

MICHAEL POLANYI AND THE SOCIETY OF EXPLORERS



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ABSTRACT¹

For Polanyi, the Society of Explorers (SoE) describes the ideal form of a free society. He does not, however, provide us with a thick description of such a society. This essay attempts to do so by bringing together his later social and political thoughts with those set forth in his discussion of “Conviviality.”

Introduction

The purpose of this essay will be to flesh-out Polanyi’s thoughts on the Society of Explorers (SoE) as the ideal form of a free society, thoughts which he developed out of the concrete exemplar of the Republic of Science (RoS). I perceive that this exercise is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, while suggestive, Polanyi was not thorough in extrapolating the implications of his own political studies. Secondly, while Polanyi spends much time in his writings correcting misunderstandings of science and scientific practice, he does not always explicitly fold those corrections into his writings on the SoE. Consequently, we are left with a haze hovering between us and a definite apprehension of the SoE.

In this essay, I argue it is consistent with Polanyi’s thoughts to say that a free society, at its best, is a SoE. As such, it exemplifies, from its lowest to its highest layers, the dynamic, spontaneous order which is practiced within the RoS. At its uppermost layer, the *noosphere* (which signifies a society’s heritage of the mind), and the *cultural institutions* of the SoE’s borders expand beyond those of the RoS in order to include the

broader plurality of humanity's highest pursuits and endeavours. At its lower levels, it is maintained materially through the spontaneous order of a polycentric *economic system* that is protected and sheltered by a *public power* embodied by magistrates responsible to finding and enforcing the meaning of the law. In between these, one finds also institutions of civic culture that inspire *fellowship* and a *loyalty* to the SoE, which transcends purely parochial submission to the traditional or charismatic power of a group by also cultivating a sense of individual responsibility to transcendent principles, such as truth and excellence. This paradoxical cultivation of civic and individual responsibility thus constitutes the grounds of a civil fellowship grounded in the common enjoyment and delight in the highest and noblest principles. The consequence of Polanyi's thoughts for political theory are conceptions of freedom and pluralism which are based neither on civil religion and sovereign power (as in Hobbes and Rousseau, respectively), or relativism, but instead on common commitment to principles, particularly truth.

The following sections will proceed by rounding out the features of the RoS, before bringing them to bear on our understanding of Polanyi's SoE by bringing together his later social and political thoughts in *KB*, *SM*, and *TD* with those that he earlier set forth in *PK* in the chapter "Conviviality." The end result shall be a clearer image of the SoE as an overlapping series of spontaneous orders, consistent with the four *coefficients of society* that Polanyi delineates in *PK*.

How to be Civil, Individual, and Cultured Without Even Trying

A given free society's manner of cultivating individuality and excellence is what Polanyi dubbed its *individual culture* and it is this feature which partly defines the character of free societies such as the RoS. By the same token, the RoS, as a free society, is also upheld by a *civic culture* that evokes a community of scientists; transmits and maintains standards of practice; and fosters both cooperation among scientists and a just allocation of honours and resources (as well as blame, dishonour, and penury). This dual culture of science can be further elaborated in terms of Polanyi's four-fold differentiation of the *coefficients of society*: (i) the *sharing of convictions*, (ii) the *sharing of a fellowship*, (iii) *cooperation*, and (iv) *authority* or *coercion* (*PK*, 215).

Furthermore, Polanyi holds that in the specific instances of free, dynamic societies (such as the RoS and SoE by implication), these coefficients tend strongly to be articulated in different sets of more or less distinct *institutions*. This stands in contrast with static (i.e., primitive or highly traditional) societies in which such differentiation is absent, or less pronounced (*PK*, 212). In their most general form, these four sets of institutions consist in (i) institutions of *culture*, which foster shared convictions (e.g., churches, museums, universities, theatres, etc.); (ii) institutions fostering *group loyalty* (e.g., social intercourse, rituals, and common defence); (iii) an *economic system* which

fosters cooperation for the purposes of achieving a joint material advantage, and (iv) *public power* to shelter and control the other institutions of society, through the use of authority and coercion (*PK*, 215-216).

It follows from this that a free society's mores hinge upon the simultaneous cultivation of individual and civic culture based upon a prevailing recognition of the goodness of both individuality and the common weal. However, knowledge and commitment to the common good in a free society is evoked, at the highest level, by convictions that uphold the independent power of thought, along with a passion for truth, excellence, beauty, or justice in general. Conversely, at lower levels, it is bound by the necessities of power and profit (*PK*, 213-216, 224; *KB*, 69).

What this largely amounts to in a healthy free society is the ongoing cultivation of individual excellence, together with a restriction of individual selfishness—particularly moral inversion. The children of a free society are persuaded to overcome the tendency towards selfishness through their enculturation, through which they find expression for the higher passions. On a personal level this is accomplished by initiation into convictions transcending the baser appetites and drives, by the creation of an atmosphere wherein genuine fellowship and conviviality can flourish, and, when necessary, by the imposition of standards of morality through the authority or the coercion of the institutions of public power.¹ Individual excellence will therefore be bound and channeled by the standards and practices of the prevailing institutions of culture.

At the same time, excellence and individuality are in danger of being stifled or left fallow by circumstances arising from injustices, failures, or outright sins originating with the institutions of the economic system or the public power. And yet, in recompense, the prevailing recognition of universal, transcendent standards provides individuals with opportunities to challenge and reform prevailing standards and opinions. Indeed, a free society will reserve its greatest accolades for those persons who have most deeply refined or expanded the *noosphere* in accordance with previously unrecognized intimations of the meaning of its most beloved principles.

Finding the Authorities

We turn now to the specific example of the civic and individual cultures of the RoS. One outstanding feature of the RoS is that there is a notable absence of a specific authority, either embodied, or abstract. There is no Sultan or Parliament of Science, nor Tablets or a Bill of Science, which effectively command the common enterprises of biologists, physicists, chemists, political scientists, ethnographers, geologists, and the other myriad classes of practicing scientists.

This is a state of affairs that may lead one to surmise that there is no civic authority present in the RoS, but this would be a mistake. The cultivation of individual student or apprentice scientists relies upon the dual authorities of the teacher or master, on the

one hand, and upon the truth of the matter that they intend to understand, on the other. This latter authority is one which is at least tacitly recognized by all classes of scientists, whatever their status or background, and forms the firmament of the firmaments; it is the basic reality from which hangs the moving horizon of the *noosphere* and to which one can appeal when one calls for reformations (including of one's own being and that of one's fellows).

The former, more immediate form of authority, moreover, is, like the latter, one freely elected for; one can never be effectively forced to learn or to see. Like Plato's prisoners bound to the cave bench, one always has the option of ignoring or manhandling anyone attempting to turn one around. Similarly, one either responds to a paradigm or a personal exemplar or not. Arbitrary authority may train a man to avoid the stick, but it cannot educate in him a genuine love and appreciation of a flower; beatings do not make botanists.

These two authorities are personal, and stand above oneself, though the authority of a master may conceivably be lacking if one runs out of teachers. They are, however, one's own personal, specific authorities. When we widen the discussion to the entire community of scientists, though, another authority emerges and this new authority is the *mutual authority* of scientists to judge each other as equals and peers (KB, 56, 84-85). Polanyi describes eight overlapping features of general authority among scientists, four of which can be said to constitute that medium of *public authority* or *public power* which shelters the RoS from internal dissolution, while also serving functions of *cooperation* and inspiring *group loyalty*. The first and most conspicuous of these features is that of *scientific consensus*, denoting the current, settled opinion of scientists regarding the facts and theoretical foundations of matters of interest to the system of science, i.e., broadly speaking, what is true, what is false, and what is plausible or indeterminate.

Just as importantly, scientific consensus plays a role in upholding *scientific standards* by helping to set the general measure of scientific competence and of competent scientific performance and research. Scientific consensus and scientific standards then dovetail to a third coefficient, that of judging the *scientific merit* of those offerings or findings which are published or presented for consideration. The judgement of the *merit* of new facts or theories which are offered to the overall system of science is itself the functional product of that offering's: (1) *plausibility* in the eyes of a plurality of scientists who are competent to render judgement on the matter, (2) *scientific value*, and (3) *originality* of the contribution that surprises scientists in the know (KB, 54). Taken altogether, these criteria of scientific merit, together with the weight of scientific opinion, provide the weight of mutual authority among scientists, and the criteria for apportioning honours within the RoS. Conversely, to be shut-out of the hallowed halls of honour represents a profound vote of non-confidence on the part of the community, and may very well flounder or destroy a career.

What, though, of the question of cooperation among scientists? For Polanyi, such cooperation does not arise from the blind enforcement of prevailing opinions. Rather, it is the case that cooperation and the exercise of authority among scientists rests upon three practices or institutions which constitute the Republic as a *spontaneous order*: i) *self-coordination through mutual adjustment*, ii) *discipline under mutual authority*, and the iii) *principle of overlapping neighbourhoods* (KB, 84).²

The self-coordination of scientists is explained by Polanyi using two metaphors. On the one hand, one has a group of women shelling peas or chess-players playing chess and on the other hand, a group of persons attempting to put together a puzzle. In the first case, the mutual isolation of the members would hardly have an effect upon their joint progress towards the end. In the latter case, progress is greatly reduced by mutual isolation, relative to what is possible if members are allowed freely to observe and communicate with one another while attending to the specific problem and the specific clues before each of them.

Furthermore, the task of scientific discovery, or of putting together a puzzle, is impeded if the joint purpose and endeavour is organized under the specific authority of a single “node,” be that a single person or a committee. Indeed, the whole project may even do more poorly than if scientists were kept in mutual isolation, were the central authority itself relatively or totally incompetent, something which has indeed proven to be the case when science has been forced to submit to ideological powers.

Be that as it may, the ability of scientists to make the heuristic breakthroughs needed to comprehend the clues before them in a significant or surprising new way is aided by their ability to draw upon the pieces of the puzzle being handled by others. These clues, in turn, can be found scattered in the surrounding neighbourhood, both in explicit, articulate forms (e.g., in books, publications, speeches, records, and artifacts), but also in the unspoken or relatively tacit clues embodied in their colleagues. Sometimes, the greatest revelations come from debating or arguing-out a problem with a peer, who intends—or has previously intended—to resolve the same question, or one quite similar.

Discipline under mutual authority arises as a consequence of the fact that scientists observe each other, judge each other, and try to maintain scientific standards. Put simply, all reputable scientists are masters of some specific domain of knowledge and inquiry. This mastery denotes their high degree of personal judgement and ability to appraise the facts, phenomena, and the findings of others within their field. By exercising their judgement, scientists are intently appraising each other’s work as competent or incompetent, and as a reflection of a true or an erroneous intellectual framework for understanding (PK, 374-378; SM, 87-89).

The dynamic character of that changing, indirect consensus of scientific opinion comes about as a reflection of *the principle of overlapping neighbourhoods*, for it also

happens that the general competencies of any scientist will extend into neighbouring fields of investigation when, for instance, a chemist will often find herself able to judge the plausibility of the data published in a physics paper, or a political scientist a work of economics or sociology. In this way, the RoS can be pictured as a patchwork of overlapping neighbourhoods, with individual scientists continuously exercising their authority on each other and submitting to the same general authority in turn. This spontaneous ordering of affairs differs from the personal authority of the master scientist over the apprentice, in which the master looks down and the apprentice up in judgement, in that this general authority is exercised between scientists mutually recognizing each other as peers and holding each other to common standards bearing on the truth with universal intent.

The RoS as the Paradigm of the SoE

The features outlined above define the boundary conditions of the RoS and its institutions. Below, it is bound by the limited resources available for scientific pursuits as measured both in terms of time and external goods. On a higher level, it is bound to the joint pursuit of the truth, while shaped by the *noosphere* and by scientific opinion and standards. These give structure to scientific endeavours, provide some sense of grounding and direction, and define the necessary limits to one's calling and responsibility, while also cultivating a tension towards the intimations of a hidden reality which transcends them. Taken together, these features characterize the RoS as a spontaneous order: a society of self-coordinating, free individuals who jointly submit and exercise general authority among themselves, in this case for the purpose of the common pursuit of truth with universal intent. Taken together, then, the RoS's *basic coefficients of society* (§2), can thus be summarized as:

- A *shared conviction* in the truth, and its best reflection in scientific opinion and consensus;
- A *fellowship* founded in participation in common pursuits of truth, and through common gatherings (e.g. conferences, symposia, research projects);
- *Cooperation* in the spontaneous order of science achieved by *self-coordination through mutual adjustment*, the *principle of overlapping neighbourhoods*, and the practical day-to-day matters of organizing scientific endeavours;
- *Authority* to bind, direct, and protect the integrity of the RoS, in the form of *discipline under mutual authority*.

The RoS is the logical arrangement of a society struck between mature, individual scientists exercising their intellectual passions, callings, and responsibilities. However the institutions of the RoS may differ or change from place to place or time to time, the

basic coefficients of the RoS can scarcely be done away with without greatly damaging it; they are the matrix through which science (that is, understanding *qua scientia* or *episteme*) can be jointly pursued and enjoyed convivially with one's peers. The alternative to this arrangement would be the metaphorical scientist, shelling peas alone in his study, or attempting to exercise solitary authority over a pseudo-Republic composed of an army of submissive subordinates.

This description of the RoS as the paradigm of free societies is ideal, in the sense that it outlines a paradigmatic RoS whose members and institutions are, by and large, free of embarrassing or destabilizing self-contradictions and do not, for instance, hold themselves or each other to the strictures of objectivist dogma. The ideal tacitly presumes that most of the citizens of the RoS follow broadly in the shadow of either of the two post-critical figures that figure so prominently in *PK*: the scientist or the post-critical philosopher. It also presumes that most of its members do not follow in the shadow of nihilism or moral-inversion, that is to say that they do not both tacitly and explicitly hold to a strictly absurd idea of reality, conjured by a mindset holding to the implications of Democritean physics and Pyrronian skepticism.³

While this existential contradiction may be rendered relatively harmless as long as the practices and institutions of the RoS remain relatively strong, it is not altogether without consequences, two of which require mentioning. First, the distortion of scientific standards and of the judgment of scientific merit induced by positivistic screeds can impair and distort sciences that deal with higher-level phenomena than those of physics and chemistry. Polanyi himself compiled numerous examples of completely absurd statements and publications, emanating, for example, from anthropology, biology, and psychology to make this point. Second, since the RoS comprises an *institution of culture* within wider, surrounding societies, it follows that society will itself be subjected to the disordering influences of objectivist mores when scientists themselves are impaired by positivism or other forms of objectivism. This tendency then opens up the door to the sorts of dynamo-objective couplings that lend themselves to comprehensive ideologies and ideological movements (compare Poirier, 2009).

It follows that these tendencies are exacerbated to whatever degree that the sciences of man are made essentially impossible to conduct well, for to have a science of man is but to use a shorthand to say that there are perennial endeavours to understand the essence of man and learn how to be most fully human. But, as Polanyi points out, the image of man which is consistent with objectivism can only be expressive of whatever "certain," quantifiable, concrete "facts" which survive the solvents of systematic doubt (*PK* 294-298). "Values," too, will be cut-off from the moorings of reason (i.e., one's hard-won understanding and appreciation) by the insistence on perceiving all things in terms of their lower, component parts. This critical habit necessarily diverts one's awareness away from intrinsic meaning, the purpose and reason of comprehensive

entities or of higher-level aspects of reality. Rather one is diverted towards the less meaningful parts and causes of wholes. When turned to one's fellows, this fixed, critical mindset will quite naturally tend to mistake the appetitive drives as the essence of man, for drives can always be conceived as directed to concrete material objects, even if there is no actual limit or end to them.

As a consequence of adopting the objectivist mindset in pursuit of an understanding of humanity, the unpredictable and highly fecund reality of mind will quite naturally be bypassed for the less real, but more concrete immanent tensions of power and libido, and their objects. "Values" will thus tend to be rendered suspect as the hypocritical masks and epiphenomena of power and gain, and politics will tend to be reduced to calculations of who gets what, where, and why. By such a distorted measure, moral and intellectual honesty could only consist in behaving as an enlightened psychopath or a child.

It stands to reason then, that a reformed RoS, reflecting the full spectrum of Polanyi's thoughts, would be disembarassed of objectivism, and broaden itself to openly respect research into emergent, teleological phenomena. This would necessarily include attempts to gain understanding of the most comprehensive and meaningful aspect of human existence: the intents of men's hearts and minds, as well as their bearing on the endless search for communion with the ground of their principles and their beings. As a consequence, the traditional concern with *philosophia peri tes anthropina* would be brought back into the fold with salutary effects for the political and historical sciences. Conversely, if no longer being ignored, the sciences of man would themselves be held to renewed standards of scientific merit. In fewer words, the Republic would become more consistently Socratic, rather than the unfortunate Chimera that it currently is.

What Polanyi means by the freedom or liberties of free societies, by this reading, is both the freedom to uphold the truth from within a culture or tradition and the civic rights required to do so. This would hold true for a vast expanse of endeavours in the case of a SoE, an expanse which is necessarily much vaster in its membership, concerns, plurality, and polycentricity than the RoS. This is what is indicated by his aphorism that man's freedom within a free society is his calling, and his remark in another context that a man's freedom in a free society is "of a positive kind" (*KB*, 70). That freedom is neither the negative nor the positive freedom defined by Isaiah Berlin in his "Two Concepts of Liberty," or the autonomous freedom of a communal will defined by Rousseau (1978, 52-64). Rather, it is more reminiscent of the classical definition freedom or *eleutheria* lived by the sage or the *spoudaios*, as exemplified by the character of Socrates in the works of Plato and Xenophon. It is, in Polanyi's terms, the freedom of self-compulsion in the pursuit of self-set standards, which we may also experience as the paradox that self-discipline and material sacrifice required by higher, non-material

ends (such as the pursuit of truth) may bring about greater joy than concrete objects. In short, it is the paradox of freedom that discipline in service of wisdom or truth brings joy.

Opening-up the SoE

Society persists to whatever extent to which sufficient conviviality exists among all and sundry to engender not only fellowship, but also loyalty. No earthly society is possible without at least the tacit or passive acceptance by all that the commonwealth is something good in itself, demanding of everyone certain duties, obligations, and even sacrifices up to and including one's own life or external freedoms. But can this understanding be squared with the pluralism of a SoE? It may be objected, as Polanyi himself recognized, that the parochial attitudes that can stem from feelings of brotherhood can threaten to swamp the ship of freedom by subordinating individual culture to civic culture and its demands.⁴

Let us admit, as he did, that this is a danger, and an ineradicable one. In accordance with the logic of emergence, the higher demands and mores of individual culture are challenged and limited by the necessary demands for group loyalty, cooperation, and for a public power capable of sheltering all higher aims. This truth, moreover, is further complicated by individual sins and frailties. Let us say quite frankly that there will always be causes by which any free society, including a SoE, will fall short of the *shared convictions* that direct them and their *institutions of culture*. Such failings may arise from a myriad of sources: the inadequacies of a society's contemporary mores, its institutions, its magistrates, or its transcendental or existential representatives; or they may arise due to more prosaic sins or errors. Let us also be observant of the fact that lower reasons may sometimes be prioritized over higher ones, to tragic effect, as the tale of Antigone's clash with the tyrant Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* reminds us.

Do these hard truths bind us to say that free society is an illusion or hypocritical mask, and therefore bar us from any discussion of a SoE? Not in the least. This is so, for the logic of the pursuit of higher principles in political affairs is still but a reflection of the general logic of emergence. Within this logic, the elements of lower levels of reality (e.g. the necessities of *public power* and economics) are harnessed and directed by comprehensive principles towards new reasons, purposes, or ends when the proper conditions obtain and only for so long as they obtain. As such, they provide both the underlying conditions for success, but may ultimately be the undermining cause of failure. By this token, the measure of success of a society is the degree to which human maturation is enabled and insured, and to which a spirit of responsibility to standards of truth and excellence prevails. The obstreperous stuff from which success must be won is quite a different affair from the measure itself.

Be that as it may, we are left with the question of the extent to which pluralism dovetails with the logic of the SoE. We can recognize that a very wide plurality of paths and endeavours do in fact already prevail in the RoS, and I have argued that that plurality would only broaden with its reformation (§4). The pluralism of the RoS is expressed in the overlapping neighbourhoods of scientists, with each neighbourhood's members attending to acquiring knowledge and understanding of the subject of their passion, while also paying some attention to neighbouring enterprises. The plurality of pursuits of scientists remain reasonably coordinated, "almost as if by an invisible hand," by virtue of common standards and a common faith in the pursuit of truth under the mutual authority of science. In so far as there is a defect in the enterprise, it has been a reflection of official, though needless, adherence to the idols of the mind preached by positivism. Those idols, if anything, can only impair the pluralism of the otherwise polycentric and ecumenic order of the RoS.

Existing free societies too, are effectively pluralistic, often prioritizing vastly different values, principles, and pursuits. They tolerate or encourage a wide variety of institutions of culture to enrichen, expand, proselytize, or administer the vast ocean of knowledge, opinions, artifacts, and practices that they allow to guide them. As has been said earlier, the character of any society is but a magnified reflection of the shared convictions of its members, the pursuit of which is guided and shaped by cultural institutions; all the while societies are bound together by fellowship and supported by whatever institutions foster that fellow feeling. If, however, we admit that objectivism encourages or enforces the pursuit of false or debased standards and principles that are caustic enough to impair even the standards of the RoS, then one would expect even greater troubles to arise when objectivist views come to guide a much broader society.

By Polanyi's estimation, that is precisely what has occurred—and will occur—in societies in which forms of objectivism have sufficiently dissolved traditional moral restraints and guidance and thereby eliminated common commitment to those higher principles that are capable of fostering common bonds and understanding amidst a plurality of perspectives. Enlightenment rationalism was successful in breaking-up the worst of Europe's medieval idols and in setting into motion whole series of social reforms, the conclusion of which is still to be seen after more than three-hundred years. Yet the strict consequences of combining a blind faith in Democritean and Pyrronian thinking could only be the sort of appetitive individualism premised by both Hobbes and Rousseau—and of a society which could only then be maintained (as they both logically concluded) by the erection of an absolutely Sovereign *public power* capable of artificially organizing, directing, and, in fact, creating order out of chaos. In effect, what both men realized was that power would need to replace principles and fellowship, both of which would also need to be artificially manufactured (*KB*, 6-9). In short, objectivist thought repudiates transcendent principles in favour of the "concrete," and

with that, repudiates the authority of flesh-and-blood human beings to negotiate a commonwealth with higher principles, and also the human freedom to reform said commonwealth's character, representation, and *noosphere*.

To extrapolate from Polanyi's clues, the SoE, by contrast, reflects in theory what existing free societies at their best often do in practice. That is to say, that the SoE is defined by an openness to follow the guidance of a wide range of mutual authorities hailing from a multitude of neighbourhoods of human endeavour, in full understanding that any currently accepted consensus may conceivably be wrong, and that the truth will continue to reveal herself in infinite future manifestations. The SoE's general character would thus be that quintessential mix of confidence and humility, curiosity and conviction that characterize the post-critical philosopher or scientist. I will further suggest, alongside Polanyi, that being free from the absurd demands of objectivism would allow for a rapprochement with tradition and religion in the modern mind.⁵

The Convivial Structure of the Society

The formal features of a self-consistent SoE can thus be summarized as its spontaneous ordering, its internal dynamism, and its polycentricity. These may imaginably manifest in myriad ways and in varying proportions in any particular time and place (as in fact, we find to be the case in actual free societies, past and present). However, it should be abundantly clear that these features are aspects of freedom as Polanyi understood its meaning. In the following section, I shall turn to the more specific question of relating the general character of the SoE to Polanyi's four convivial *coefficients of society*, in contrast to those of the RoS (§4).

Briefly: freedom is manifested by those who responsibly exercise their calling to encounter, know, and proclaim the truth. This responsibility is upheld in all societies that honour truth, and submit to her guidance. What separates the comparatively conservative character of static societies from the dynamism of free societies is not, in fact, the desire for society to reflect the truth, *per se*. Rather, what differentiates the latter, by Polanyi's estimation, is the degree of honour paid to the critical powers of the mind as a requirement for true understanding and proper reforms in one's being. It also bears on the history of social reform that the heightened moral passions educated by Christianity have provided tremendous energy to the critique of social ills and their remediation, including that of the most ardent atheists. The great moral truths expressed through Christian traditions and other transcendent moral callings have been no less a factor in the freedom and dynamism of our time than the astronomical truths unveiled by Kepler and Galileo.

It is for this reason that the SoE can be thought of as the post-critical philosopher writ large (to borrow a Socratic maxim): it represents a balance in the understanding between critique, faith, and comprehension, moved by the all-pervading desire to

know. Its dynamism is an image, so to speak, of the comfortable embodiment of the post-critical mind, generally accepting an inheritance of articulate culture as its happy dwelling place, while encouraging the emergence of meaningful dissent and reform in response to its principles. Its spontaneous ordering and polycentricity are, in turn, reflective of the emerging control, on a societal scale, of the same principles as help define one's personal knowledge and independent power of thought, along with all of the inevitable human limits, frailties, and failures.⁶

As we have extrapolated, much of the progress, openness, dynamism, and commitment to such principles as truth, which characterize the RoS as an exemplary free society (§4), must hold true as well in a SoE. That being the case, it remains true that the quintessential characteristics of a free society (SoEs necessarily included) would be limited, perhaps fatally, by the imposition of central planning of a society's coefficients by a specific authority, or by organizing individual or collective endeavours like an exercise in pea-shelling. This is a truth that prevails as much for the *cultural* coefficient of any society, as it does for the production and distribution of the external goods of life. In a complex society, the life of the mind and the economy are only effective if they find a spontaneous order through mutual cooperation. A sense of *fellowship* in a SoE, moreover, like in the RoS, is only conceivable through a prevailing desire for the truth, wisdom enough to respect that it will reveal itself in infinite future manifestations, a sense of being at home in the authority of a tradition, and the humility to recognize that no one creed, domain, or tradition will ever more than provide one with foundations and point one in the right direction, at its best.

Moreover, the relationship of the spontaneous order of a free society's *noosphere* to that of its *economic system of cooperation* is analogous to the relationship between one's personal intellectual passions and material appetites. As was observed earlier, our valuation of things is very much a reflection of our due appreciation and understanding of them, that is to say that it is a function of our knowledge and comprehension of the intrinsic and extrinsic meaning of things. The price mechanism of the market, on the other hand, is but an imitation of value; it allows for buyers and sellers to coordinate their actions, "as if by an invisible hand," by providing them with a sign by which to come to rational judgements regarding a multitude of transactions in goods. In this way, an order can arise through mutual self-adjustment in the ineffably complex and extensive network of needs, desires, and production in a dynamic society.⁷

Yet the spontaneous order of a market is, in itself, nearly blind to value, and in fact relies on an antecedent education which evokes an understanding of value, something which can only be supplied by one's individual acculturation within a *noosphere*. A mountain of maize is of no value to a starving man, if he has no experience of it and has not the slightest knowledge to prepare it for consumption. It only follows from this that its price could never be set low enough to stir his interest in it. Similarly, the

Egyptian peasants who for years used volumes of the Nag Hammadi scrolls for kindling had too little relevant knowledge to understand that there may be a market for such priceless cultural artifacts.

Yet this disjunction between price and value is a commonplace that at times becomes farcical (as when attempts are made to dispute the market price of things which are strictly priceless) owing to the fact that such things are the pre-conditions of the existence of a market, of civilized life, or life simply. All of this is merely to point out explicitly that the invisible hand of the markets is always subordinate and dependent upon a properly functioning culture. A great deal more “market value” would be irrevocably destroyed by a collapse of one’s culture into a fixation with purely vulgarian appetites than by the collapse of a stock exchange. The latter would require a re-coordination of finances, debts, and exchanges; the former would see Rembrandt in a fireplace. Yet this simple observation is but another side of the same need to educate the passions that hold at the individual level, and merely goes to show both the ubiquitous power of thought, and the necessity of bringing our understanding and conduct in line with reality as far as we are capable. It also follows from these implications in Polanyi’s work that the spontaneous order of a market is far more dependent upon institutions of culture than is commonly or explicitly recognized. In following the direction of his thoughts, we are therefore compelled to say that the spontaneous order of the *economic system* of a SoE, must necessarily be tethered to and given direction and form by the spontaneous order of its *noosphere*, as embodied in said society’s *institutions of culture*.

I believe that it is in a similar manner that Polanyi sees all free societies, and therefore a SoE, ideally directing the forces of their *public power*. We have seen that within the RoS, the primary means by which scientists exercise their authority on each other and advance their common goals and the common good is through the apportioning of honour, shame, and resources. This occurs as scientists authoritatively judge their peers and their works in conversation with the understanding and contributions of the apprentice-scientists, students, lay-experts and laypersons who greatly outnumber them.

In the much wider life of a SoE, such allocations of punishments and honours can be no less necessary, for the range of sins, moral failings, and irresponsibility that are of importance to any free society is very much greater. In fact, in free societies, the adjudication of right and wrong has generally been made the subject of the expertise of jurists, lawyers, and officers of the peace, who are apportioned the task of determining the law and maintaining the right. It is noteworthy as well that Polanyi particularly approved of the common-law tradition, with its emphasis upon “finding the law,” for this tradition, he judged, much better expressed the living and personal character of the universal intent of law. As such, we would infer too that the public power of the SoE too is a spontaneous order, setting upon all and sundry of the commonwealth, those

boundaries of a moral calling and the duty to exercise responsibility with universal intent. In Platonic terms, it comprises the “thumotic” ordering of the commonwealth (Plato 1968, Bk. III-IV).

Conclusion

If I am correct in this, and I believe that I am, it would be proper to say the ideally manifest SoE is, in fact, a four-fold, open hierarchy of spontaneous orders, reflecting all four of Polanyi’s *coefficients of society*. Taken together Polanyi’s insights would thus render us with a wholly novel understanding of the essence of an open and free society, the question of which has actively bedevilled political theory since Hobbes and Rousseau. In short, if order emerges in the world through our active pursuit and embodiment of truth, then, contra e.g., Hobbes and Rousseau, the world is not simply an intrinsic chaos of matter in motion nor human beings *simply* a chaos of appetites and will, and the modern drive to *create* and *impose* order through sovereign power and civil religion is founded on a fundamental error.

Such then are the signs and the standards of a Society of Explorers, as I have drawn them out through long dwelling on Polanyi’s meaning and intent, and by contemplating the problems, the questions and the clues which he has left behind. Such too, then, the reasons for affirming that his insights are, essentially, Socratic in kind. The Society can be affirmed to be an image of the truly free man writ large, and he, the *cosmos* writ small, forever in the process of becoming something in light of moving and eternal sources of illumination.

ENDNOTES

¹I have argued elsewhere that fully unpacking what is implied by the structure of commitment reveals it to be no more or less than a deep and confident expression of one’s personal and tacit knowledge, thus making it consistent with Polanyi’s introductory remarks in the *TD* that, by fully working-out what was implied in the theory of tacit knowledge, he had lightened the burden carried by commitment *qua* commitment (Cordner, 2013 and 2017).

²C.P. Goodman (2008, n. 63) notes that M.P. first employed the term “spontaneous order” in the essay “Planning and Spontaneous Order” (1948), twelve years before Friedrich Hayek adopted the term from him in 1960. Polanyi thus substituted “spontaneous order” for the term “dynamic order,” which he had used in the 1941 essay “The Growth of Thought in Society” and had likely derived it from the work of Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Kohler.

³Yeager (2002) provides an exhaustive and eminently useful list of twelve components, features, historical antecedents, and other factors that Polanyi, over the course of his career, wrote of as contributing to the character of the age. She passes quite quickly, though, over these two basic seeds of the critical or objective mind and treats them as one, but that is a topic I cannot pursue here.

⁴See, for instance, his thoughts on the necessary tension between individual and civic culture in *PK*, 213-216, 222-224 and similar remarks made in Polanyi (2013, 7–11). See also Gelwick (2014, 26) and Mullins (2013, 4–6).

⁵For Polanyi's stronger statements with regards to a rapprochement between the premises of Western culture, religion, and worship, see *PK*, 280-286, 324; *SM*, 42; *TD*, 90-92.

⁶Allen (1998, 185-211) has proposed that Polanyi's theory of the SoE may need to be conjoined with Hayek's concept of the Great Society in order to supplement the weaknesses of both, i.e., the relatively narrow scope of Polanyi's theory, and Hayek's overemphasis upon negative freedoms.

⁷See *KB*, 50-53, 69, 84. Cf. *TD*, 70-73. For a lengthier discussion of Polanyi's thoughts and contributions to economics, see Mitchell (2008), Gulick (2008), and Roberts and Van Cott (1999).

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