

THE EDUCATIONAL PREREQUISITES OF REHABILITATION

Jon Fennell

There is much in Polanyi's work that bears on all three of the questions whose treatment constitutes this forum. In what follows, I will focus on the third of these questions, "What remedies might Polanyi suggest for rehabilitating our experiment in democracy?" But, since it is scarcely possible to discuss remedies without at the same time reflecting on what it is that needs to be remedied, we will inevitably touch on the causes of our current disorders as well.

In "The Study of Man," a paper from 1961, Polanyi aptly cites *The Abolition of Man* by C. S. Lewis. What makes this citation apt is that Polanyi in this essay is principally concerned with the widespread tendency for the manifest success of scientific endeavor to be employed as justification for a reductionist conception of man—one in which man is reduced "either to an insentient automaton or to a bundle of appetites" (26) and thus incapable of moral responsibility—while Lewis in his book is focused precisely on the flawed ideas and associated moral and intellectual formation that engendered this disaster. Primarily responsible for the dangerously truncated conception of humanity, says Lewis, is a training (what we should appropriately call a "miseducation") that debunks moral sentiment and renders suspect any claim to knowledge of real and genuine incumbent value. This flawed pedagogy, rampant in English schools between the world wars (and, alas, prevalent in educational institutions, especially the universities, here and in other Western democracies during our own time), insists that judgments of value are intrinsically subjective, a function of non-rational forces. Under this view, such judgments, properly understood, are merely a concealed mechanism employed by one interest or faction to establish and maintain its advantage over others. Accordingly, subjugated groups remain dominated and oppressed to the degree that they believe that the true or the good in fact exists and they are bound by its authority. (Under this ideology, the fundamental actor is always collective: race, gender, class, etc. The idea that the individual person, with access to the universal, is primary, is viewed as an instance of hegemonic politics of consciousness.) Liberation thus consists in seeing through all of this and, after rejecting the clever universalist cloak of hegemony, asserting one's own conceptions in its place. Polanyi's primary contribution to the preservation of the liberal democratic order (and Lewis's as well) consists in revealing the terrible consequences of such skepticism and cynicism and pointing in its stead to the fruitful coherence of an alternative traditional understanding of value.

In "The Study of Man" Polanyi observes that, "Our age is racked by the fanaticism of unbelievers" (28). Stripped by skepticism and cynicism of any possibility of straightforward allegiance to universal principle or ideal, the angry protestor (satisfying an unacknowledged appetite by clandestinely yet fervently appealing to a moral universal) topples a statue of Abraham Lincoln or even of Frederick Douglass (both, after all, are committed believers in universal value), or defiles the Capitol building (the very existence of which points to something higher). Nearly all the rancor and violence of recent times is a product of the eclipse of commitment to, and thereby the reality of, the unifying ideals without which this nation, or any nation so conceived, cannot endure. This eclipse, in turn, is the product of a pervasive skepticism and cynicism that is the logical (and for Polanyi as well as Lewis, predictable) consequence of the influence of historicist-based reductionist ideology growing out of the Hegelian framework and achieving widespread currency through Marxism and its innumerable latter-day variations. In short, the root of the loss in vitality of the American

experiment is decay in the real presence of the defining principles of the Republic as a consequence of a miseducation rooted in neo-Marxist ideology in the guise of class, race, and other forms of identity politics and their underlying zero-sum reductionist power-based analysis and worldview. Only the rehabilitation of universal principle and ideal—indeed, of the very possibility of such—can sustain the regime (and Western civilization generally). The sole vehicle for such rehabilitation is a renaissance of education broadly understood. If we would have a return of the Republic of a healthier time, we must have a return to the character formation and associated moral and intellectual enablement of that healthier time. There is no better guide for what can and must be done than Polanyi's *Science, Faith and Society*, especially its elaboration and endorsement of "primary education" (above all, on pp. 71-72 and 83).

Polanyi offers additional guidance for rehabilitation in *Personal Knowledge*. Within the passionate crescendo with which the book closes, Polanyi refers to the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the human race that "is wholly determined as that which we believe to be true and right; it is the external pole of our commitments, the service of which is our freedom" (404). Significantly, he adds that this knowledge and wisdom "defines a free society as a fellowship fostering truth and respecting the right" (404). It is no wonder, then, that Polanyi points us to Lewis and *The Abolition of Man*. For no one is more alert than Lewis to the price to be paid when people are either unwilling or unable to believe in a truth and rightness that exists beyond our petty divisions and trivial tribal identities and that, in its universality, is binding on each individual. Without the enablement afforded by appropriate initiation and apprenticeship there is no "man" and thus certainly no grounds for principled citizenship. The Republic is defined in terms of principle and ideal. Without securing the conditions under which these become real in the lives of the young who will tomorrow rule as adults, it can only be futile to speak of rehabilitation and, through it, preservation of the American experiment.¹

ENDNOTE

¹For more on the pedagogical prerequisites for rehabilitation, see Jon Fennell, "On Authority and Political Destination: Michael Polanyi and the Threshold of Postmodernism," *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (July-September 2013), pp. 154-161 (esp. 158-59), as well as Jon Fennell and Timothy L. Simpson, "A Polanyian Rationale for a Liberal Arts Curriculum" (forthcoming in *Theory and Research in Education*).

REFERENCES

- Lewis, C.S. 2001 [1944]. *The Abolition of Man*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1962. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1946. *Science, Faith, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1961. "The Study of Man." *Quest* 29 (April-June):26-34. Also available in the Gelwick microfilm collection at <http://www.polanyisociety.org/essays.htm>.