

# From Salon to Institute: Convivial Spaces in the Intellectual Life of Michael Polanyi

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*From Chapter Two in Science, Faith, and Society, to the central mediating center of the long argument in Personal Knowledge, “Conviviality,” Polanyi continued to extend his “post critical inquiry” in his visits to a wide variety of centers and institutes which relate to his earliest intellectual and aesthetic education in the salon of his mother. The concept of conviviality finds its autobiographical correlative in such spaces.*

Biographies of significant people in our lives inevitably provoke autobiographical re-visitations. This is case for this reader of *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher*, by William Taussig Scott and Martin X. Moleski. It no surprise then that I begin my comments on what I have learned from this useful and comprehensive work with a first time of meeting anecdote. However, my choice of this anecdote reaches beyond its occasion and allows me to introduce a major, if under appreciated, central motif in Polanyi’s thought. My appreciation for this recurrent topic has been documented and enlarged by my reading of this biography.

I met Michael Polanyi in late December, 1956, at the Beekman Towers Hotel in New York City. The meeting was arranged by a letter of introduction from my friend and former teacher William Poteat, then assistant professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (p. 226). Professor Polanyi was in New York to address the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The address was published as “Scientific Outlook: Its Sickness and Cure,”<sup>1</sup> (Science 125 March, 15, 1957).

We went up to the cocktail lounge in the penthouse of the hotel which faced south toward the United Nations building on the East River. The mid afternoon sun illuminated the UN Tower, though my attention was only peripherally occupied with that image, His face and his voice offered a double welcome. The face of my host changed from gravity to levity in swift alterations while his voice shifted smoothly from middle to lower registers. As the conversation found its rhythm and gained in confidence and intimacy, the table between us with its white table cloth seemed too wide. I leaned into the conversation wanting to catch every nuance. Polanyi’s mastery of the art of conversation invited me to forget this distinguished figure with the F. R. S. behind his name and Professor in front of it. I was freed to attend to words I was hearing for the first time that I would be able to hear many times in the years ahead. In a very short, while the large disparity in our status ceased to matter. What mattered was the conversation. Though it was by no means an equal exchange.

What began to matter was Polanyi’s analysis of the Hungarian Revolution of the previous October. I was hearing phrases—accompanied by diagrams on the menu—like “moral inversion,” and “dynamic-objective coupling,” “moral passions” disguised as “scientific assertions,” all terms against the background of Polanyi’s report of the refusal of a group of Hungarian intellectuals and writers in a public declaration that they would no longer tell lies. The fiftieth anniversary of this event next October renews and sharpens the memory of that conversation. The readers of this biography will appreciate the attachments Polanyi never ceased to hold for his home city of Budapest, fraught with scenes of his coming of age. While I recalled the concept of “moral

inversion” from the *Logic of Liberty*, Polanyi’s analysis of the events in his home city were new and compelled me to want more instruction in them. Lacking the larger context later provided by the publication of *Personal Knowledge*, I wondered if what I was hearing was political philosophy, or epistemology, or both? I soon realized that prevailing classifications of intellectual work would not work in gaining an understanding of Polanyi’s work.

I eventually learned that he had to provide more than arguments for his work to be understood. He had to provide contexts for its reception. This biography offers major resources for a re-reading of his work since it offers opportunities to locate Polanyi in a much larger network, including family, institutions, and those informal circles of friends and associates that loom so large in this biography. . For example, I did not know of his early relationship with George Lukacs and Karl Mannheim, or, later with Czeslaw Milosz, whose 1953 book, *The Captive Mind*, would make a companion in discussions about the Hungarian Revolt of October, 1956.

In the context of this first meeting, I became acquainted with the work that was to become Chapter 7 of *Personal Knowledge*, already titled “Conviviality” on the galley proofs Polanyi, entirely to my surprise and delight, offered to loan me for my train trip back to New Haven, on condition that I return them the following afternoon. I learned the following year when I was a research student under Professor Polanyi’s supervision in the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies at the University of Manchester that this gesture was an authentic expression of the man. I was amused to learn from this biography that the previous year Polanyi had given Bill Poteat “three or four chapters of what was later to become part of *Personal Knowledge*. Poteat was terrified of losing the manuscript, since he had not had the presence of mind to ask whether another copy existed.” (p. 226). Out of my inexperience and in the after glow of my first conversation, I did not have the presence of mind to think about this possibility!

I was not surprised to read in this biography that when the University of Chicago Press asked Polanyi for a clean copy of *Science, Faith and Society* in preparation for the publication of a new edition, he did not have one. “In his enthusiasm for sharing his ideas, Polanyi had given away all of his own copies of the book.” (p.251). For the many who knew him well, there is agreement that Michael Polanyi embodied in his person many of the salient features of his concept of conviviality. This biography expands our knowledge of his social history and offers a rich and varied background for discovering the coherence among Polanyi’s central ideas, particularly this concept, and many chapters in his personal and professional history.

In what follows, and with the essential help of the co-authors of this biography, I will offer an incomplete inventory of scenes spanning his life time which exemplify autobiographical coefficients of the concept of conviviality. Moving from what he has written about conviviality, which I will not detail here except to note that much of this topic is foreshadowed by second chapter in *Science, Faith and Society*, these notes offer some assistance in understanding features of Polanyi’s practice as a scientist and philosopher that the concept itself does not disclose but surely presupposes. These scenes from his life, early and late, are social contexts and sources for the nourishment of his imagination. It is with forethought that in the introductory anecdote of my first meeting with Polanyi there I stressed his conversation. In all the scenes included in this inventory, conversation among diverse scholars and intellectual is a constant reference across a wide variety of different informal and institutional spaces. Consider the following types: salon, seminar, laboratory, circle, working group, center, institute, committee (for intellectual purposes), among others, omitting lectureships and short term residencies during which Polanyi delivered lectures and papers at dozens of institutions and societies. Polanyi was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California in 1962-1963. Showing himself an ethnographer of the academic ethos as well as a participant, here is what he wrote his compatriot and long term friend Arthur Koestler. Note both critique and generosity, not to speak of his characteristically soft ironies, in the passage that follows:

It is a collection of specialists, a nice collection, occasionally instructive, but still only a replica of the academic mind, or lack of mind. Comprehensive issues cause a dreamy look to come into their eyes. 'It is not something one can get one's teeth into'—not their kind of teeth. I enjoy it, for I am used to the tribe; and at least there is an effort of keeping the conversation going, instead of just ducking behind the screen of expertise and academic routine problems. Yes, I like it very much but doubt you would. (p. 249)

The temptation for commentary is great, but now I want to call attention to another scene, a recurring one, in his young life, at home, in Budapest, to the salon of his mother, Cecile Wohl Polanyi, who was, in the words of Karl Polanyi's widow, Ilona, writing in 1971, "in her later years a focal point of the avant-garde literary and political life of Budapest:"

Clever and amusing in conversation, she loved being with people, drawing out their interests and opinions, as well as discussing what she learned from her extensive reading in literature and social theory." (pp. 6-7) Our biographers continue this description of Michael's mother: "For three decades Cecile's talents were mainly channeled into her weekly literary salons. These had started after her marriage in 1881 with 'jours,' gatherings of a group of women friends, and expanded to include the bright young men and women of the avant garde. Cecile would pick up some challenging thought as a starting point for the conversation. Every new idea from the West was discussed. Here, right at home, was a model for Polanyi's later idea of a society of explorers. . . (p. 7).

While I was in Manchester, 1957-1958, Michael mentioned that as a young boy he slipped downstairs and found a hiding place just out of sight so he could listen in on some of these conversations in his mother's solon. It is not difficult to imagine that in the words he wrote to Koestler about the conversations at the Center in Palo Alto there are echoes of his early experience at home, of the conversations conducted by his mother and her friends. As any attentive reader of this biography soon learns, these conversations introduced Polanyi to a variety of forms of intellectual life, which in a variety of different formats and venues, he participated in the rest of his life. An incomplete list must be the substitute for description: his classes at the Minta Gymnasium "where classes were based on informal interchange between teachers and students, and the learning was achieved through practicing and reasoning rather than by rote memory of material given in formal lectures." (p. 15-16); the Galileo Circle (p. 21-23); the Petofi Circle (p. 228); the Sunday Afternooners, where he first met Karl Mannheim, a relationship renewed when he moved to England from Germany in 1933 (p. 41, p. 194); and The Moot in England which he joined at Mannheim's suggestion. (pp. 196-197).

Polanyi is the best witness to the power of these quiet gatherings. After he and Mannheim commented on a paper by T. S. Eliot, "Clerisy and Clerisies," he wrote to Joseph Oldham, the founder of the Moot, "These things change our lives." (p. 197).

I was for more than twenty years Director of the the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The use of the term "institute" in my title bears two meanings, though I imagine there is a strong analogy between the two. In the first instance this term refers to Polanyi's institutional affiliations as a student of chemistry, and later in Germany as a researcher during the stages of his career in the Karlsruhe, 1919-1920, The Fiber Institute, 1920-1923, and Institute for Physical Chemistry, 1923-1933. In the second instance, this term refers to the institutes and centers, primarily in North America, where Polanyi visited recurrently during his later years at Manchester and Oxford, which the authors aptly term "At the Wheel of the World, 1961-1971," as well as in his "Last Years, 1971-1976."

In the former cases, the note I stress is the distinctively different organizational structure of the German institute in contrast to the North American universities department. However, in the physical sciences there is a common element as well: the laboratory and the lab group. But the differences are decisive. The European institutes are free standing with much lateral exchange among them. The practice of knowledge in these spaces is in the collaborative mode of the lab group, so sharply different from the solo mode of work characteristic of the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Significant changes in the organization of intellectual work in North America began to occur in the 1960's when some American universities began to tolerate, and them support more convivial spaces found in centers and institutes similar to the Center for Advanced Studies on the Sanford campus referred to above. The slow dissolution of the encoded fiction of separate and distinguishable boundaries between areas of research was haltingly acknowledged at the organizational level by the emergence of multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary centers and institutes. What mattered most was the opening up of convenient, daily opportunities for serious conversations by scholars and practitioners in a variety of fields in spaces and at times which encouraged convivial exchanges. Polanyi's letter to Arthur Koestler quoted above offers a brief sample in his witty description of the pleasures and frustrations of conversations in such venues.

Like the shifting memberships in his mother's salon, Polanyi was early and late a border crosser. He discovered early that the best locations for finding and testing ideas are at the cross roads, not in the cell, study, library, or what Archbishop Temple in his Gifford Lectures called "Descartes's Stove."

Many students of Polanyi's work recognize the paradigmatic role the organization of science in general and the laboratory in particular played in his arguments for freedom in science and for his arguments against central planning. This biography provides a densely rich set of narratives and descriptions of his life and work which strengthens our understanding of the intimate relationship between the tacit dimension in knowing and the convivial settings where intellectual work is conducted. Now we can expand the notion of the inarticulate dimension in knowing to include a sociological correlative to the epistemological. "Conviviality" is a polyvalent, open textured term that needs an ethnographer with a flexible wrist to mark its dynamics. However, Polanyi has taught us to expect such descriptions to be limited by elusive and inarticulate dimensions. While such putative genealogies cast as much darkness as light, it is a useful heuristic to imagine a conversation—yes, at table or in a lounge in some center or institute (café or kitchen)—among Emile Durkheim, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi. Perhaps the performance of such a conversation will be staged as an after dinner exercise at some center or institute.

Lest this seem so grave a matter, I stress that such settings are also spaces where its members are free to don an antic disposition. The water pistols "fights" at the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University where Polanyi was a fellow in 1965-1966, were mythic in memory if not in fact. The description of the costume parties at the Institute for Physical Chemistry in Berlin (p. 128) held each year during Fasching, the time of carnival just prior to Lent, is a better documented case of antic creativity. Polanyi's lab group translated Schrodinger's wave-mechanical interpretation of quantum mechanics into an allegory in which astronomers came dressed as sun and moon and Max Delbruck came dressed as a hotel boy "Psi Psi Star." (p. 128) Such antics remind us that experimentation and playing in disguise are first cousins. Humor and discovery are founded on "effective surprise." (Jerome Bruner). Conviviality as articulated by Polanyi and as lived by him before he conceptualized it was much more than a sociological or an epistemological concept. An inclusive comprehension of the multiple aspects of conviviality includes festivity as well as dialectic and both require commodious accommodations from salon and circle, working group and conference, center and institute.

The "Society of Explorers" and "The Republic of Science," need seasons of gravity as well as levity. Michael Polanyi's face, as I recall our first meeting now renewed by the generous display of photographs from all seasons of his life in this volume, became for me the lively image of these gestures, now supplemented by the echoes of his conversation whispering between the lines of his biography.

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