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MICHAEL POLANYI IN THE MOOT¹

“Wisdom and humanity are learnt in the family”

(Michael Polanyi to Karl Mannheim)

The young Michael Polanyi, a medical student, sought and found an ideal intellectual society in the Galilei-Circle,² which gathered the most progressive young intellectuals in Hungary at the end of the first decade of this century.

Karl Polanyi was the founder of the Galilei-Circle (later he became a famous historian of economics) and his younger brother Michael was the scientific secretary of the Circle. Thus both Polanyi brothers were there at the birth of the Galilei-Circle.

In the autumn of 1919, after the 133-day rule of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the Horthy regime regarded not only communists as personae non grata but pursued and brought actions against all who “served” the communist system or belonged to a progressive bourgeois movement - among others, the Galilei-Circle. Aware of the fact that as an ex-member of the Galilei-Circle he could not expect tolerance on the part of the Horthy regime, Michael Polanyi chose life in emigration.

He left Hungary at the beginning of 1920. Later he visited Hungary in order to participate in the researches of Tunngsam, but he never planned to remain in his native country once he appreciated freedom of science and the freedom of man.

Between 1920 and 1933 he lived in Germany, first working as a researcher at Wilhelm Kaiser Institute für Faserstoffchemie and later at Fritz Haber's Institut für Phisikalische

1/ *The Moot was an elite intellectual society operating in England between 1937 and 1945/46. Its members sought answers to the questions and problems of their time in intellectual and ethical discussions. There is no comprehensive literature on the Moot. Its source materials can be found in various archives and bequests, mostly at the University of Chicago, The Regenstein Library Special Collection. See also: Sigrid Ziffus: Karl Mannheim und der Moot-Kreis. Ein wenig beachteter Aspekt seines Wirkens im Englischer Exil. In: Exil, Wissenschaft, Identität. Die Emigration deutscher Sozialwissenschaftler 1933-1945. Hrg. Ilja Sruber. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch. Frankfurt A.M., 1988, p. 206-227.*

2/ *The Galilei-circle was an association founded by progressive university students. Its objective was to spread liberal thinking in Hungary and to study and promote the social sciences. The Horthy regime suppressed its operation.*

Chemie und Elektrochemie, then some time lecturing as a professor at Berlin University. He did not join any political party or movement. We can even say that he kept away from all sorts of intellectual groups as well. During these years he devoted himself to science (in contrast to his brother Karl, who sympathized with the Communists for a time, even became a member of the Communist Party, though later he broke with the movement). In Germany Michael Polanyi remained 'politically abstinent', though he strongly opposed marxist and communist ideas.

In a letter to Karl Mannheim³ he wrote: 'As regards Marxism, my earliest publication 'On Peace in Europe'⁴ constituted an attack upon the conception of historical materialism. At the time of the Hungarian Communist regime I strongly opposed the measures of the government. E.g. I was the only man at the University who refused to join the Red Army voluntarily. As a result they tried to frighten me holding out the prospect of possible consequences'. Then he goes on: 'I have never supported a power in any form that is against human rights. I have never needed to reshape my thinking to accept this.'

When Polanyi wrote these lines he had already been living in England for 11 years, working as a professor of chemistry at Manchester University. He did not approach any party or movement. In Karl Mannheim's term, he was a 'freely floating' intellectual. But he was anything but an ivory tower scholar. He did not retire to his ivory tower, he squared off against dangers threatening humanity and stood by civil liberties. During World War 2 he joined some representatives of the British intellectual elite and with them he sought the way out from the serious political, economic, cultural and moral crisis.

Beginning with the second half of the thirties he published articles⁵ in which he discussed economic, social and political issues. He wanted to discover how unemployment could be reduced to the minimum in the conditions of free enterprise. He condemned totalitarian systems, the racist politics of German fascism and its aspirations to conquer the world. Based on his experiences gained during his travel to the Soviet Union, Polanyi exposed the causes of the troubles in the functioning of the Soviet economy: the voluntarist planning, which gave too large a role to utopias and illusions; the root of distortions in political life; the absolute power of one-party dictatorship.

These articles attracted the attention of Karl Mannheim, the sociologist and philosopher of culture, whose life is similar to Polanyi's in many respects. Mannheim chose emigration voluntarily because he feared that the Horthy regime would not appreciate or honor his loyalty, in spite of the fact that he had not taken part in the Soviet rule. (He was not mista-

3/ *Michael Polanyi's letter to Karl Mannheim, 19 April 1944. The University of Chicago, The Regenstein Library, Special Collection (hereafter Spec. Coll.).*

4/ *Michael Polanyi: A békeszerződközhöz. Nézetek az európai háború és béke feltételeiről. Huszadik Század 1917/2, pp. 165-176.*

5/ *Among others: 1/ USSR Economics. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1936; 2/ The Struggle Between Truth and Propaganda. The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies. 7 October, 1936; 3/ Full Employment and Free Trade. Cambridge University Press, London, 1945.*

ken.) He found refuge first in Germany and then in Great Britain. In the forties he lectured at the renowned London School of Economics and at the same time he was the chief editor of the Social Sciences section of Routledge and Kegan Paul. In this capacity he asked Polanyi to allow some of his noteworthy works to be published. Polanyi fulfilled this request; in the spring of 1944 he handed over five of his works to the publishing house.⁶ This was the start of their cooperative efforts that lasted for many years (and of their friendship for a short period) and of their common appearance in the Moot.

The Moot was definitely an elite organization of intellectuals that resembled in some respects the Galilei-Circle but, of course, was greatly different from it, due to the local characteristics of the problems and to the different intellectual arsenal.

The Moot existed between 1937 and 1947. "Moot" is an Old English word meaning gathering, society, grouping and discussion. (The word does not exist in modern English in the 20th century.) The members of the Moot were bourgeois intellectuals committed to progress: Anglican theologians, philosophers, teachers, authors and artists and representatives of certain sciences. Some of the well-known members were T.S. Eliot, the poet, J.H. Oldham, the theologian, Lord A.D. Lindsay, and the philosopher, Karl Mannheim. The idea of establishing the Moot came from Geneva where in 1937 an ecumenical conference was held on 'Church, community and state' and on whose agenda was the crisis of valuation of our times. The founders of the Moot declared at the very start that they were against all kinds of totalitarianism, and they worked out recommendations concerning ways leading out of the crisis. In the following years lectures and discussions were held that attacked the problems of overcoming the crisis of valuation and moral renewal in the centre. (Later we will talk about one of Polanyi's lectures and a response by T.S. Eliot, from which we can get a view of the issues that the members of the Moot were concerned with in the mid-forties. We can thereby examine Polanyi's contribution to the clarification of these issues.)

Before joining the Moot, Polanyi tried to get acquainted with its principles and programme. An opportunity for this was offered by his close working relationship with Karl Mannheim. While discussing the studies Polanyi handed over to him for publication, Mannheim brought up the idea of joining the Moot. When Polanyi learned that both the leadership and the members of the Moot would welcome him, he agreed. In a letter to Mannheim dated 27 May 1944, Polanyi thanked him for his support and for his invitation to the next meeting of the Moot. 'I have studied the essays to be discussed', he wrote, 'and I can say that I am looking forward to meeting the members of the Moot.' Mannheim's reaction to this was: 'When I suggested that you should be invited to the discussion of the Moot I obeyed my conscience that dictated to me that such a meeting would mean enrichment both for you and the others.'

It seems necessary at this point to touch on the topic of Polanyi's 'correction of career'. Polanyi researchers are divided concerning the time of his 'breaking with the natural sciences' and his 'conversion' to social science. I take the position that in Polanyi's case his

6/ They are: 1/ *Science - Its Reality and Freedom*; 2/ *The Autonomy of Science*; 3/ *The Growth of Thought in Society*; 4/ *The English and the Continent*; 5/ *Jewish Problems*.

interest in the two great fields of science runs parallel, so he was always interested in problems of social philosophy, epistemology, and scientific theory. But his interest in social science was pushed into the background until the mid-twenties and thirties, as physico-chemical studies demanded much of his time. This was the reason his interest in social science hid in the background as 'an underground stream' a 'suppressed interest'. Polanyi let this hidden interest take its course when, after the mid-thirties, he consciously turned to the problems of economics, political theory, and philosophy of science.

The lecture that marked Polanyi's debut in the Moot contained ideas that were not without antecedents; they had ripened during long years of meditation and were published later in comprehensive works. This lecture now exists only in a sketch,⁷ but even in this fragmentary version it deserves attention. Polanyi examines the great thinkers and the significant trends in the history of philosophy, starting with Aristotle and the schoolmen, through Galilei, F. Bacon, Hobbes and the encyclopaedists, to Marx. From the history of philosophical thought he draws the conclusion that particular motifs run parallel, others return in transformed form, showing regularity, and as a consequence they cannot be ignored. For example, the social commitment of philosophers and at the same time their striving for sovereign, autonomous thinking; the survival of traditional ideas and at the same time their permanent renewal; the obstinate survival of old issues and at the same time their appearance in new guises; all these indicate that in the history of philosophical and scientific thinking in general, a certain continuity exists. And if from time to time a tendency wanting to disrupt this continuity appears, e.g., the totalitarian ideologies of our time (fascism and bolshevism), determined action is needed against them. Otherwise the traditional values of philosophy and science are in danger.

How well this lecture was received is not known; perhaps it was delivered before a small audience. But we know a lot more about the lecture from a report⁸ produced in the autumn of 1944 and from a letter written by Polanyi to Moot members completing the report. The lecture was on 'Sciences and the Modern Crisis'. The typescript of the lecture (more than four pages) gives us the opportunity to get acquainted with Polanyi's conception of the crisis of science and intellectual life in general.

In the 20th century, Polanyi writes in the introduction, two totalitarian systems have come into being, i.e., fascism and bolshevism, both of which seriously threaten the existence, development and the freedom of thought and, within this, freedom of scientific thinking. In these systems only one scientific truth is recognized and canonized, the one which has the interests of the ruling stratum in sight. This kind of danger to tolerance and

7/ Polanyi, M.: *Crisis of Science (Notes for the Moot)*. 25 June 1944. Chicago University, Spec. Coll.

8/ Polanyi, M.: *Science and the Modern Crisis. Paper for the Moot*. 14 November 1944. Spec. Coll. Paper 16.

threat to the autonomy and freedom of science is not recent; it has been known since the Middle Ages. Either the authoritarian state or the 'protecting-provident' Church have taken the offensive against science, both insisting on their own freedom and sovereignty.

Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1551) complains that a totalitarian doctrine ruthlessly suppresses scientific truth and thus puts obstacles in the way of the free functioning of science. Both the representatives of the Enlightenment in the 18th century and the liberal thinkers of the 19th started a crusade against totalitarian powers because they were aware that the mere existence of science was in danger.

Polanyi criticizes Marx severely because he overemphasized material values and thus degraded intellectual values, primarily science, and this degradation was deepened by his followers. Perhaps it would be a mistake to condemn Marx for a typical totalitarianism of the 20th century, i.e. bolshevism, Polanyi says, but it is an indisputable fact that his overstrained materialism has something to do with the vulgarization of science, the emptying of personality, the suppression of human rights. In Russia in the 19th century there still existed a basis for liberal development (Polanyi mentions the democratic functioning of the multi-party Duma), from which a free society could have emerged and science and intellectual life in general could have developed freely. But this did not happen. On the contrary, Hobbes' *Leviathan* came true, and the Jacobin dictatorship emerged solidly and threateningly. Marx is 'responsible' for it insofar as he pejoratively talked about 'eternal' truth, the freedom of conscience of the individual, and moral values in quite a few of his writings.

Polanyi is not miserly with words condemning the other model of totalitarianism either, i.e., fascism. He pointed out that the liberty of science and intellect, and all positive values that have developed in the course of human development, were being threatened by fascism as it raised to the status of state policy mythical thinking, racist ideology and the theory of *Übermensch*.

The train of thought expounded in his lecture, which we can only outline here, is continued in his letter to the members of the Moot.⁹ In this letter he first uses the term 'personal knowledge', which later became the key category of his main work.¹⁰ (Initially he used the term 'personal transmission' but shortly thereafter he started to use 'personal knowledge'.) What he says in the letter can be summarized as follows.

9/ *Letter from M. Polanyi. Paper for the Moot. 18 November 1944. Spec. Coll. Paper 18.*

10/ *Polanyi, M.: Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1958.*

In societies depending on civil human rights (like the bourgeois societies of the Western countries), the intellectual heritage accumulated in religion, law, various sciences, technology, history, philosophy, economics, language, music, painting and poetry is transmitted from one generation to the other. A great deal of this heritage can be transmitted only personally. If the process of this transmission is broken, the 'secrets' of the heritage are lost to oblivion and their revival is possible only by rediscovery. It is, nevertheless, doubtful whether important values can be retrieved in this way. Polanyi estimates that fifty years is the interval after which rediscovery cannot reinstate old values and accumulated intellectual heritage. The disorders caused in the functioning of a society by the lack of these values are shown by the example of fascism and bolshevism. The totalitarian systems make their 'new' values absolute and deny the old ones that were rooted in tradition. For this they later pay a high price.

Polanyi discusses another typical phenomenon in this letter, to which T.S. Eliot responded with dissent. Our intellectual heritage, Polanyi writes, has accumulated over, and has been enriched significantly in, the last 300 years. The capacity of our minds, however, has not kept pace. How can this inconsistency be resolved? In order to preserve for the future at least the more valuable part of our accumulating intellectual heritage, more and more specialists are needed. (A specialist is the possessor of well-defined knowledge.)

The most varied groups, divisions of specialists, have emerged. Any such group reflects a miniature society. The task of such a society is to hold together those belonging to the group, to support the instruction and training of beginners, to supervise professionally the activity of the more mature members, to compare the performances of the members, to evaluate the scientific value of these performances and to confirm or to reject the achieved results.

Languages, especially world languages, play an important role in specialization, in the acquisition and transmission of an intellectual heritage. Through the medium of language the acquired details of knowledge are united into the (total) knowledge of nations, regions and all mankind.

The intellectual elite gathered in learned societies takes care of the transmission of intellectual heritage. If it is prevented from fulfilling this task, the utterance of scientific truth and its transmission are limited, the grave consequences of which hit hard future generations. The scientists who have to undertake this role are termed "clerisy" by Polanyi. And where clerisy exists, faith cannot be missing, faith in specialized knowledge carrying traditional value and faith in the possibility of its transmission to the coming generation.

The relation of the new generation to the inherited knowledge is on the one hand, critical, and, on the other, faithful. The first prevents us from accepting anything servilely, while the other helps us to accept authorities. Each generation - should it live in any kind of civilization - has to take for granted and accept a part of inherited knowledge while criticizing another part of it. The simultaneous existence of a critical attitude and of faith in authority breeds sharp conflicts, the resolution of which is also the task of the clerisy.

As a consequence, the future of the intelligentsia, Polanyi writes, rests on three pillars. These pillars are: ultimate power, ultimate truth, and liberty. Power has to rest on general will as defined by Rousseau (*volonté générale*), which excludes absolute autocracy and

restricts the applicability of violence to the minimum. The assertion of ultimate truth - according to Polanyi - implies nothing more and nothing less than that we believe in the possibility of truth, in the possibility of uttering truth, and in the competency of the clerisy that is in the position of being able to formulate scientific truth.

Thus, restricting liberty entails the restriction of the activity of the 'clerisy'. When totalitarian states restrict intellectuals from freely formulating and uttering the truth acquired through scientific cognition, they restrict their own power as well, because they, too, cannot take possession of the 'whole' truth.

Just a few days after Polanyi delivered his lecture and wrote the letter completing it, T.S. Eliot responded to his thoughts in a relatively lengthy letter.¹¹ He argued against the exceptional function attributed to the clerisy, saying that if specialization and integration run parallel (as suggested by Polanyi's standpoint), the ordination of intellectuals, i.e., being selected, loses its significance. Caring for and transmitting intellectual values - Eliot states - cannot be restricted only to intellectuals. Social classes, for instance, play an important role in this process. Families as well. Innovations are transmitted primarily by families and by schools, a point that Polanyi did not even mention. Eliot admits that it is indisputable, however, that in the transmission of culture, of intellectual values, and of true information (truth), a decisive role is played by intellectuals concerning the specialized scientific knowledge that they possess owing to their commitment.

Eliot also did not agree with Polanyi's views on the integrating role of languages. He argued that Polanyi attributes absolute advantage and superiority to the so-called primary languages, i.e., world languages such as English, German and Russian, and that the so-called secondary languages play a subordinate role in his conception, such that the languages of the small nations are only satellites of the former. If we accept this - Eliot argues - the consequence is widespread intellectual suicide. Ireland, for example, cannot accept that intellectual values are to be available only through the medium of the English language. Further, the nations of the Baltic states, of the Balkans and of Scandinavia would be threatened with cultural subjugation. (T.S. Eliot wrote these words in 1944!) According to Eliot, Polanyi's viewpoint overemphasized the role of tradition in cultural heritage and paid little attention to the local, regional and newly appearing elements of intellectual values.

However much Polanyi's standpoint was doubted concerning the issues in question, it is sure that his ideas left their mark on later lectures and discussions in the Moot. It is just as sure that the reception of his lecture left a long-lasting mark on him as well. All that is implied in this will be the subject of a following study.

11/ *Comments by T.S. Eliot on M. Polanyi's notes on the Clerisy. 22 November 1944. Spec. Coll. Paper 19.*