



POLANYIAN REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S.A.



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ABSTRACT

In response to the events of January 6 and the second impeachment trial, which made clear the fragility of democracy in the USA, several scholars whose work has appeared in this journal comment on one or more of the following questions: (1) What causes, epistemic and/or social, might Polanyi see as contributing to the incivility, rancor, and division that now characterize American politics? (2) What would Polanyi say about the events of January 6, as well as the events leading up to it? (3) What remedies might Polanyi suggest for rehabilitating our experiment in democracy?

MICHAEL POLANYI ON SOCIAL ORDER

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Michael Polanyi confronted and analyzed both extraordinary political turmoil and political violence in the last century. He was a physician in World War I and he left Hungary for Germany after the fall of the Liberal post-World War I government. He likely anticipated the Red Terror which came when the short-lived communist government took control but was soon succeeded by the Horthy government and the White Terror (Scott and Moleski 2005, 33-51). In 1933, Polanyi left Germany as the Nazis tightened their grip. He had recently declined a position at Manchester University but reconsidered after Hitler was given dictatorial powers, and he eventually advised the Vice Chancellor at Manchester he would take a position under any terms offered (Scott and Moleski 2005, 133-142). Later, he was refused entry into the U.S. to take a position at the University of Chicago due to the upheaval in the U.S. associated with Joseph McCarthy. Polanyi organized events and wrote about issues central to Cold War politics for fifteen years in the programs of the Congress for Cultural Freedom; the Hungarian Revolution, the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the possibility of nuclear destruction also profoundly troubled Polanyi and led him to write essays (Scott and Moleski 2005, 211-294).

What follows is a selection of Polanyi comments on social order that I believe bear on the troubling, deep problems that surfaced at the end of 2020 and early in 2021 in U.S. political culture.

Mutual trust is fragile—and especially so in contemporary digital culture—and the crumbing of trust undermines agreement about facts:

The process of moral inversion inevitably undermines the very conception of facts, of ordinary matters of fact. After all, the overwhelming part of our factual beliefs are held at second hand through trusting others . . .

The widely extended network of mutual trust, on which the factual consensus of a free society depends, is fragile. Any conflict which sharply divides people will tend to destroy this mutual trust and make universal agreement on facts bearing on the conflict difficult to achieve (1956, 16).

Human beings must regard each other foremost as moral beings. Moral confidence among persons in a cultural and political context that relies upon public discussion is the underpinning of governance by consent:

Moreover, without moral confidence between men there can be no government by the consent of the governed. For no government would be trusted not to abuse its position and to relinquish power when consent was withdrawn....Thus inevitably, once we deny that moral motives play a part in politics, we find that the only possible form of government is by force (1947/2020, 27).

A free society can exist only if men firmly believe in each other as essentially moral beings. Free government is guided by discussion; that is its very essence. But how can you argue with people who have no moral conscience? What is the use of appealing to their sense of justice or to their social responsibility? They can neither be expected to respond to such argument nor to believe that it means anything on our own lips. And even if [in] the discussion we were only to make statements of facts, why should anybody believe that we are telling the truth? Unless people maintain a considerable degree of confidence in each other's respect for moral standards, there is no common ground between them and any attempt to seek remedy for grievances by appealing to public opinion is as senseless as it is impracticable (1947/2020, 27).

Populism is a great danger insofar as it suppresses genuine, serious discussion which is a primary domain for the exercise of public freedom:

Freedom to-day [sic] is drowned in popular emotion (1940/1975, 96).

The fight for freedom must aim...centrally at the voluntary reunion of conflicting groups. This is the unending task of those dedicated to the service of liberty. For life in a changing society can never cease to produce new dissensions and free citizens can therefore never pause in their search for new harmonious solutions to ever recurring conflicts (1947, 1058).

The rule of law, the exercise of public liberty, and democratic electoral practices focused on universal suffrage must go hand in hand.

We may call democratic a political system in which the rule of law sustains public liberties under a government elected by universal suffrage. . . [P]ublic liberties are the heart of democracy; the rule of laws is its muscular framework; and finally, a democratically elected government forms a dynamic centre for improving the laws by which men live in a free society (1958, 17).

Religious, political or scientific thought can best be cultivated where political liberty, rooted in democratic institutions and practices, is nurtured, where truth is recognized as transcending politics, and where open and reasoned discussion is recognized as the primary guide for public life.

Science, and generally the independent search for truth, is destroyed when political liberty falls. . . By its very nature. . . [religious, political or scientific] thought must claim superiority to temporal power. . .

[T]he link between science and liberty is completely reciprocal: while the profession of truth needs for its protection the free institution of democracy, these institutions themselves must decay and fall if people abandon their belief in reason. The idea of liberty derives its strength from many roots but among these there is one most vital: the belief that men can reach a better understanding by free discussion, that in fact society can be continuously improved if public life is steadily guided by reasoned controversy (1937, 710).

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