
As Gareth Dale puts it in his introduction, Karl Polanyi is “an attractive biographical protagonist” (p.8). The contemporary revival of interest in Polanyi’s social-economic theories, his exciting and sometimes contradictory personality, and his inspiring career all make him an appealing main character. Dale’s previous books on the great thinker (Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market [2010], Karl Polanyi: The Hungarian Writings [ed., 2016], and Reconstructing Karl Polanyi [2016]) focused on analyses of Polanyi’s ideas. His new monograph concentrates instead on his life. However, it undertakes something more complex than the mere retelling of a life story, as Dale aims to offer an intellectual biography. His ambition is to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu in which Polanyi’s intellectual formation took place and to paint a picture of both his formative years and the intellectual currents that influenced later developments in his thought. Dale also explicitly notes, furthermore, that the “lessons” of Polanyi’s life shed light on the whole intellectual climate of his era and his milieu and, more specifically, on the history of reformist socialism, “an international movement that sought to transform capitalism into a socialist society by means of parliament-led piecemeal alterations” (p.9).

This “lost world of socialism” not only provides the context of the Polanyian defense of a “nonmarket utopia,” it also constitutes the main concern of the book itself, which is Polanyi’s search for an alternative to “market fundamentalism,” as Dale characterizes (using Polanyi’s words) the global economy’s current neoliberal face. Without having written a political pamphlet, Dale expresses explicit regret that after the 1959 Bad Godesberg Conference of the German Social Democrats adopted a program of combining democratic systems with self-regulating market capitalism, the reformist version became marginal and the chances of a radical transformation were reduced to the minimum.

The contextualization of Polanyi’s intellectual biography takes place in two directions, as, chapter by chapter, Dale offers detailed descriptions of the social background of his protagonist, whether this background was fin-de-siècle Budapest or Columbia University in the 1950s. Dale also provides an exhaustive history of ideas connected to Polanyi’s intellectual world. From Hungarian radical bourgeois circles through H.G. Wells-inspired guild socialists to the London-based Christian socialists Robert Owen and Richard Tawney, Dale
examines personal and intellectual encounters in order to reconstruct Polanyi’s lifelong quest for a feasible form of socialism. This double agenda makes the book rich and thoughtful, but it is a vertiginous ambition which ultimately leaves the reader with an occasional feeling of incompleteness.

One can only admire the quantity and quality of research into sources in three languages and from archives in five countries, the careful and critical use of oral history, and the meticulous reconstruction of links between life and scholarly work. An exciting example of the latter is Dale’s interpretation of the fact that for Polanyi, when diagnosing the crisis of his age, the main concern was social unification and the search for solidarity in a fragmented society whereby individual moral responsibility would remain subsidiary. This concern, Dale reasons, was related to Polanyi’s Budapest years, when “the Jews of his milieu (…) were acutely sensitized to questions of detachment, alienation and community” (p.83). The way Dale sketches the very different but also (re)unification-centered ideas of Georg Lukács and Karl Mannheim, both of whom came from the same milieu, makes his conclusions all the more intriguing and convincing.

At the same time, Dale is less persuasive when providing accounts of some historic events. Obviously, the reader cannot expect a detailed history of the countries in which Polanyi lived and worked, but against the brilliantly drawn background, some key moments of history should have been sketched more precisely. Because of the absence of this more analytic approach, some simplistic judgments attenuate the argumentative strength of the narrative. Qualifying for instance the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as “a short-lived and forgettable empire that […] was destroyed by the mutiny of its own armies” (p.1) is such a strong statement that at least some supporting evidence should have been provided. Similarly, when describing the Republic of Councils, Dale seems to oversimplify the events when he accepts without critical overtones a Polanyian appreciation of the Commune, described as “desperate but not inglorious” (p.71). As a matter of fact, even Polanyi had more ambivalent feelings about this experience, which descended into paramilitary violence (the so-called red terror). Polanyi was deeply concerned about Bolshevism and gave several lectures warning against such a turn. It would have been worthwhile to investigate Polanyi’s attitude towards the events and the people who shaped them, as he was very close to several of the Commune’s leaders but nonetheless chose emigration at the time. At these specific points and, more generally, whenever Dale reports on other highly controversial events, one could reasonably have expected him to draw on the relevant proliferating debates in historiography.
Dale has the rare ability to bring a personality closer to the reader through, for instance, descriptions of his warm family relations, but without entering into intimate details. He evokes not only the popular and the brilliant from Polanyi’s oeuvre, but also the failures, dilemmas, and even some of the embarrassing details. Ironically, by the 1930s, the man who made it his lifelong vocation to bring the moral dimension back into the political and economic spheres and who had had a nuanced view of the 1919 commune of Béla Kun had become blind to the inhuman practices of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The most striking example might be the way in which he stubbornly defended Stalinist methods of governance even when his own niece, Éva Zeisel, became the victim of a show trial in 1936. (Her experiences were to inspire parts of Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon.*) In spite of the warm relationship between the Polanyi brothers, on which Dale writes in detail, Michael sternly reproached Karl on the issue.

This was not a singular instance of Polanyi’s lack of clear discernment. Even this sometimes idealized portrait, which describes him as a man of principle with a very strong sense of duty, occasionally makes note of his “Hamlet-like irresolution” (p.77), though the delicate conflicts between this “life on the left” in principle and the comfortable bourgeois lifestyle of the Polanyi’s in practice goes unmentioned. When, for instance, Polanyi describes his standard of living as “a normal proletarian life” (p.78), in spite of the fact that his family employed a servant (Erzsi, whose last name, of course, has been forgotten) and he could count on a significant annuity from his wife’s family, the irony seems to be lost on Dale.

The narrative strikes a truly critical tone only in parts of the Epilogue. This is regrettable, given that more explicit reflections by Dale regarding some of the abovementioned issues would have enriched the text. Furthermore, only in the epilogue does Dale undertake to analyze briefly the contemporary reception of Polanyi’s oeuvre, including his popularity among the most diverse tendencies critical of capitalism. Nevertheless, for a reader interested in these kinds of critical tendencies, this volume makes an enormous contribution to a better understanding of Karl Polanyi’s sometimes contradictory but always thought-provoking ideas.

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