

QUAESTIONES DISPUTATAE

MICHAEL POLANYI'S
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
AND THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM

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Liberty and Tradition: Michael Polanyi and the Idea of Progress

*Eduardo Beira*¹

Michael Polanyi is often regarded as a “philosopher of science” and an “epistemologist” but clearly he was also a twentieth century thinker who, all of his life, was deeply concerned with fundamental questions about social order. This essay comments on some important aspects of Polanyi’s thinking about social order, and his ideas about progress and the mechanisms of progress.

We will see that stable liberal social orders rely on a dynamism related to progress. Phil Rolnick discussed Polanyi’s notion of progress in terms of tightly interwoven relations among transcendence, universality, and teleology, including all the traditions of human endeavor.² Rolnick's metaphysical approach goes from Polanyi’s general philosophical ideas to a focus on progress in relation to religious traditions. Here I take a different approach. Mine is a more historical, textual, and practical approach, and a less metaphysical path. I focus on the secular foundations of Polanyi’s ideas about progress and rely on what Polanyi said explicitly about progress in his era, using both published and unpublished sources; I then look for differences between Polanyi’s early and late writings. Finally, I will examine how Polanyi's progress fits well

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A first version, covering the early Polanyi period, was presented in my introduction to “Polanyi’s Liberalism in the 40’s” zoom meetings (May 15, 22 and 29, 2021) organized by *The Polanyi Society* (more information, including recordings of the meetings, is available at <http://polanyisociety.org/2021Zoom/May2021/Polanyi-Liberalism-Proposal-5June2021.pdf>).

² Phil Rolnick, “Polanyi’s Progress: Transcendence, Universality and Teleology,” *Tradition and Discovery* 19 no. 2 (1993): 13-32.

with some current discussions about the idea of progress that emphasize local action, equality, liberation, and environmental sustainability.

To begin, I review the impact of the events before and after World War I on Polanyi's memory; I start with notions of an older progressive liberal society, as I build to Polanyi's dynamic notion of social order that is marked both by freedom and tradition.

1. The Collapse of the Dream of Progress

World War I brought the collapse of the world in which Polanyi lived his youth, and this made a deep and long-term impression on Polanyi; it was a driver of his social thought for his entire life.

In a short 1938 note about contemporary issues, Polanyi wrote about the collapse of civilization that came in the nineteenth century, and he observed that "it is impossible to hope [for] a rapid restoration of respect for truth and private morals."³

In a broadcast of 1944 about science and the decline of freedom, Polanyi recalled that:

My generation - the generation of modern intellectuals to which I belong - entered on its heritage at the opening of this century with immense hopes for the future. Science was our Pole-star. Guided by science we were determined to make a clean sweep of all ancient stupidities, of all silly obstructions to human happiness, and to rearrange life in a thoroughly rational and scientific fashion.⁴

In one of the essays included in his 1951 collection titled *The Logic of Liberty*, Polanyi wrote that his generation had entered the twentieth century ("an age of endless promises") full of hopes

³ Michael Polanyi, "Contemporary Problems" [note] (unpublished manuscript, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, Michael Polanyi Papers Collection, Box 25, Folder 16), 1938. Citations of archival Michael Polanyi Papers unpublished materials are hereafter foreshortened as follows: title, RPC (box number, folder number, digital numbers [if available]), and date.

⁴ Michael Polanyi, "Science and the Decline of Freedom," RPC (Box 29, Folder 13), June 11, 1944.

and enthusiasm:

I well remember this triumphant sentiment. We looked back on earlier times as on a period of darkness ... we rejoiced at the superior knowledge of our age and its assured liberties. The promises of peace and freedom given to the world by French Enlightenment had indeed been wonderfully fulfilled toward the end of the nineteenth century.... It is hardly surprising that the universal establishment of peace and tolerance through the victory of modern enlightenment, was confidently expected at the turn of the century by a large majority of educated people on the Continent of Europe.⁵

In 1967, at the University of Toronto, Polanyi noted that his generation had entered the twentieth century with promises of inevitable progress:

They were our ideas of inevitable progress, which we inherited from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Progress relied on two actions. Science explained the world and in it man and society setting us free from all established authority; and thus enlightened man would shatter ancient servitudes and set society on the way to liberty, equality and fraternity. [But] ... The idea of history as the inevitable progress of truth, justice and liberty was abandoned. The echoes of Condorcet, of Jefferson and of John Stuart Mill fell silent.⁶

The following year, Polanyi opened a conference, with similar words:

⁵ Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 96. Quoted also in Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 8-9.

⁶ Michael Polanyi, "60 Years in Universities" [Notes for a speech at the University of Toronto (Canada)], PRC (Box 38, Folder 10), November 26, 1967.

My remembrance of these September days sixty years ago, when I entered the University of Budapest, shows me an almost forgotten past of peace, of bold intellectual and artistic enterprise and of *continuous progress towards liberal ideals*. And then, after a mere six years of this life full of confidence in the future, I see years of destruction and fear. (my italics)⁷

It was with horror that Polanyi discovered that, after all “the idea of history as an inevitable progress of justice, peace and freedom,” had been shattered by the first world war: the massacres of this war destroyed “our belief in moral progress.”⁸ “Progress sailed into the waters of our own age, the age of our disasters,” he commented in 1956.

Polanyi recognized a disturbing and puzzling “regress” on the previously progressive path of civilization and this raised for him questions about the idea of progress. But he kept hope in the face of the “occurrence of historic disasters as the outcome of human passions inflamed by delusions,” and persisted in his personal calling: “to rely, as I tend to do myself, on the sobering effect of experience and reflection to arrest the course of such disasters.”⁹

2. Progress and Freedom in Early Polanyi

Polanyi pursued a program to re-define liberal values and the value of freedom for society, and the decade of the forties was a period of extensive and intensive writing projects for Polanyi. He participated, in 1938, in the Paris Colloquium about the “good society,” inspired by Lippmann’s book. Later, he wrote to his friend and confidante, the economist Toni Stolper, at the end of 1939: “I am attempting to reformulate the *logic of liberty*, carrying its theory behind that outlined by Lippmann, both as regards the level of approach and the extent of the inquiry.”¹⁰

⁷ Michael Polanyi, “Why Did We Destroy Europe?,” *Studium Generale* 23 (1970): 909-916.

⁸ Michael Polanyi, “60 Years in Universities” [Notes for a Speech at the University of Toronto (Canada)], RPC (Box 38, Folder 10), November 26, 1967.

⁹ Michael Polanyi, “This Age of Discovery,” *The Twentieth Century* 159 (March 1956): 227-234.

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, 24 November 1939 Letter to Toni Stolper, RPC (Box 4, Folder 5), 1939.

From December 1939 to February 1940, Polanyi drafted a book entitled *The Struggle of Man in Society*¹¹ in which he discussed the “mental functions of human association and the thoughtful nature of social relations”: “society gives reality to thought and itself is a theme of thought” (chapter 2). The “inherent necessities of growth,” whether mental or material, and “the prime moves of growth” are discussed (sections 2 and 3) as alternative mechanisms versus progress as proposed by historical materialism (section 4).

Polanyi argues that “the belief that the forces of change operating in society are fundamentally co-ordinated in promoting the higher aims of humanity” (section 5). The process of growth is progress driven by spiritual changes:

The spiritual changes of society are either due to the continuation of thought guiding society (science, technology, medicine, pedagogy, economics) or else to the growth of the systems of thought embodied in society. The latter are represented by the *progress* of law, of administration, of legislative methods. The *progress* here is to be understood in the sense of perfecting or adapting to new conditions, the process of growth being guided by the fundamental purpose of the institution, (justice, efficiency, equity, democratic participation, etc). (section 5; my italics)

In this very early text, “growth” (change, progress) and liberty are already clearly linked. About liberty, Polanyi wrote that “freedom is a system of ideas, each of which is fundamentally a precondition of the other.” He defined freedom as

the policy (or behaviour) which springs from the faith that society makes sense with the ideas to which the pursuit of sympathy, justice and truth gives rise. It is an attitude cultivating all endeavours based on these tendencies, in the belief that they will all culminate in a joint result, which is thought of as the *progress of civilisation* (notes to chapter 4; my italics).

¹¹ Michael Polanyi, “The Struggle of Man in Society,” RPC (Box 26, Folder 2), 1939. Quotations in this and the next two paragraphs are from this draft.

Subsequently, Polanyi drafted thousands of typewritten pages, most of them never published, searching for a coherent social theory that could preserve the fundamental values of a liberal society in the turbulent years around World War II.

In the drafts for chapters for another book about the “program for a liberal philosophy” (1945), Polanyi linked his search for the foundations of the “logic of freedom” with the collapse of the continental “liberal civilization”:

I was brought up in the humane and tolerant times preceding 1914 which looked forward with unbroken confidence to more freedom and goodwill in the future. I have then seen the collapse of liberal civilisation over wide ranges of the Continent. Now I am seeking to discover what has gone wrong; and naturally also trying to warn those who would continue to proceed on the lines which have led to catastrophe on the Continent and are endangering thereby the still standing parts of our civilisation.¹²

In the first months of 1945, Polanyi drafted a proposal for a new quarterly journal (*Our Times*),¹³ a liberal “manifesto” with programmatic ideas for contemporary society. This was “a proposed new quarterly journal to be published by The Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society.” The new publication was expected “to explore the path of a good society and promote *progress* towards it” and to contribute to and “to restore a free *progressive* society” (my italics).

¹² Michael Polanyi, “Program for a Liberal Philosophy,” RPC (Box 30, Folder 1), 1945.

¹³ Michael Polanyi, “Our Times” [A proposed new quarterly journal to be published by the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society], RPC (Box 4, Folder 12), 1945. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are from the same source. Polanyi sent a copy of the proposal (that he called “memorandum”) to Toni Stolper and asked for her reactions and opinion about the prospects “of getting support and circulation in the US”. He also announced that “we have some money with which to start such a venture in Britain”. See Michael Polanyi, Letter to Toni Stolper. RPC (Box 4, Folder 12), March 29, 1945. The reply of Toni Stolper was not very hopeful about the prospects of the venture in the US. See Toni Stolper, Letter to Polanyi, RPC (Box 4, Folder 12), May 18, 1945. Polanyi also sent the proposal to Karl Mannheim and asked him to help to interest Routledge in publishing the journal, but without success. See Phil Mullins and Struan Jacobs, “Michael Polanyi and Karl Mannheim,” *Tradition and Discovery* 32 no.1 (2005): 20-43.

In this text, Polanyi argues that the study of tradition is an “essential condition of a good society.” Polanyi recognized the dangers of nihilism inherent in the older Enlightenment idea of progress as “a continued liberation from the yoke of tradition” and concluded that “*our idea of Progress will have to be modified. We must consider its scope to be limited by a permanent framework of beliefs and customs. Its task is to evaluate these and to re-interpret them to meet the exigencies of ever new situations*” (my italics). Developing this framework of tradition, beliefs, and customs as bearing on the idea of progress would be a long-term project in Polanyi thought, but a project he had already begun.

About five years earlier, Polanyi gave a lecture to the Classical Society at the University of Manchester, with the title “Planning, Culture and Freedom.”¹⁴ He articulates the fundamentals of his model, specifying the relation between tradition, freedom, and progress in terms of the concept of dynamic order. In a dynamic order, people serve the public interest “not by executing orders but by acting independently, to the best of their own judgement,” with their actions determined by a “body of knowledge and of ideals which are public property.” They are guided “by a vast heritage of experience and ideals in making their contributions to social life.” This “process of growth” (that we can understand as progress) allows the social heritage to be “constantly applied and *renewed*” and eventually “progress to be achieved along a variety of parallel lines.” Polanyi emphasizes that “This scheme of co-operation, by independent participation in a joint task, is the essence of all cultural life and development.”¹⁵

But this progress, or process of growth based on the renewal of tradition, is only possible in a context of a form of social freedom. This is the “*foundation of the doctrine of liberty*, which affirms that society can function, and progress onwards through the independent actions of responsible individuals.” So “the social purpose of freedom appears to be to secure the cooperation of a large number of individuals by their independent participation in the joint tasks of cultural life” and the social purpose of liberty is “as the supreme method for coordinating cultural efforts” (my italics).¹⁶

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, “Planning, Culture and Freedom,” RPC (Box 26, Folder 4), November 19, 1940. Quotations in this and the next two paragraphs are from this lecture.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Liberty is here more than the right of an individual to advance goals in his private life. It is also a key “method of cultural cooperation” that is important from a political point of view: without freedom the self-adjusting activities of independent individuals is not possible, and so the cultural cooperation and the continuous discussion of tradition and its changes are not possible. “Free access to the social heritage of guiding principles, the existence of which gives justification and purpose to their freedom” is a key mechanism for social growth. Polanyi stresses that totalitarian dictatorships can easily concede some private freedoms, but they “dread public freedom,” because of the difficulties of controlling the free association of individuals to promote projects concerned with the development of socially and politically significant ideas.

Polanyi's objective in this lecture was not to discuss the idea of progress by itself but the impossibility of central planning for the cultural growth of the society. However, he also aimed to explain the fundamental bearing of liberty on social growth. He thus articulated a model for progress in terms of a continuous interaction between tradition and free but responsible individuals. Freedom allows people to challenge aspects of tradition in public discussion and to introduce different customs and concepts for the ongoing growth of the social heritage. For Polanyi, this never-ending process of co-construction of the wider society and tradition relies on a dual feedback between tradition and liberty that is not centrally controlled but generated by the public liberty of individuals. (This I attempt to represent graphically in the figure below.) Without liberty, tradition stagnates and there is no change and no innovation; there is no social growth and no progress. This permanent renewal of tradition by the agency of people in a free society is the process of progress.

This model makes clear that the direction of progress should move towards tolerance within each community and tolerance between different communities. Different communities should become more open, more free, and more convivial, making for a diverse and tolerant humanity united at the “noosphere” level of spiritual orders.¹⁷ This suggests Polanyi saw history as a

¹⁷ There are some similarities here with the Omega point of the final brotherhood in Teilhard de Chardin, discussed in his “*The Phenomenon of Man*.” Polanyi had reservations about de Chardin’s theories, but borrowed the conception of the noosphere. In Polanyi’s review of Teilhard’s book (Michael Polanyi, “An Epic Theory of Evolution,” *Saturday Review* XLIII (January 30, 1960): 21), he notes that he considers the book an “epic poem” but not scientifically sound. Polanyi wrote “I do not believe that the origin and destiny of man can be defined in such

continuous struggle moving toward tolerance and peace, but without any assurance of success. Technical and economic progress are not ends by themselves, but subsidiary components of higher-level moral progress.

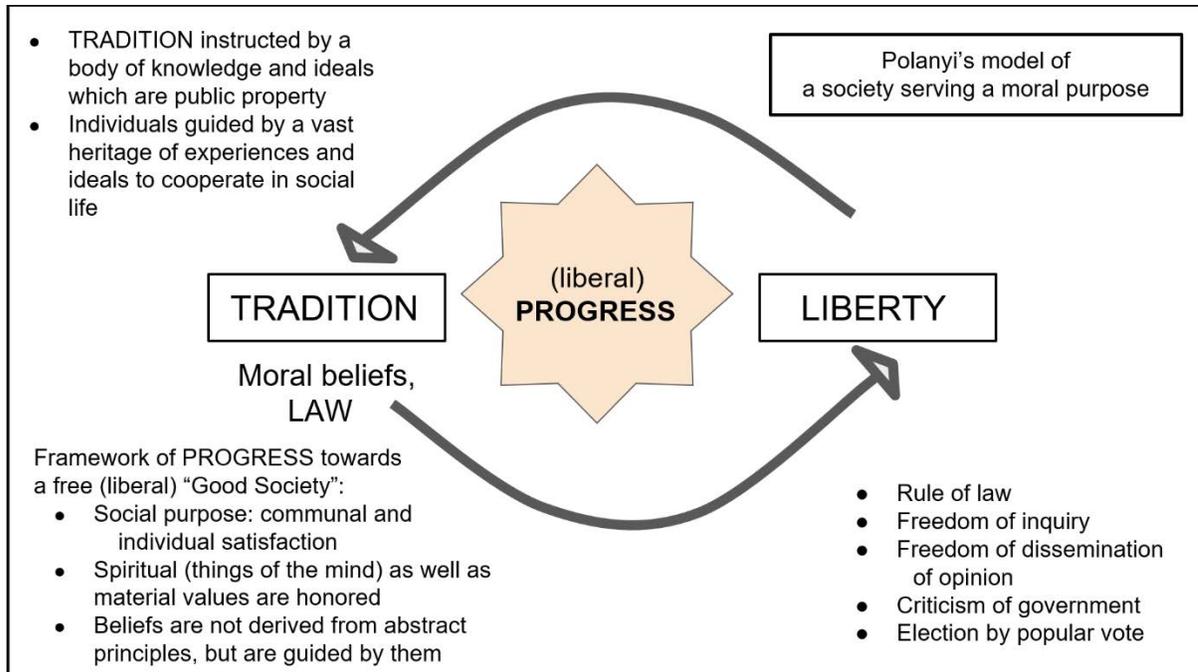
For Polanyi, the direction of history is open and reflects the success or failure of human endeavors. In a 1941 unpublished essay, Polanyi recognized that “the engines of history are driven by explosions which, unless they are properly timed and graded, may shatter the machine of progress. Our desire to build a society which is more humane, more just, and possessed of a higher culture is by itself no guide to useful action.”¹⁸

And in drafts for a never-completed 1941 book about the liberal concept of freedom, Polanyi writes that a “society cannot know precisely where the search for justice, reason and humanity will lead to either in the court of law or in public life in general; nor where the progress of science will lead to. A State in which such progress goes on can, therefore, have no responsibility for the specific results of progress, but is limited in its functions to the supervision of an exploratory enterprise, proceeding towards largely unknown ends.”¹⁹ The following diagram attempts to capture Polanyi’s notion of a liberal social progress.

vague terms as Teillard did” (Ibid.). For a discussion of Polanyi and de Chardin, see Phil Mullins, “Michael Polanyi and Teillard de Chardin,” *Appraisal* no. 4 (October 2013): 195-200.

¹⁸ Michael Polanyi, “Modern Millennialism,” RPC (Box 26, Folder 8), April 2, 1941.

¹⁹ Michael Polanyi, “The Liberal Conception of Freedom,” RPC (Box 26, Folder 8, 0398-0403), 1941.



This diagram suggests a kind of feedback loop that Escher made famous in his print "Drawing Hands" (1948): two hands rise from the sheet of paper in the paradoxical act of each drawing the other into existence, and so on. This drawing was one of the inspirations for the famous book *Gödel, Escher and Bach* by Douglas Hofstadter.²⁰ As Douglas Hofstadter explains, the drawing is a "strange loop" representative of the interaction between levels in which the top level reaches back down toward the bottom level and influences it, while at the same time being itself determined by the bottom level, creating "in other words, self-reinforcing 'resonance' between different levels."²¹ Self-referential loops can generate this relation of "strange loops" with "entangled hierarchies."²²

Science, Faith and Society (1946) is representative of the closing years of Polanyi's early thought. Polanyi develops there his idea of tradition. Although Polanyi uses the tradition of science and its progress as an inspiration and model to think about a liberal society, progress, in

²⁰ Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher and Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 18-23 and 686-687.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 704.

²² *Ibid.*, 686. In a later book, Hofstadter suggests that conscience may be an emergence in very complex and sophisticated multilevel strange loops of body (brain) activity. See Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

the sense of a theory of history, does not appear explicitly in the book. But the last section (IV) of part III (Dedication or Servitude) offers some insights about tradition, along with the evolution of society. Effectively, this is a discussion of progress.

Confronted with the disasters of his age, that he saw as a “regress” in history, Polanyi refused to close the door to a future of progress: he writes that “we must not shut the gates of hope on the future,”²³ although he recognizes that history can include periods of distress: “I do not assert that eternal truths are automatically upheld by men. We have learnt that they can be very effectively denied by modern man.”²⁴

He concludes that “the continued pursuit of a major intellectual process by men requires a state of social dedication and also that only in a dedicated society can men live an intellectually and morally acceptable life”; he further emphasizes that “the whole purpose of society lies in enabling its members to pursue their transcendent obligations; particularly to truth, justice, and charity.”²⁵

Polanyi accepts here that his “interpretation of society would seem to call for an extension in the direction toward God.”²⁶ But he clearly is not ready (and never will be ready) to recognize a teleological kind of progress based on religion: “How near that source is to God I shall not try to conjecture.”²⁷ Later, Polanyi would be more assertive about the idea of progress as bearing on secular grounds, as I will note.

Progress as “growth of thought” in “men’s gifted minds” is a central idea that late Polanyi included several times in his *Tacit Dimension* chapter about the “society of explorers”²⁸ (to be discussed in the next section). We have already discussed similar ideas about “growth” (as a

²³ Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964 [reprint]), 66. Hereafter citations are to the 1964 reprint and are foreshortened to SFS.

²⁴ Polanyi, SFS, 68-69.

²⁵ This view as a noospheric trend does not exclude economic organization and welfare, but Polanyi argues that “the advancement of well-being therefore seems not to be the real purpose of society but rather a secondary task given to it as an opportunity to fulfil its true aims in the spiritual field” (Ibid., 69). The same idea is found in the *Our Times* proposal.

²⁶ Polanyi, SFS, 69.

²⁷ Polanyi, SFS, 70.

²⁸ For instance, Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 75, 77, 80; hereafter, citations from this book are abbreviated as TD.

progress of ideas) that appeared in his early 1940 draft *The Struggle of Man in Society*, which was never completed and published. But “growth of thought” appeared explicitly in the title of one of the early Polanyi's most important papers of the forties: “The Growth of Thought in Society,”²⁹ where the conditions for progress of science—but not only science—are discussed. We find the structure of this paper confusing. Polanyi wrote it, at insistence of F.A. Hayek,³⁰ as a critical review of J. G. Crowther's book, “*Social Relations of Science*.” Crowther's book was intended as an effort to understand “the actual relations of science and society,” a contribution for a “first step towards the construction of an effective social policy for science.”³¹ Polanyi and Hayek thought the Crowther book was a frontal and dangerous attack on freedom in science and Polanyi saw there an opportunity to present his theory of social orders as a fundament for the critique. This was unfortunate, because it associated his general theory of social orders with the local polemic with Crowther (and others) about liberalism versus totalitarianism and planning of science.

Phil Mullins offers a very complete discussion of “The Growth of Thought in Society” as representative of Polanyi's early liberal vision of evolving social order: “society as a network of dynamic orders reliant on public liberty.”³² Polanyi wrote in that essay that the “hope of progress through the pursuit of various forms and aspects of truth—artistic, scientific, religious, legal, etc.—by a number of autonomous circles, each devoted to one of them, is the essential idea of a liberal society.”³³ The dynamic order of these “autonomous circles” is coordinated by self-adjustment (think again of Escher's hands) and it is a “democratic life conducted publicly under the voluntary accepted laws of this circle” that requires public liberty—“it is freedom with a responsible purpose; a privilege combined with duties, as exacting as any that are shouldered by

²⁹ Michael Polanyi, “The Growth of Thought in Society,” *Economica, New Series* 8, no. 32 (November, 1941): 428-456.

³⁰ F. A. Hayek, Letter to Michael Polanyi, RPC (Box 4, Folder 6), May 1, 1941.

³¹ J. Crowther, *Social Relations of Science* (London: MacMillan, 1941), vii.

³² Phil Mullins, “Michael Polanyi's early liberal vision: society as a network of dynamic orders reliant on public liberty,” *Perspectives in Political Science* 42 (2013): 162-171. See also Phil Mullins, “The Growth of Thought in Society as a Major Motif in Polanyi's Philosophy” in this issue of *Quaestiones Disputatae*.

³³ Polanyi, “The Growth of Thought in Society,” 446.

man,”³⁴ a freedom beyond the claims of personal freedom. Dynamic order works through traditional practices and standards that are eventually challenged and changed by a kind of consensus within the group. Growth of thought appears here again as the kernel of change or progress and as a co-construction between tradition and the public freedom of individuals. This paper by Polanyi can be read as a coherent and expanded follow up of his ideas in the 1940 lecture, “Planning, Culture and Freedom,” and the culmination of his early thought on social progress.³⁵

3. Evolution and Progress in *Personal Knowledge*

The celebration of progress, in the simplistic sense of a recognition of an obvious direction of movement or change improving the human lot in human history, is missing in Polanyi’s 1958 magnum opus *Personal Knowledge* (hereafter PK). Historic progress in European and other human cultures was not a topic Polanyi focused on in PK, but PK does focus attention on the broader evolutionary changes in life and on anthropogenesis. Although Polanyi uses the term “progress” on more than forty pages in PK, most uses refer simply to such matters as developments in scientific thought. But the progressive development of the universe is a key theme of part IV of PK, where Polanyi outlines his views about the nature of living beings, including the development of man as a consequence of his commitment to personal knowledge.³⁶

Polanyi calls for an extrapolation from biology to ultra-biology, where “the appraisal of living beings merges into an acknowledgement of the ideals transmitted by our intellectual heritage”—an emergent noosphere totally determined by that which we believe to be true and right, in a free society that comprises everything in which we might be totally mistaken.³⁷ The process of emergent evolution was the result of a “continuous ascending evolutionary

³⁴ Ibid., 438.

³⁵ Michael Polanyi, “Planning, Culture and Freedom,” RPC (Box 26, Folder 4), November 19, 1940.

³⁶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 327. Hereafter citations are foreshortened to PK.

³⁷ See Polanyi, PK, 404, which I am paraphrasing.

achievement,”³⁸ the result of a generalized heuristic field driven by gradients of discovery.³⁹ In 1965, Polanyi wrote that “for two thousand years and more, humanity has progressed by the efforts of people solving difficult problems, while all the time it could be shown that to do this was either meaningless or impossible.”⁴⁰

Polanyi’s approach thus integrates progress in human society and progress in the broader evolution of life under the same type of developmental principles. Anthropogenesis is a continuation of the global evolutionary process of ontogenesis. He extends his concept of a generalized field in a biological sense to human development and comprehension, covering all tacit operations.⁴¹ This he further expands into the concept of a *heuristic field* driven by the gradient of a discovery toward truth about reality: “The lines of force in a heuristic field should stand for an access to an opportunity, and for the obligation and the resolve to make good this opportunity, in spite of its inherent uncertainties.”⁴²

The final sentences of PK are about Polanyi’s faith in the overall progress of the universe and human beings, converging “along rival lines,” to the present, by way of a “cosmic field” that offers each man, as a tiny fragment of the universe, a “short-lived, limited, hazardous opportunity for making some progress of their own towards an unthinkable consummation.”⁴³

Polanyi’s ideas here, briefly and provocatively sketched, about the unfolding of the universe, through knowledge acquired in responsible human inquiry into the nature of the universe, are ideas that provide something of a cosmological sweep at the end of PK. Further, they fit coherently with the nondeterministic account of progress as a co-construction of tradition and freedom that allows both for periods of “advance” and “regress,” since tradition and freedom can change in a nonlinear loop structure, and do not always follow a direct course to their highest

³⁸ Polanyi, PK, 385.

³⁹ Polanyi calls this, in a 1966 book, “a field of potential systematic progress” ready to be revealed by the efforts of discovery. Polanyi, TD, 71.

⁴⁰ Michael Polanyi, “The Logic of Innovation,” RPC (Box 38, Folder 6), 1965. Think of Meno’s Paradox here.

⁴¹ Polanyi, PK, 398.

⁴² Ibid., 403.

⁴³ Ibid., 405. See also Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 97. Hereafter citations from this book are foreshortened to SM.

potentiality.⁴⁴ Progress appears here as hope, an aspiration of man to constitute a free and good society. Later Polanyi called this “a society of explorers” in his Virginia Lectures and in TD.⁴⁵

4. Progress in Late Polanyi

In 1961, twenty-one years after his address to the Classical Society in Manchester, Polanyi, now close to seventy years old, revisited his theory of history in a set of four lectures that he titled “History and Hope.”⁴⁶ In these lectures we find one of the most detailed and complete discussions of the late Polanyi’s philosophy of history, and it is integrated with his post-critical account of personal knowledge.⁴⁷ Here, Polanyi digs deeper into questions about human progress through “an analysis of our age.”⁴⁸

Polanyi divides human history simply into “before” and “after” the French Revolution. Before, “men had accepted existing custom and law as the foundation of society.” After, “the

⁴⁴ In the last chapter, “Understanding History,” of SM, a follow up of PK, Polanyi extends his epistemology to the knowledge of history. However, his objective here is not to discuss progress and the associated theory of history, but to discuss historical knowledge versus natural science knowledge.

⁴⁵ Polanyi, TD, part III.

⁴⁶ These lectures were first delivered in November of 1961 at the Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy of the University of Virginia (and are referred to both as the Virginia Lectures and the Jefferson Lectures) and later (in 1962) were delivered as the McEnerney Lectures at the University of California at Berkeley. Hereafter citations from these unpublished lectures are abbreviated as VL. The audio recordings of the McEnerney Lectures are available online at <http://www.polanyisociety.org/essays.htm>. The texts of the Virginia Lectures are available in the Gelwick microfilm materials and there is a link for the Gelwick materials under the above link. Phil Mullins wrote an introduction to the McEnerney Lectures available at <http://www.polanyisociety.org/McEnerney-intro.htm>. Only the first of the four lectures has been published: Michael Polanyi, “The Destruction of Reality,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 38, no. 2 (1962): 177-195.

⁴⁷ “Progress” and related words appear more than thirty times in the four lectures. Related papers by Polanyi relying on the content of his “History and Hope” lectures are, for instance, Michael Polanyi, “Beyond Nihilism,” *Encounter* 14 (March 1960): 34-43; Michael Polanyi, “On the Modern Mind,” *Encounter* 24 (May 1965): 12-20; Michael Polanyi, “Why Did We Destroy Europe?” *Studium Generale* 23 (October 1970): 909-916; and Michael Polanyi, “Science and Man,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 58 (September 1970): 969-976.

⁴⁸ This idea already appeared in Polanyi’s drafts and notes for the Gunning Lectures, Edinburgh, 1960: “The break occurred about two centuries ago by a far-reaching secularization of our outlook which caused an essentially static society to be transformed into a society bent on indefinite discovery and unlimited innovation.” Michael Polanyi, “Perspectives of Personal Knowledge,” RPC (Box 34, Folders 1-5), March 4, 1960 (Lecture 5: “The Process of History”).

deliberate contriving of unlimited social improvement [had] been elevated to a dominant principle” and “public life has become increasingly dominated by fervent expectations of a better future.” But that hope lasted only for a “brief period”—“such is the history—the short history—of *hope* as a political and social force.”⁴⁹

Polanyi sees an ambivalent result from this period of hope after the French Revolution. On one side, after the French Revolution came the achievement of the “most human and most free societies the world had ever seen” with an “intellectual life of unprecedented range”⁵⁰ and societies that “created immense wealth, more equally distributed than before.”⁵¹ But, on the other side, totalitarianism and moral inversion emerged.⁵² “Hardly had the *march of humanity towards its new hopes* got under way than it divided mankind into two rival camps mortally opposed to each other by their totally different visions of progress.”⁵³ Although secular conceptions that undermined traditions were a big part of the problem, Polanyi believed “that our ideals of critically established truth and of unlimited social improvement must be reconciled primarily on secular grounds.”⁵⁴

An important development in Polanyi’s late thought concerns the role of tacit integration in the workings of tradition: “The transmission of knowledge from one generation to the other must be predominately tacit” and acknowledging “*tacit thought*” as an indispensable element of all

⁴⁹ These are my italics here and in subsequent paragraphs. W. Inge in his well-known lecture “The idea of progress” (1920) rejected the existence of “real progress,” but he also recognized that (Christian) hope could be a driver for “new varieties of achievements that will enrich the experience of the race.” Inge concluded that “the laws of nature neither promise progress nor forbid it,” so “we shall go hoping.” See W. Inge, *The Idea of Progress, The Romanes Lecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 31, 34.

⁵⁰ Polanyi, VL, I, 1.

⁵¹ Polanyi, VL, I, 2.

⁵² The “idea of unlimited progress, intensified to perfectionism, has combined with our sharpened skepticism to produce the perilous state of the modern mind,” Polanyi wrote in Michael Polanyi, “On the Modern Mind,” *Encounter* 24 (May 1965), 14. And he added: “This paradoxical combination is new in history and deserves a new name; I have called it a moral inversion. In public life moral inversion leads to totalitarianism.” *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵³ Polanyi, VL, I, 2. My italics. In “Beyond Nihilism,” Polanyi recognizes that this “dialectic” of Enlightenment progress began with Rousseau, even before Condorcet claimed universal progress (“humanity would then advance peacefully towards ever higher intellectual, moral, political, and economic perfection”) following the natural light of reason. See Michael Polanyi, “Beyond nihilism,” *Encounter* 14 (March 1960): 35

⁵⁴ Polanyi, VL, X, 7.

knowing and as the ultimate mental power by which all explicit knowledge is endowed with meaning offers a theoretical support for *traditionalism*" (my italics).⁵⁵

This is a significant development clarifying the key mechanism of change in tradition and this also modifies the early Polanyi's idea of progress. Change in the traditions in a free community (or society) comes through tacit mechanisms and grounds that cannot be made fully explicit, and this helps make tradition sustainable in a community. Polanyi works out this line of thought again in the last chapter of *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) as the operational dynamics of "the society of explorers." Polanyi's idea of tradition is that tradition is "inescapable" in the "framework for intellectual and moral progress in a free, dynamic society." By emphasizing the inescapability of accepting some commitments (even in science) uncritically, Polanyi reasserts tradition (and authority) *on secular grounds*, but traditions tolerate dissent and even encourage creative dissent in a quest for truth.⁵⁶ Thus progress is the growth of thought through progressive discovery in a free and dynamic society where human beings are called to explore the ubiquitous potential discoveries surrounding them under a responsible fiduciary judgement. But the creative approaches to discovery through tacit integration "are controlled – but not fully determined – by their potentialities. They may succeed or fail."⁵⁷

Polanyi looks for "a community where coherence is spontaneously established by self-coordination, authority is exercised by equals over each other, all tasks are set by each to himself."⁵⁸

5. Polanyi and the Theory of Historic Progress

Polanyi's account of progress relies on freedom. Polanyi's early work was more concerned with freedom, exercised as the public liberty of individuals to be responsible to a higher calling, which brought the growth of thought and evolutionary social change. Through the growth of thought comes the evolution of society and an alternative to both violent revolution and the

⁵⁵ Polanyi, VL, X, 76-77.

⁵⁶ Polanyi, TD, 62.

⁵⁷ Polanyi, TD, 90.

⁵⁸ Polanyi, TD, 92.

problems created by extreme liberalism (absolute laissez-faire). Polanyi's later work is more focused on the mechanisms of change in tradition and the role of tacit integration in this process of transformation. In this section, I offer a short review of the notion of progress as increasing liberty, drawing a thread from the Enlightenment to Polanyi.

But would such an account not ignore Polanyi ambivalence to Enlightenment ideas? Reading just the late Polanyi might give that impression. The late Polanyi is especially more explicitly critical of the Enlightenment. In the 1940s Polanyi is just beginning to formulate his conception of moral inversion,⁵⁹ but in the 1960s he says: "Enlightenment, having secularized Christian hopes, destroyed itself by moral inversion"⁶⁰ and "the defeat of Enlightenment was the logical consequence of an inherent weakness for self-destruction."⁶¹ But in the early Polanyi we see both agreement and differences. Polanyi made clear his differences with the "universalism of the eighteenth century"⁶² in his Riddell Lectures. He points to three "important points" of difference, as he affirms: 1) the impossibility of verifying any of the universal statements commonly held by men, 2) that eternal truths are not automatically held by men, and 3) that it is inevitable that intellectual development must start by accepting uncritically a large number of traditional premises of a particular kind. Polanyi believes in progress through reason, but a narrow and abstract Enlightenment notion of "rationality" created problems in modernity when they were applied to the complexity of our world.

"Progress as freedom" is how Robert Nisbet classifies the Enlightenment-based idea of progress developed during the eighteenth century by Turgot, Adam Smith, Kant, Condorcet, and by Malthus, John Stuart Mill, and Spencer during the nineteenth century.⁶³ They saw progress as

⁵⁹ The first reference to moral inversion I am aware of is a comment in a notebook from 1941, four or five years before SFS where moral inversion first appears in print (3.IV).

⁶⁰ Michael Polanyi, "Beyond Nihilism," *Encounter* 14 (March 1960): 34-43.

⁶¹ K. A. Jelenski, *History and Hope: Progress in Freedom. The Berlin Conference of 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 74. Polanyi's position was sharply criticized by the American philosopher Sidney Hook in his paper "Enlightenment and Radicalism," included in the same book.

⁶² Polanyi, SFS, 68-69. Also cited by Phil Rolnick, "Polanyi's Progress: Transcendence, Universality and Teleology," *Tradition and Discovery* 19, no. 2 (1993):13-32.

⁶³ Teilhard de Chardin was perhaps the last major figure of the twentieth century arguing for a theory of global progress in history: he articulated a cosmic history approach bearing on modern science and traditional Roman Catholicism (like St. Augustine). In the long run, evolutionary progress would unite mankind as the increasing

a steady and ever more encompassing advance of individual freedom in the world. Advancement was demonstrated by the gains in human knowledge and man's control or command of the natural world that freedom to think, work, and create made possible.⁶⁴

Polanyi's model of progress was aligned in some ways with this thread of thought. There are more similarities with Kantian ideas than any other figure mentioned. For Kant, the future of mankind was a progressive attainment of more perfect conditions for the exercise of human freedom by each individual, as a responsible human being and an autonomous agent using his individual reason. For Kant, committing to do what is rationally demanded is the fullest expression of freedom. This aligns with Polanyi's idea of public liberty. While Kant believed we could determine and affirm common universal truths, Polanyi—as we saw in the first “difference” of his Riddell Lectures—did not see this as possible. Instead, Polanyi contends that “I do not speak of an established universality, but of universal intent.”⁶⁵ Thus there are no Archimedean perspectives, but Polanyi still holds the spirit of Kant by focusing on the “universal intent” of our responsible judgments.

Empowering rational people with freedom was the key to progress in history for Kant: freedom has the effect of generating happier and more morally-attuned people, and of furthering the growth of enlightenment. Enlightened people will opt for the good; free people will refuse to be enslaved again by their rulers and economic growth will make states more independent and less likely to go to war.⁶⁶ For Kant, progress was a natural purpose, embedded in the “hidden plan of nature” and the driver of progress was a kind of competition between humans—the tensions from the natural antagonism of men in society, i.e., the “unsocial sociability” of men inside society.⁶⁷

perfection of man would assure a long-term convergence of “the rising tide of human aspirations.” See R. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 313-316. I noted above the differences between Polanyi and de Chardin (see note 18).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 179-236.

⁶⁵ Polanyi, TD, 78.

⁶⁶ Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society* (London: C. A. Watts & Co., 1968), 86.

⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent* (1794), Fourth Principle, in *Kant Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1991), 44.

Kant, like Polanyi, does not assume a linear timeline for progress: progress can be interrupted. Kant comments that even then “it will never be entirely broken off or stopped” and “will continue for the better in relation to the moral end of its existence.”⁶⁸ In contrast, Polanyi’s progress is a human construction in a society with fiduciary commitments to its values (established in tradition), but it does not assume an inherent force of nature driving it—unless we consider the moral aspirations of men as the “will of nature” as Kant did.

For Polanyi “unlimited progress” through the use of reason is not assured and the faith in it contributed to the disasters of the twentieth century: “this idea of unlimited progress, intensified to perfectionism, has combined with our sharpened scepticism to produce the perilous state of the modern mind” through a new “paradoxical” combination that Polanyi called “moral inversion.”⁶⁹

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) is often cited by Polanyi. Spencer’s philosophical perspective is perhaps the supreme embodiment of liberal individualism and the idea of progress in the nineteenth century. He presents the idea that freedom is fundamental to progress and that the goal of progress is an ever-ascending realization of freedom.

The early Polanyi’s thought about progress is also part of the thread promoted by the group of thinkers who Nisbet classified as favoring “liberalism-cum-progress” such as J.A. Hobson, John Dewey, and L.T. Hobhouse, who were influential figures after the mid- 19th/nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Their belief in economic and secular progress through free private enterprise, called for a different form of liberalism (a new liberalism) during the first years of the twentieth century. Nisbet includes Hayek in this group.⁷¹ For Hayek, progress is a process of learning and, as with Polanyi, the permanent striving of thought is a driver of progress.

6. Polanyi and Twenty-First Century Discussions of Progress

⁶⁸ Cited by Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 223.

⁶⁹ Michael Polanyi, “On the Modern Mind,” *Encounter* 24 (May 1965), 12-20. [*Editor’s note*: For more on “moral inversion” see also Richard Moodey’s “Confronting or Denying the Minotaur: Moral Inversion Today” in this issue of *Quaestiones Disputatae*.]

⁷⁰ Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 300.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

Progress has always been a tricky concept. It is an inherently teleological concept—that is what differentiates it from mere change. But to be sure of progress, in an absolute sense, we would need to know the end of the story.⁷² Harry Prosch said something similar: “I must confess that I always found it hard to make sense of Polanyi’s notion of the progress ... if there were nothing ... by which to access whether the changes taking place in them were improvements or not.”⁷³

Modern ideas about progress are a product of Enlightenment thought and it has become a kind of faith in dogma associated with Western civilization. But this is one of the dilemmas of progress: how does the idea apply in non-Western parts of the world? Should Western rationalism be the standard to evaluate global progress? To do so would seem a violation of a liberal pluralism, but another problem comes with denying progress, since to deny progress is to accept a definitive conformism,⁷⁴ condemning underdeveloped or non-Western parts of the world. Meanwhile, the world has changed a great deal from the age of Enlightenment, especially in the last fifty or one hundred years. What progress means today needs to be reevaluated and updated.

In recent decades, the concept of progress itself has been under discussion. Some authors have been claiming alternative visions for the concept. Here I cannot not review the field, but will consider Polanyi’s vision in comparison to two very recent authors from different philosophical camps.

Andrew Feenberg, in the closing chapter of his last book, *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* (2017), argues that “progress is not a tendency of history but an achievement of struggles against injustices.” He offers a critical constructivist view for the concept of progress as “a local, context bound phenomenon uniting technical and normative dimensions.”⁷⁵

⁷² Andrew Feenberg, *Tecnologia, Modernidade e Democracia*, ed. and trans. E. Beira (Porto, Portugal: Inovatec, 2015), 31.

⁷³ Harry Prosch, “Those Missing Objects,” *Tradition and Discovery* 17, no. 1 and 2 (1990): 19-22. Also cited by Phil Rolnick, “Polanyi’s Progress: Transcendence, Universality, and Teleology,” *Tradition and Discovery* 19, no. 2 (1993): 13-32.

⁷⁴ Andrew Feenberg, *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 197.

⁷⁵ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 200.

Feenberg also argues that modern societies need a notion of progress: all policy making and public interventions are subjected to it. Without a vision of the direction of the future, how do you have a rational basis to evaluate public policies? The past grand narratives of progress are often utopic and do not offer practical guidance. Feenberg concludes that “replacing the grand narrative with the many local narratives will free the imagination to explore alternatives to both the existing society and the failed revolutions of the past.”⁷⁶

Feenberg thus proposes that progress can be defined in terms of designs and innovations (changes) that tend to be inclusive of all populations, and that contribute to realize excluded human potentialities or reconcile human requirements (including technical requirements) with the natural limits of nature. Progressive developments are social answers to exclusion and to the harms of capitalist industrialism. Feenberg here discusses development and progress in the “lifeworld,” and distinguishes it from “systems” that can invade and hijack the free activities of people who live in moral communities. But, for Feenberg, not all technical developments and systems are infectious manifestations of instrumental rationality that contaminate moral decisions in local lifeworlds. Lifeworlds, too, can generate technical systems. Thus, progress is not solely a technical or a moral issue, but is both technical, moral, and it is local. Similarly for Polanyi, dynamic orders develop from communities and their traditions, and they, like Feenberg’s lifeworlds, can produce systems that are structured in a way that empowers individuals and their moral commitments. It is in the lifeworld that we have dynamic orders with self-regulating non-hierarchical power structures, in which people can exercise their public liberty. As with Feenberg, for Polanyi we can produce technology and systems that serve our higher moral purpose and which do not necessarily work against our higher values.

Of course, the metaphysical grounds for Feenberg’s claims are quite different from Polanyi’s metaphysical grounds. But both offer visions of progress as human driven constructions, and both offer secular and local grounds for progress. Feenberg’s activism, in advancing humans’ natural potential, is close to Polanyi’s search for discovery in the presence of partially hidden realities in the context of human fiduciary responsibility, since this discovery and progress occur in a plurality of dynamic orders.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 204.

Both claim that the “underdetermination” of progressive paths make change possible. Feenberg claims that progress can offer alternative solutions (designs) with different social implications, so that the successful solutions are not explained only by technical considerations. Underdetermination means that trajectories of history (or technosystems) can be changed, and this has liberating political implications. The present trajectory of a system does not necessarily determine its future. Public action can place society on a different trajectory in conformity with different values. For Polanyi, heuristic fields offer different opportunities for innovation through actualization of a range of potentialities with heuristic anticipations. Human freedom allows for change in nondeterministic ways. Freedom allows the choice of one path or another, under responsible fiduciary human choice.

While Feenberg’s philosophy has his roots in critical theory, another recent book about progress follows a more classic approach, but also claims the idea of progress needs to be updated in a similar way. Peter Wagner’s *Progress: A Reconstruction*, considers the experience of the last one hundred years, in which “progress” has moved “from the overconfidence of the past to the disorientation of the present,”⁷⁷ and claims that rethinking progress should be done along three main lines: it should focus on building democratic collective agency as a core component of future progress (like Feenberg’s activism and Polanyi’s dynamic order); it should focus on overcoming new forms of domination and inequality (like Feenberg’s liberation and Polanyi’s opposition to top-down control); and it should combat hubris about the mastery of nature and other human beings in name of supposed benefits (which has led to climate change, depletion of natural resources, and other environmental issues, for instance). Polanyi has also argued straightforwardly about the environmental problems of industrial societies.⁷⁸ Wagner claims we should abandon the search for theoretical certainty, which is often a source of “hegemonic

⁷⁷ Peter Wagner, *Progress: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), xi.

⁷⁸ See Michael Polanyi, “Welfare. The Structure of Freedom / book II,” RPC (Box 27, Folder 8), 1942 and also Michael Polanyi, “The Determinants of Social Action,” RPC (Box 33, Folder 8), 1953. For a discussion of Polanyi’s public policy concerns about the “unsocial transactions” that may be possible in a modern liberal society, see Michael Polanyi, “Why profits?” *Humanitas* (Autumn 1946): 10-11. Also in Michael Polanyi, *The Logic of Liberty*, chapter 9 (“profits and polycentricity”), 148-149.

discourse.”⁷⁹ Polanyi does not abandon the search for certainty, but he does emphasize our fallibility.

7. A Polanyian Vision of Enlightened Progress

Local progress, freedom, and humility all fit well with Polanyi’s model of progress. While Polanyi was primarily concerned with Western society, and the dynamic orders within it, his concept of progress as the co-construction between tradition and freedom does not exclude non-Western societies. I suggested that the Polanyian dynamic of progress can promote a convergence of different communities with different traditions, moving incrementally toward a progressive brotherhood of diverse communities engaging together in liberal national and international structures. Higher levels of progress are rooted in local progress. Thus, local progress is concerned with one of the levels of the stratified vision of the world hinted at in Polanyi’s writing.

We can see the Polanyian world as a global and dynamic polycentric structure of different societies (communities), each with its own traditions, somehow committed to indeterminate ends and with different rates and objectives for progress. Polanyi’s principle of mutual control⁸⁰ allows for a kind of self-coordination between different communities, where free dissent or divergence is part of the mechanism of change.

A global noosphere appears as an extension of overlapping local noospheres interacting by (more or less) mutual adjustments in a chain of overlapping communities that allow a kind of global self-coordination. This is a replication of the same pattern operative for shaping emerging local progress: “in fact the entire progress of our cultural heritage is achieved by a cooperation based on the mutual adjustment of the participants,” Polanyi suggested in 1941 in his liberal conception of freedom.⁸¹ This seems to cohere with Polanyi’s later claim for human beings that there is a “movement of intellectual solidarity between the civilizations arising beyond nihilism,

⁷⁹ Peter Wagner, *Progress: A Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 146.

⁸⁰ Polanyi, TD, 72. About this principle of mutual control in a dynamic society, Polanyi wrote that “mutual authority also governs other cultural fields” and not just science. Those fields include public administration of resources (TD, 73).

⁸¹ Michael Polanyi, “The Liberal Conception of Freedom,” RPC (Box 26, Folder 8), 1941.

restoring the balance between his critical powers and his moral demands.”⁸² What Polanyi sketchily outlines regarding progress here is compatible, for instance, with the patterns of the growing wave of global awareness about the future of the planet. Different communities have different policies and dynamics about the issue, but an overall awareness has been growing.

In sum, progress can be seen as a continuous and nonending pattern of interacting local searches for solutions of community problems (in lifeworlds), a process of progressive heuristic learning fueled by the human passionate craving for discovery and innovation and looking for possibilities previously hidden and dimly anticipated. Progress diffusion between different communities may create global waves of progress. It is a learning process through different generations (time), and across different geographies (space).

Because tradition is a consequence of the past path of the history of the community / society, the seeds for future discoveries are already there, driven by gradients of understanding (or gradients of meaning) in the field of heuristic potentialities. But progress is never guaranteed. Local change is offered by people with universal intent that can be accepted or rejected by the local community. For Polanyi, the local (and global) struggles of economic life are part of the moral progress. There is no moral progress outside the “medium of a society operating by the exercise of power and aiming at material advantages,”⁸³ but a liberal society is “under obligation to purposes which transcend the material satisfaction of its members.”⁸⁴ Global progress claims, whether material or moral, must also be put forth with “universal intent.” Realizing progress toward the Enlightenment goals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity at the local, national, or international level is thus a continual matter of negotiating claims in an unfolding future.

Phil Rolnick considered Polanyi’s progress to be a “natural possibility” entailed in the “idea of universal principles which may be progressively discovered by a community of explorers as they succeed in transcending the arbitrary through submission to the reality they would

⁸² Michael Polanyi, “A Postscript,” in K. A. Jelenski, *History and Hope: Progress in Freedom. The Berlin Conference of 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 196.

⁸³ Polanyi, TD, 86.

⁸⁴ Michael Polanyi, “Program of a liberal philosophy” RPC (Box 30, Folder 1), 1945 (section “Outline of a Liberal Society”).

discover.”⁸⁵ Rolnick also agrees that Polanyi never demonstrates any systematic or a priori aspects of the ontology which he implies. He recognizes that Polanyi insists that there is such a reality to which we may and should aspire—but it is a matter of hope.

Polanyi’s progress is an “open” concept that is not compatible with the utopian ideal of “unlimited social improvement” and the ideal of a deterministic world, it is a human construction under the firmament of human values held in human communities. Progress, as we have seen happens in dynamic traditions that are free (early Polanyi) and depends on tacit knowing and the discovery of emergent possibilities that connect with reality (late Polanyi). But where is progress taking us and what guides it?

On the last page of TD, Polanyi asks where human beings and societies are going and, pointing to the openness of human destiny, he answers, “Nobody knows.” But he adds “perhaps this problem cannot be solved on secular grounds alone.”⁸⁶ Polanyi implies that perhaps we need more than a one-dimensional answer. Humans need a cosmic view inspired by the “cosmic emergence of meaning” (later Polanyi) and thus “men need a purpose that bears on eternity. Truth does that; our ideals do it; and this might be enough....”⁸⁷

Both Feenberg and Wagner have an exclusively historical secular humanistic vision of progress; Polanyi offers a complementary cosmic vision as well. Despite this difference, Polanyi’s vision is consistent with the trends of contemporary thought about progress, like Feenberg’s and Wagner’s, that emphasize local and multiple paths to progress, and which see the amelioration of inequality, the advancement of human rights and values, and environmental sustainability as criteria for progress. Today the “potentialities” of Polanyi’s progress by a free society of explorers still seems to offer new and unexpected powers in a changing world.

⁸⁵ Phil Rolnick, “Polanyi’s Progress: Transcendence, Universality and Teleology,” *Tradition and Discovery* 19, no. 2 (1993): 13-32.

⁸⁶ Polanyi, TD, 92.

⁸⁷ Ibid.