

Social transformation and the re-formation of the working class

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Abstract: There are two different academic lines on the transition to a market economy by contemporary socialist countries. One is Karl Polanyi's "Great Transformation"; the other Michael Burawoy's "Second Great Transformation". The former, more concerned with the elite, is viewed as "neoclassical sociology", while the latter which deals more with the historical destiny of the working class and the lower rungs of society during the transition period, is viewed as "sociological Marxism". In China's transition to a market economy the working class may be shaped in two different ways because of social inequalities at the start of the transition period. The two major theoretical models in sociological labour studies, the Marx model and Polanyi model provide the theoretical basis for how migrant workers and former workers in state-owned enterprises form a working class in a market economy. According to the sociologist Beverly Silver, this is a familiar staged process in Marx's theory and a pendulum swing in Polanyi's one: workers go into the production process "as free as birds". Capitalists then exert increasingly tight controls on their labour by strengthening the management of the production process, introducing technology and improving factory organisation. As a result workers become increasingly aware of their structural position in the production process and its exploitive nature. Gradually they begin to carry out organised resistance and transform themselves from a "class in itself" to "class for itself". According to Polanyi, when the "pendulum" swings from the commoditisation of labour to de-commoditisation it triggers a trend for social protection in which the labour movement is one of the most important factors. When the "pendulum" swing is under pressure it may move in the opposite direction to a point where the impact is significant enough to menace the profits of capital. In this case pressure from capital will force it to swing back to the commoditisation side with a resulting upsurge in the labour movement. The working class is shaped by these successive pendulum movements. Such theories could offer a new vantage point for studies on migrant workers and be incorporated into the theories of class formation. Finally, Burawoy's concept of factory regimes may provide a theoretical and methodological standpoint for detailed studies on the re-formation of the working class in a transition period with a particular emphasis on the production process.

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