

Fieldwork, Theory, and Reflexive Sociology: Debating Michael Burawoy and the Extended Case Method

*Université libre de Bruxelles
December 4th, 2026*

This symposium will focus on discussing the epistemological and methodological proposals put forward by sociologist Michael Burawoy as part of his project on reflexive sociology, systematized in the form of the extended case method in the wake of the Manchester School of Social Anthropology (Burawoy 2009). This perspective invites a twofold extension: not only to connect what we directly observe in the field to a broader historical, social, and political context, but also to question (or even challenge) our own theoretical frameworks in order to test them against reality and broaden their heuristic scope.

This reflexive methodological approach – although having inspired numerous researchers around the world (Braga 2018; Wood 2020; Sallaz 2019) – has remained relatively underdiscussed in the French-speaking world thus far – (Cefaï 2010; Buscatto 2012; Clair 2022a; Clair 2022b) are exceptions. This relative lack of attention raises questions in itself. French-speaking sociology has its own reflexive traditions (in the Bourdieusian tradition, or within feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge, among others) that may have rendered less visible the need for a method such as the extended case method. Its grounding in an assumed Marxism, its explicit comparative aim, and its particular relationship to theory place it at odds with certain dominant currents in contemporary French sociology. Why, then, has the extended case method not found in the French-speaking world the resonance it has generated in Anglo-Saxon, Brazilian, or South African sociology? How might the French-speaking tradition contribute to it, and what might stand in its way? This study day aims precisely to explore these questions by examining what Michael Burawoy does, and could do, for French-speaking sociology.



Teaching at the University of California: Berkeley, and part of a tradition of “living” Marxism (the qualifier is important), Michael Burawoy served as president of the American (and International) Sociological Association and has devoted himself, above all, to building a “global” and “public” sociology that is fully engaged with the wider world. In a recent essay on Palestine, Michael Burawoy aptly summarized his approach to the relationship between knowledge and engagement, emphasizing the idea that “if sociology cares about the world, then the world may care about sociology.” His sudden passing in early 2025 makes a rigorous and collective examination of his intellectual legacy all the more necessary.

It is from this perspective that we invite you to submit proposals for presentations for a one-day symposium to be held at the Université libre de Bruxelles on December 4, 2026, organized around the various themes of this methodological approach and its pedagogical implications:

Theme 1: Intervention, Positionality, and Power Relations in Research Practice

The extended case method thematizes immersion in the field by acknowledging the impossibility of researcher neutrality in research practice. Since we cannot control the biases associated with this intervention, the goal is, on the contrary, to turn them into a virtue from which we can draw, one that makes visible the implicit foundations of the social order thus “disrupted” by the researcher. Going beyond a simple clarification (prior to the research) of the researcher’s positionality, the extended case method proposes to fully integrate the principle of intervention as a genuine methodological tool, paying particular attention to the power relations that shape the field of inquiry and are embedded in the very practice of research.

This research focus will address the following questions: How can we “do science” in our sociological research despite the impossibility of adhering to the principle of neutrality? What tools can we use to propose an alternative to positivism and radical relativism within interpretive and/or postmodern approaches?

Moreover, the extended case method shares with other traditions – e.g., the reflexive sociology of Bourdieu and Wacquant (2014), the situated knowledges of Haraway (1988), feminist and decolonial epistemologies – a rejection of the researcher’s fictitious neutrality and a commitment to making one’s own position an object of analysis. Nonetheless, certain tensions deserve to be explored. While Burawoy acknowledges the effects of the researcher’s biographical trajectory on the research relationship, the feminist standpoint epistemology, for its part, invites us to question the biographical and social roots of the theoretical choices themselves (Clair, 2022a). The contributions are therefore also invited to bring these perspectives into dialogue and to explore both their points of friction and convergence.

Theme 2: Tracing social processes across space and time

The second principle structuring the extended case method focuses on the expansion of field data to social processes. Rather than a mere empirical reconstruction – in which sociology would be limited to a “compilation” of situated knowledge – the aim here is to aggregate and interpret lived experiences, which are then linked to broader social processes. To extend the analysis beyond the space-time of the field site, history and theory are particularly important tools.

In this perspective, the questions that arise here concern how a research site becomes a “case study”. How can we theoretically construct a “case of something,” and what meaning should we attach to it, once we move away from the positivist principle of representativeness or reliability?

The notion of revisit deserves special attention here, as it constitutes one of the most original contributions of Burawoy’s approach (Burawoy 2009; Burawoy 2010). This method – which he

adopted upon discovering that he was returning to Donald Roy's (2006) fieldwork site thirty years later – allows us to distinguish between what, among the observed differences, stems from social change and what stems from the researcher's position or theoretical choices. But revisiting also raises its own difficulties. Contributions may focus on concrete experiences of comparison, revisitation, or reanalysis, as well as on the epistemological problems they raise: what do we see more clearly “by returning”? What do we no longer see?

Theme 3: Extending the Case Study to Macro-Social Forces

As a methodology aimed at connecting local processes with broader social forces, the extended case method stands out for its emphasis on context – social, political, economic, historical, and so on – as an “active” dimension for making sense of the unique characteristics of the field. Far from treating this context as a mere backdrop or scenery – setting it aside for the sake of research reproducibility – the extended case method proposes instead to examine how the most everyday social reality is shaped by social forces far exceeding it, thereby defining the range of possibilities of social practices.

But how can we account for these macro-forces, invisible to the naked eye? How can we avoid reifying these forces to the point of attributing such importance to them that they end up stifling agency, leaving the researcher with nothing more than the role of unveiling them or recording the extent of the devastation? These questions lie at the heart of an apparent tension between macro- and micro-sociology, inviting contributions that seek not to ignore one dimension in favour of the other, but to imagine ways of articulating them organically.

Theme 4: Examining and Reconstructing Social Theories

The extended case method also gives considerable attention to theory, positing that we cannot make sense of the social world without the theoretical lenses that we bring with us into the field – and that we must question, refine, or even change them if necessary.

Consequently, being reflective also means acknowledging and being explicit about the chosen theoretical framework and the criteria behind that choice. What does a chosen theory reveal and what does it obscure? How, in practical terms, can we make skillful use of pre-existing theories and challenge them against the facts? How can we grapple with new or unexpected cases and thereby contribute to the expansion of a conceptual framework, following the logic of Lakatos's (1978) progressive research program? And how can we avoid the trap of normalization, which forces recalcitrant data into a pre-existing theoretical frame? These challenges invite contributions that go beyond both a certain reverence for theory and strictly inductive approaches to field research, following the principles of Mills' (1997) sociological imagination.

Theme 5: Public Sociology and Reflective Pedagogy

Finally, Michael Burawoy's methodological approach is firmly rooted in his teaching practice. The two books in which he most practically applies the principles of the extended case method are, in fact, the result of the participant observation seminar he led for over three decades at Berkeley,

and were published jointly with the young researchers who participated in it (Burawoy et al. 1991; Burawoy et al. 2000). Teaching and research are thus intimately linked, and this specific theme aims to explore this particular aspect of Michael Burawoy's legacy: the way in which public sociology engages first and foremost with our primary audience, our students. How can we help them discover a reflective way of questioning the social world, in the vein of Gramsci's political pedagogy or Freire's approach to emancipation? How can we turn a theoretical approach into something concrete and give them the courage to question it? And how does all of this vary depending on the audiences, levels, and disciplines with which we work? The contributions could here offer reflective accounts of pedagogical or research supervision practices.

This call for papers is therefore open to anyone interested in exploring the various ways of articulating fieldwork and theoretical development within the context of empirical social science research (sociology, anthropology, political science, geography, education, etc.), regardless of the disciplinary field.

Abstracts, which should be no longer than 500 words, must specify which themes they wish to address, as well as the theoretical and/or empirical approaches on which they intend to base their contributions to the discussion. They may be written in French or English and must be submitted by June 30, 2026, to the following e-mail address: ecm-seminar-2026@protonmail.com.

Schedule:

- Abstract submission (~500 words): July 7
- Committee response: mid-July
- Extended abstract (~1500 words): November 11
- Symposium: Friday, December 4, 2026, Université libre de Bruxelles – [ULB Solbosch](#)

Scientific Organizing Committee:

- Cécile Piret - PhD, Université libre de Bruxelles, Metices / Transfo
- François Rinschbergh - PhD, UCLouvain Saint-Louis - Bruxelles / CBAI
- Lorena Izaguirre Valdivieso - PhD, F.R.S. - FNRS / UCLouvain
- Sébastien Antoine - PhD, National University of Ireland: Maynooth

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