
Reviews

Gregory Baum. *Karl Polanyi On Ethics And Economics*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996.

As an economist, I will hazard the guess that most of my brethren who have read a bit of Karl Polanyi (KP) are quite unaware that the more famous Michael Polanyi (MP) was his brother. I find this surprising, given many important parallels in their ideas. I should state at the outset that my own work as an economist has been largely shaped by the influence of KP.

The cultural separation of KP and MP might just reflect the rift between the social and physical sciences. But one expects more willingness to cross boundaries from those influenced by their ideas. It must be said that these boundaries were not explicitly bridged by either brother in his published writings. As far as I know, neither ever mentioned the other, despite maintaining what seem to have been close personal relations.

Gregory Baum's book does not mention MP. But its focus on the ethical and spiritual dimensions of KP's work opens up comparisons with MP. I am a student of KP, not MP, but I offer several points from Baum's book that suggest striking parallels between the two.

KP was definitely a partisan of the left. But he has been mis-interpreted (or mis-appropriated) by those on the left who see him too simply as an opponent of the market and all its associated civic institutions. On the contrary, a major thesis of KP's economic anthropology was that markets play an important role *within* most traditional societies, but not standing outside and dominating social life.

KP is best known for *The Great Transformation*, recently picked by the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the

"100 most important books" for understanding contemporary Western society. While scathing on the anomie spawned by a global market "dis-embedded" from traditional and local social institutions, KP was absolutely *not* a critic of "bourgeois morality" in the sense of Marx.

Quite the contrary. KP saw the bourgeois civic tradition (das burgerliche Gewissen, in an earlier essay) as very much an obstacle to the reduction of human beings to money values. Bourgeois society is the nurturing soil that made the impersonal, self-regulating market possible. The extension of this market, however, can threaten to destroy personal community relations, destroying the market's own peaceful, well-ordered preconditions. Thus the market must be restrained by market society--this is KP's analysis of the "double movement" of capitalism. Baum writes:

This then is Polanyi's original argument: the longing of the bourgeois conscience transcends the possibilities of bourgeois society. What this conscience calls for is the creation of a transparent society that allows its members to estimate the effects of what they are doing and thus assume ethical responsibilities for their actions... According to Polanyi, there are no fixed laws that define the life of society. If it seems to people that such laws do exist, then the reason for this is that they have been successfully persuaded to see society in this way... The subject of history is responsible human beings (pp. 27-28).

KP's socialism was of a communitarian or Christian stripe rather than as a belief in central planning. Baum points out the ties between KP's thought and Catholic social doctrine. KP wrote an essay for a book entitled "Christianity and the Social Revolution." His essay, written in 1933, was entitled "The Essence of Fascism."

Notes on Contributors

In this essay, KP warned that the spiritual virulence of Nazism is its offer to “relieve” the individual of personal identity. This is the antithesis of KP’s idea of community. According to Baum:

There does exist, Polanyi argues, a Christian concept of society... When Polanyi writes that the discovery of the soul is at the same time the discovery of society or that society is a relationship of persons, he offers a *personalist conception of society*, that is, a society characterized by cooperation and co-responsibility that recognizes the personal dignity and equality of its citizens (emphasis added, p. 33).

I offer these passages in hopes of provoking more work on the relation of the Polanyi brothers. Most of the work I have seen seems far too polemical. The ties between their work are formed by an extraordinary family full of lonely geniuses and courageous individuals, by their Jewish tradition of Christianity, and by a distinctly Austrian skepticism toward abstract formalization. These resonances are more important, I would argue, than any explicit political statements. Polanyians of either stripe should be able to understand that.

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Electronic Discussion Group

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group exploring implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. For those with access to the INTERNET, send a message to “owner-polanyi@sbu.edu” to join the list or to request further information. Communications about the electronic discussion group may also be directed to John V. Apczynski, Department of Theology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778-0012 PHONE: (716) 375-2298 FAX: (716) 375-2389.

Dale Cannon is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Western Oregon State College, Monmouth, OR 97361. He has long been interested in Polanyi, having written his '69 Duke dissertation under William H. Poterat on “Mastered Irony: The Point of Entry Into a Post-Critical Epistemology.” Cannon written several articles for *TAD*. He is currently interested in corresponding with teachers of philosophy who are interested in rethinking the teaching of philosophy from a perspective opened up by Polanyi and post-critical philosophy His recent book, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion* (Wadsworth, 1996), was reviewed in *TAD* XXII:3 (email: cannodw@fsa.wosc.osshe.edu).

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Elaine Hocks received her Ph.D. from the English Department at the University of Missouri in Rhetoric and Critical Theory. Her professional interests are in contemporary theory and its relationship to rhetoric and the teaching of writing. She directs the Missouri University Writing Lab, teaches in the Honors Humanities sequence, and supervises both graduate and honors undergraduate students in writing internships in the lab (engelain@showme.missouri.edu).

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