismissed and subjected to travel bans. Their experience underscores the high personal and professional costs imposed on scholars who contest official narratives and signals the tightening constraints on critical thought within the academy.

One of the most visible examples of the erosion of university autonomy in Turkey is the case of Boğaziçi University. Rectoral appointments had traditionally followed internal elections, while the introduction of presidentially appointed rectors through executive decree has come to symbolize a broader departure from academic self-governance. The removal of academics who publicly opposed these changes, the use of unemployment and disciplinary procedures as sanctions, and the deployment of police on campus to suppress protests indicate that state intervention has extended beyond administrative authority into direct forms of coercion. During the same period, pressure on academic organizing and union activity intensified. Academic unions faced constraints, critical social scientists were singled out, and freedom of expression was significantly restricted. The Boğaziçi case illustrates how the academic sphere can be securitized and reorganized to align with the ideological priorities of political power.

Michael Burawoy was sharply attuned to these tensions. He consistently drew attention to the ways global and regional inequalities shape university regimes and academic labor, as well as the professional hierarchies and injustices that emerge from them. He also recognized the immense difficulty of building collective forms of academic resistance across borders. The enduring significance of his work may lie less in the specific remedies he proposed than in the clarity of his analytic framework (ISA 2012). In this sense, as Pleyers (2025) argues, Burawoy continues to serve as a “compass” for sociology in turbulent times, orienting scholars toward public engagement and democratic responsibility. His intellectual legacy affirms the critical, reflexive and publicly engaged role that scholarship can and must assume (Samanta 2025). Through concepts such as the market university, the bureaucratic university, the fourfold crisis cascade and the spiralist, he offered a vocabulary for understanding and contesting the transformations reshaping higher education. His scholarship and activism underscored that the university is not a protected enclave insulated from historical forces; it is a central arena in ongoing struggles over knowledge, labor and democracy.

The path toward realizing the public university as a real utopia remains steep and uncertain. Yet Burawoy’s work provides a map of this contested terrain and a compelling invitation to join the struggle. His insistence that the university must serve a public mission, accountable not to the market or the state but to a democratic civil society, stands as a necessary challenge to the quietism of our time.

³ For more information on Academics for Peace, see barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/4 (accessed 25 Oct. 2025).

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