



# Michael Polanyi's Theory of Spontaneous Orders

STRUAN JACOBS

**M**ichael Polanyi is well known as a theorist of science but his social-economic-political writings have never received adequate coverage. This neglect needs to be remedied because his system of liberal ideas is deeply interesting, persistently relevant, and historically significant as the following discussion will show.

Being an unfamiliar figure to thinkers outside of certain specialist academic circles, it may be helpful to introduce Polanyi with aid of a quick pen portrait. Born in Budapest in 1891, he entered the University of Budapest in 1908, graduating with a degree in medicine in 1913 and a Ph.D. in chemistry four years later. He served as a medical officer in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I, worked as a researcher in physical chemistry at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, Berlin, from 1920, and rubbed shoulders with some of the great scientists of the age: Planck, Schrodinger and Einstein. Disturbed by the rising tide of Nazism in Germany, and being of Jewish extraction, 1933 saw Polanyi resign from his position at the Berlin Institute and emigrate to England. In the mid-1930s at the height of his career as a scientist, with an international reputation for his research on chemical reaction rates, Polanyi began to write *about* science, society, economics and politics. These topics steadily assumed greater importance in his mind. For a time he continued to conduct research in the physical sciences while examining social subjects, but the last of his 218 natural scientific papers appeared in 1949 and his days as a scientist were over. From 1933 to 1958 Polanyi was on the staff of Manchester University, occupying the chair in Physical Chemistry for fifteen years then a personal chair in Social Studies. His final years were spent as a Senior Research Fellow at Merton College, Oxford.

The following study is arranged around three prominent themes in Polanyi's social writings: opposition to Soviet style planning of science and economics, explication of spontaneous orders in social and cultural life, and distinguishing features of the free society. The study chiefly covers Polanyi's writings in the 1940s when he devoted most attention to these matters. The approach adopted combines theoretical interpretation with intellectual history.

## Anti-planning

In the second half of the 1930s Polanyi produced related essays and reviews on science, economics and politics. They are essentially negative, directed against Soviet-style central

The author is indebted to his wife, Anne, for advice that led to improved drafts of the paper; and he thanks two anonymous readers for the *Review* for helpful criticisms of the penultimate version of the paper. Thanks also to Christine Oughtred and the Inter-library Loans staff at Deakin University Library for obtaining a number of works that proved indispensable to researching this topic.

planning. The more important of these anti-planning tracts were conveniently collected in *The Contempt of Freedom: The Russian Experiment and After* (1940).

Polanyi gained knowledge of conditions in Stalin's Soviet Union at first-hand, visiting it several times in the 1930s. Granted an audience with the Communist Party's leading ideologist, Nikolai Bukharin, in Moscow in 1935, Polanyi listened to him expound the official Soviet view on science. Bukharin dismissed the distinction between pure science (the quest for true theories) and applied science (using knowledge to solve practical problems) as an anachronism 'due to the inner conflict of . . . [a] type of society [capitalism] which deprived scientists of the consciousness of their social functions, thus creating in them the illusion of pure science.' In the Soviet Union, Bukharin was proud to report, the distinction had ceased to reflect a real difference. Scientists were (allegedly) free to undertake research on whatever topic took their interest, but such was the harmony of Soviet society that its scientists inevitably selected problems whose solution would make a contribution to 'the current Five Year Plan.' The comprehensive planning of Soviet science 'reflected the pre-existing harmony between scientific and social aims' (Polanyi (1946, 1964, p. 8)).

A suitably modified version of these ideas had already taken root in Britain where the seed had been sown by Bukharin, Boris Hessen, and other Soviet delegates to the International Congress of the History of Science in London, 1931. A number of prominent British economists and scientists were soon advocating the emulation of Soviet central planning. Later in the decade (1938) The British Association for the Advancement of Science formed a Division for the Social and International Relations of Science for the purpose of supporting planned science. Dedicated Marxist and distinguished X-ray crystallographer, J.D. Bernal, put the case for planned science with special force and clarity and in elaborate detail in *The Social Function of Science* (1939). Before the year was out, Polanyi (1939, 1975, pp. 1–26) had made known his fundamental dissatisfaction with Bernal's position in a short piece, 'The Rights and Duties of Science'.

The fundamental issue, as Polanyi saw it, was the Marxists' denial of a real difference between pure and applied science. Regarding thought as always determined by economic conditions, Marxism excluded the possibility of truth pursued for its own sake; scientists seek knowledge to advance the material interests of the dominant social class, the bourgeoisie. Bernal's belittlement of pure science was one side of a coin for Polanyi whose obverse was planning of science for its 'social function' of improving material standards of living. It was beyond Polanyi's comprehension how Bernal or anyone else for that matter could imagine that science, advancing unpredictably, might be directed to yield specific benefits. Theoretical scientists are in the dark as to what they will discover, and technological innovations based on theoretical discoveries are themselves often unpredictable. Not only would the method bear no fruit, it would kill the tree of knowledge itself. Polanyi (1939, 1975, p. 18; 1941, p. 451) explained that planning must extinguish the right of the researcher to initiate the line of inquiry he judges as potentially the most illuminating, the very freedom science counts on for its advance.

In 1939, reading of the biologist Vavilov vainly trying to defend the genetics of Mendel against the officially backed Lysenko in the Soviet Union, Polanyi (1946, 1964, p. 9) found himself pondering such questions as: 'What philosophy of science' in the West could be

pitted against the Marxist one; how was one to account for the acceptance of the Western philosophy? 'Was this acceptance justified? On what grounds?' Musing on these matters it dawned on Polanyi that no existing analysis of science, Marxist or non-Marxist, could provide convincing answers, and with this realization he set to on what would prove a major and protracted undertaking of producing a philosophical account of science to reflect his own intimate experience of scientific research and discovery. The first results of this inquiry were papers Polanyi published between 1939 and 1941; *Science, Faith and Society* of 1946 marked an important advance, but the full elaboration of his position—*Personal Knowledge*—took him until 1958 to produce.

Together with his case against planned science, Polanyi produced a critique of Soviet economic planning. A clear and succinct statement of his argument is 'Collectivist Planning' (1940, 1975). Noting that proponents of State control of production and distribution expect it to replace 'commercial gain' as the driving force of economic activity, Polanyi proceeded to expose the unfounded nature of the expectation in light of Russia's experience of War Communism (1917–1920) and subsequent developments in the Soviet Union. Lenin had set the ball rolling, sabotaging the market process of mutually agreed commercial exchanges between producers and buyers, leading to economic collapse. Without the market, Polanyi argued, consumers had no way of ascribing comparative values to the different goods being produced, were prevented from informing producers of the kinds of goods they wanted and the degree to which they wanted them. In the event, Lenin was forced to back-pedal, offering concessions to capitalism in the New Economic Policy (1921–1927). In 1927, to staunch the power it was losing as commerce picked up, the government put a stop to private business activity and entered upon an ambitious 'programme of State enterprises' (Polanyi (1940, 1975, p. 54)), The First Five Year Plan (1928–1932). Within three years, a further economic disaster looming, Stalin reintroduced market reforms, only this time ownership of all enterprises remained with the state.

The moral Polanyi (1940, 1975, p. 54) drew from these economic lurches was that a government may own all business operations but it can never rationally decide off its own bat what goods to produce for it needs 'the profitability of sales to indicate the usefulness of every particular activity. Commercial management is now revealed as far more fundamental than the system of ownership, which can vary widely while the market persists'. Study of the Soviet experience convinced Polanyi (1940, 1975, p. 55) that any state engaged in economic planning would proceed erratically, tightening its grip on the economy to suppress 'the independence which commerce restores in the people' then relaxing it in order to clear up the resulting economic mess.

The idea that market prices are indispensable to any rational calculation of value was not original to Polanyi, having been expounded by von Mises from the early 20s, notably in his monograph, *Die Gemeinwirtschaft* (1922) (translated as *Socialism* (1936)), as well as by Hayek and others.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that Polanyi had direct acquaintance with this literature when he was gestating the views outlined above, and he certainly would have read about it in Lippman's *The Good Society* (1937), to which he referred in his *Contempt of Freedom* anthology (1940, 1970, p. 36). But undoubtedly his (1940, 1975, p. 61) own observations

<sup>1</sup>Lavoie (1985) and Ebeling (1993) provide informative studies of the 'calculation debate'.

of and reflections on economic conditions in the Soviet Union during 'repeated visits' there in the first half of the 1930s also served to ground his analysis.

Having mentioned the names von Mises and Hayek may encourage readers to presume that Polanyi's economic outlook was similar to theirs. However his *Full Employment and Free Trade* (1945) gives the lie to it. There Polanyi (e.g., 1945, pp. 146–150) qualified his support for *laissez faire* and free mutual adjustments among productive units with a number of Keynesian riders, advocating among other things that governments annually decide the entire distribution of national income, as well as levels of monetary circulation and of unemployment.

## Ontology

Social ontology was a topic Polanyi had begun to explore before 1941, but a paper he published in that year in the journal *Economica*,<sup>2</sup> 'The Growth of Thought in Society', was far and away his most substantial and systematic examination of it to that time and it proved seminal for his subsequent investigations in this area. He developed his ontology in the context of delineating the respective natures of, and underlying differences between, the liberal state and totalitarian regimes.

Polanyi (1941, p. 448) started with an unargued assumption that truth is a compound of different 'forms' or 'kinds', corresponding to human faculties and to various 'inter-lacing patterns' in the world. Science, law and art each has its own ideal, namely 'Scientific Truth, the Law of Nature [combining the 'ideals of Reason and Equity'], . . . the Canons of Beauty' (Polanyi (1941, p. 441)). The ideals are principles that underlie and sustain practice in the different areas, receiving partial expression in accredited works. This was the extent of Polanyi's picture at this time of the ideal ends of cultural life; it was sketchy, tentative, and not particularly illuminating.<sup>3</sup>

More interesting from our point of view than Polanyi's suggestions regarding these ideals is the proposition he propounded that for them to animate human affairs they require a special social form, and he based this on a broad distinction between objects embodying 'corporate order' and others embodying 'dynamic order'. Corporate order, common and obvious enough, Polanyi explained as the result of planning, design and control, citing machines and well kept gardens as examples. Components or members are restricted in their movements. A social corporate order ('corporation') involves a body of people one of whom—the chief executive—is vested with supreme authority. His study of administrative science had convinced Polanyi that a corporate chief could only directly command, and directly process information from, five to six subordinates. So the structure of authority in a social corporation has to be pyramidal. The chief executive directs her half a dozen subordinates, each of whom interprets the chief's directives for a similar number of subordinates, and each

<sup>2</sup>Hayek was involved with *Economica* in 1941, as one of six members of an editorial board responsible for its first three issues (February, May, August), and as Acting Editor for its final (December) issue.

<sup>3</sup>He never really developed it. The nineteenth century Cambridge polymath, William Whewell, had a similar picture of truth as multi-faceted, but the possibility that he influenced Polanyi is ruled out by Polanyi and Prosch (1975, p. 57).

of these in turn interprets the directives she has received for her five subordinates, and so on. The structure broadens 'out at each stage, down to the lowest tier, which contain (sic.) the officials in charge of the working men and women actually handling the job' (Polanyi (1941, p. 433)). Reports about activities within the corporation return up through the lines of authority. The chief executive alone has the right 'to deal with the wider perspectives and longer range problems of the corporation, . . . [and to] evolve a strategy or policy and exercise powers of judgment of a high order' (Polanyi (1941, p. 434)). Assisted by advisors, she defines the limits within which staff apply personal skills to their allocated tasks. So long as certain natural limitations are not exceeded, the principle of division of labour embodied in and helping to integrate the corporation should ensure that it, the institution, is capable of outperforming an aggregate of individuals.

A negative that Polanyi particularly wanted to bring out was that corporate order is useless in regard to diffuse, large-scale social processes that have no certain results and throw up new problems, his criticism of economic planning, noted above, appearing now in a different guise as a criticism of the imposition of corporate order on the productive sphere of the economy. The attempt must lead to maladjustments with 'indefinitely accumulating stocks in one place, . . . machinery without workers in another, and . . . men waiting to be given jobs almost everywhere' (Polanyi (1941, p. 434)). The complexity of the task defies the managerial power of an organization, with too many adjustments to initiate and control, decisions continually needed on kinds and numbers of workers, quantities of various grades of materials, despatch of these to industries, localities, etc. Communication and decisions flowing vertically must clog up the official channels causing chaos at groundlevel; while permitting more horizontal communication and decisions at the base of the organization would undermine its structure of authority.

The second, rather less obvious, form of order was designated by Polanyi in 'The Growth of Thought in Society' as 'dynamic order'.<sup>4</sup> In this order, grounded in freedom, objects can move about without artificial restriction and they adjust their behaviour in appropriate response to the behaviour of others in the same sphere. The variety of such order is indicated by some of Polanyi's examples: water perfectly filling a jug in even density with a horizontal surface, crystal formation, perception of *Gestalt* and formation of embryos. But he was more interested in dynamic social orders than in those of nature. One such order comprises producers of goods in a market economy adjusting their efforts in light of competitors' activities. They are working to maximize profits through satisfying consumer demand, and the dynamic order of adjustments expresses changes in producers' demand for resources and in the goods offered to consumers.

Common law was discussed by Polanyi as a dynamic order preserving and enlarging the cultural tradition of society. A judge reaching a decision on a case is interacting, indirectly, with the minds of many predecessors as precedents impinging on her thinking. She like past judges is assisted by the legal tradition of 'statute, precedent, equity and convenience' and the trend of social opinion. Using her trained 'conscience' to weigh these factors, the convinced decision of a judge is an interpretative response to current law that will guide other judges in

<sup>4</sup>He (1941, pp. 432, 435) also referred to it in this work as 'spontaneous ordering', 'spontaneously arising order', 'spontaneously attained order' but interestingly, we allude to a terminological point to be made shortly, never as 'spontaneous order' as such.

the future. The criterion of dynamic social order—thoughts and actions *adjusted* to pursue a common goal in response to what peers have said and done—is satisfied; common or case law is ‘a process of direct adjustments between succeeding judges’ decisions (Polanyi (1941, p. 436)).

The dynamic order of science, in which Polanyi continued to participate at this time (1941) while becoming an increasingly interested student of it, was analysed by him as a system of researchers tackling such problems as they strongly believe could lead them to noteworthy discoveries. The scientist adjusts her thinking and conduct to the inherited tradition of knowledge while endeavouring to proceed beyond it. New work is ‘based on thousands of previous discoveries’ while each new discovery modifies ‘previously prevailing ideas’ (Polanyi (1941, p. 437)). She similarly calls on traditional methods and procedures while adapting them to her particular requirements. Besides being ‘consultative’ in respect of past achievements, scientists’ adjustments appear as ‘competitive’ striving for priority and recognition.

In what sense was Polanyi envisaging science as an order? He was principally interested in it as an ordered or, better, self-ordering *process of change* as distinct from an order of recurrences or regularities. His perspective in other words was diachronic rather than synchronic. Where Bernal was calling for the scientific process to be ordered from without according to a predetermined plan, Polanyi was stating in the present essay that pure science can only grow if its ordered development is internally generated by scientists personally selecting problems and deciding their own lines of investigation.

Citing other instances, Polanyi (1941, p. 438) indicated something of the number, variety and significance of dynamic orders in society and culture: ‘The social legacies of language, writing, literature and of the various arts, pictorial and musical; of practical crafts, including medicine, agriculture, manufacture and the technique of communications; of sets of conventional units and measures, and of customs of intercourse; of religious, social and political thought’.

### **Spontaneous order in society: Historiographical correction**

The expository flow of the paper will be interrupted in order to note an historiographical omission in the literature. (Any reader who happens to be uninterested in intellectual history may skip this section without detriment to her understanding of the rest of the paper.) The argument will be advanced that, contrary to orthodoxy, it was *not Friedrich Hayek* who first explicitly identified and named spontaneous order in print this century.<sup>5</sup> That person was Polanyi.

The priority claim for Hayek in this matter has been asserted many times. Ross (1987, p. ix), for example, has representatively written, ‘The term *spontaneous order* appears to have been coined by F.A. Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) though he made use of the concept in earlier discussion of economic phenomena’. Similarly, Hamowy (1987, p. 3 and n. 1) wrote of Hayek originally employing the *concept* (idea) of spontaneous order

<sup>5</sup>The phenomenon was known to Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. References for some of the earlier history of the idea are provided in the following notes.

in an economic context, 'The Use of Knowledge in Society' (1936, 1949, p. 50), and then expressly designating the phenomenon in *The Constitution of Society* (1960, pp. 160–161).<sup>6</sup> Roche (1976, p. 10) described 'the concept of "spontaneous order"' as 'One of Hayek's greatest discoveries'.<sup>7</sup> Such claims to the contrary, what we actually find is that Polanyi published on the topic of spontaneous order several years before Hayek. It is part of the idea of dynamic order which, as noted, appeared in Polanyi's 'Growth of Thought' essay of 1941 and which he had already foreshadowed in 'Collectivist Planning'.<sup>8</sup>

Polanyi made the terminological change from 'dynamic order' to 'spontaneous order' in 1948, in an essay 'The Span of Central Direction'. In this he differentiated between 'spontaneous' and 'corporate' orders, which is part of the 1941 distinction differently described. It is not equivalent to the earlier distinction, however, which included non-social orders whereas this one explicitly refers only to orders in society. Here one finds Polanyi arguing that industrial production is among several tasks unable to be planned and included in a corporate order. Production depends on plant managers making 'spontaneous mutual adjustments' in a competitive market order, deciding purchases of types and quantities of materials in response to changes in supply and demand and price. Polanyi (1948, 1951, p. 114) offered a quantitative demonstration of the proposition that 'the administrative powers of a corporate' order are in a ratio of  $1:n$  relative to the task of administering a system of industrial production, where  $n$  signifies the number of productive units. For example, to attempt to place 100,000 productive businesses in one corporate order under central direction would, according to Polanyi's theorem, reduce business adjustments and the overall rate of production to  $1/100,000$  of a spontaneously ordered counterpart. As an interesting aside, Polanyi (1948, 1951, p. 122) argued that vociferous critics of central planning—von Mises, Hayek, F.H. Knight—had not gone far enough: 'The rigorous free-traders . . . who urgently warn against the danger of enslavement by economic planning, thereby imply (often without intending it) that economic planning is feasible, though at the price of liberty'. Polanyi for his part was claiming it to be economically *impossible*.

<sup>6</sup>The story may be fleshed out as follows. In 'Economics and Knowledge' (1936, 1949, p. 50) Hayek identified 'a problem of the *division of knowledge*' as the fundamental problem of economic science and of the social sciences in general, the problem of 'how the spontaneous interaction' of people with fragments of knowledge bring, for example, prices into correspondence with costs.

In another essay, 'The Use of Knowledge in Society' (1945, 1949, pp. 84–85) Hayek asked how people are able to *co-ordinate* (a key term in the analysis of spontaneous order) their actions in a system of dispersed knowledge of particular facts, and he noted in regard to the market that the price system is crucially involved. He illustrated this suggestion in terms of a relative scarcity raising the price of a raw material such as tin, prompting manufacturers to appropriately respond as they try to maintain profit levels by using tin more sparingly and innovating with substitutes. He wrote (1945, 1949, p. 86 emphasis added), 'The whole acts as one market, not because any of its members survey the whole field, but because their limited individual fields of vision sufficiently *overlap* so that through many intermediaries the relevant information is communicated to all'. This no doubt is what Hamowy was referring to when he suggested the concept of (as distinct from the term) spontaneous order was originally suggested by Hayek in 'The Use of Knowledge' essay of 1945.

<sup>7</sup>Other writers who suggest the term 'spontaneous order' was coined by Hayek and that he was responsible for resurrecting the theory of it this century include: O'Brien (1994, pp. 346–347), Letwin (1976), Barry (1982), Moldofsky (1989), Cubeddu (1993).

<sup>8</sup>See Polanyi (1940, 1975, pp. 35–40), and Lavoie (1985) although the latter does not address the historical priority question.

If Polanyi were employing the idea of spontaneous social order and the rubric itself in publications before Hayek (and he was), perhaps he (Polanyi) in turn was indebted to them to some other thinker. As Hayek is typically seen as having gained his concept from eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment thinkers (a not entirely correct view it is being suggested in this paper), the thought occurs that Polanyi also may have drawn from this source. In later writings Polanyi (1951, p. 154) suggested the idea had been presaged by Adam Smith without, however, indicating personal intellectual indebtedness to him. Whereas if one returns to Polanyi's seminal essay of 1941 he is found to cite only the *Gestalt* psychologist, Wolfgang Köhler, in this context.<sup>9</sup> (Had Polanyi collected the idea from Hayek he could, and surely would, have mentioned it.)

The index of Köhler's *Gestalt Psychology* (1929, 1947) has several page entries for 'dynamic order', which is distinguished from 'enforced' or 'prescribed order'.<sup>10</sup> Köhler's interest lay in dynamic orders of nature and technology (Polanyi was much more concerned with the social). Köhler's distinction was between orders forming from freely interacting internal forces ('dynamic' factors), and those comprised of elements subject to 'rigid constraints' ('topographical' factors). He cited distribution of electric charges on an insulated conductor, the planetary system, oil in water, and the organization of sense experience as examples of dynamic order. Steam engines along with most other machines, and movement of water along a narrow pipe appeared in his list of 'enforced orders'. Köhler presented the distinction as one of degree, orders being differentiated according to whether the influence of dynamic forces or of rigid constraints is preponderant.

Polanyi's distinction significantly overlapped that of Köhler and rested on similar grounds. Köhler, as noted, was operating in the realm of natural and technological objects and demarcating them according to different degrees of constraint and internal dynamics. Polanyi (1941, p. 431) for his part focussed on the social, grounding his distinction on imposed forces of human design, planning, and control on the one side and free individual-participant decision making on the other.<sup>11</sup>

### Polanyi's liberalism

The idea of 'dynamic' or 'spontaneous order' (the latter term entered Polanyi's lexicon in 'The Span of Central Direction' (1948)) is a motif in Polanyi's depiction of liberalism. There are, as he saw it, certain tasks necessitating spontaneous order, that corporate orders can never perform. They are tasks demanding orders which, free and self-governing, provide

<sup>9</sup>Polanyi indicated (1941, pp. 432, 435) he had taken the name 'dynamic order' from Köhler and modified its meaning to suit his own needs. *Gestalt* psychological theory had an important role to play in the development of Polanyi's thought (Polanyi (1946, 1964, pp. 33–34, 38, 47, 52, 59); also Polanyi (1967, p. ix)).

<sup>10</sup>The index of Köhler's book has an entry for 'spontaneous association' (1929, 1947, 262ff.), and a notion 'spontaneous grouping' (p. 144). There is mention of 'stationary state' (p. 136) in the body of Köhler's book but not of 'spontaneous order'.

<sup>11</sup>Polanyi (1951, p. 159) was not saying spontaneous orders are devoid of regulation; he indicated that tradition, law and informal social control are bound to play a part but, rather than be used to design and control any such order as a whole according to a predetermined plan, they set parameters within which free mutual adjustments may proceed.



members with scope to personally adjust their initiatives in response to the activities of colleagues. About what tasks was Polanyi talking? Conspicuously, the three cases cited above—science, law, and modern industrial production. He also noted, without discussing, numerous other operations that can only properly proceed in spontaneous orders, some of which were cited earlier with others appearing below.

So the contours of Polanyi's liberal society have become discernible. His account of it has affinities with, even if it is not self-consciously in the tradition of, continental liberal theory arising from Montesquieu and featuring the *Gemeinde* or small community as the basic unit of society, not the individual person. The idea of the *Gemeinde*, as Daniel Bell (1976, p. 258) has reminded us, goes

back to the medieval social order, the corporation (such as a university or a religious foundation), the “guilds” of merchants and artisans (we would now call them professional associations). These were self-ruling corporate bodies within the larger society which lived according to their own codes and were privileged in their powers. For someone like Durkheim, these professional bodies and occupational communities appeared as the necessary anchorages for civic morals in the large-scale modern society, standing between the unchecked egoism of the individual and the enormous and threatening power of the state.<sup>12</sup>

Bell did not have Polanyi in mind when he wrote this, but it certainly serves as a good outline of the Polanyian position.

Polanyi's image of spontaneous order is a crucial component in his distinctive liberalism, his appreciation of freedom was inextricably bound up with such order. In 'The Growth of Thought' essay, as in subsequent writings, Polanyi elaborated a distinction between two ways of acting independently, described as 'private' and 'public' liberty. A person left to her own devices, acting on personal desires and not obliged to serve any externally defined purpose, was seen by Polanyi as enjoying 'private' liberty. It is 'the converse of personal servitude', people devoid of it are as 'slaves or villains' (1941, p. 430). 'Public' liberty on the other hand is exercised within spontaneous orders, someone (or some corporation) being free in this sense when able to act as s/he personally considers appropriate in a given context in relation to a predetermined public goal or ideal end. The agent here acts independently, on her own initiative without having to follow instructions, contrasting the duty of a subordinate official in a planned or corporate order. Polanyi described public liberty as 'responsible', unlike private liberty. But responsible to whom or what and for what? He (1951, p. 158), also (1964, p. 83), Polanyi and Prosch (1975, pp. 14 and 202)) associated public liberty with performance of 'social functions' or tasks, describing their discharge as a 'public responsibility' that participants accept as a condition of being members of a spontaneous order as they conscientiously work toward the ideal end or absolute value of the order.

On the face of things, Polanyi's 'private' liberty appears to coincide with what Berlin (1969, chap. 3) identified as 'negative liberty' (freedom from coercion) in his celebrated

<sup>12</sup>Among many studies of the topic Nisbet (1953, 1990, 191ff.) is of particular value.

lecture of 1958, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', but closer inspection discloses at least one difference. A person could exercise Berlin's negative liberty to pursue one of the ends of Polanyian public liberty, suggesting negative liberty is neutral between selfish desires and public ends. The same, it may be noted in passing, is true of Hayek's (1982a, 55m, p. 107; 1982c, p. 163) freedom which allows all 'to use their knowledge for their purposes, restrained only by rules of just conduct'. According to Polanyi, the freedoms he distinguished are alternatives or mutually exclusive, ruling out the possibility of a person simultaneously enjoying both sorts of freedom. His suggestion was that a person enjoying private freedom to satisfy her private desires cannot be serving the public ideal of a spontaneous order at the same time. But he (1941, p. 430) offered no cogent reason as to why private liberty must be irresponsible, rather than serving unselfish ends (moral, intellectual, or whatever). One can think of counter-examples to what he said. A scholar might devote years to a problem, working independently, ignorant of discoveries and adjustments occurring in cultural spontaneous orders. Or someone might use her (private) freedom compassionately, caring for the underprivileged or the mentally ill. Choosing to help family members or neighbours is unselfish, but the freedom is not obviously Polanyian public freedom. A pianist may play a Beethoven sonata simply to appreciate its beauty; the freedom is private but the end is one of Polanyi's spiritual ideals. A scientist within a spontaneous order may be egotistically motivated by desire for fame, the ideal end of truth being of little concern to him. Such cases display an admixture of Polanyi's supposedly incompatible freedoms, suggesting private/public liberty is a false disjunction, that these in fact are at opposite ends of a spectrum of liberties, various mixed forms existing between. The disjunction he postulates evidently rests on the thought that freedom exercised outside a spontaneous order is for selfish reasons, while public freedom must be unselfish, but this is a mistaken assumption in both its parts.

Further explicating their relations, Polanyi argued that although public liberty is incompatible with and limits private liberty, the freedoms nevertheless complement and stimulate each other. Examples readily spring to mind: scientists need time and quiet to discover solutions to problems, architects to envision designs, composers new scores, business people to conceive new products and ventures, and they are all typically conditioned by developments occurring in spontaneous orders, the context stimulating their own contributions. Polanyi claimed that public liberty had served as an historico-causal condition of private liberty with the shackles of serfdom breaking once public liberty emerged in law and commerce. Again, he pointed out that the perversion of private liberty ('private nihilism') is inimical to public liberty—abuse of private freedom to reject truth, beauty, justice and the cultural achievements inspired by these ideals opens the door to tyranny. Both forms of freedom Polanyi (1951, p. vi; also 1958, p. 233 n. 1) saw as having their rightful place in liberal society although he counted public freedom as the more fundamental of the two. Public liberty justifies private liberty, not the converse. 'Freedom of the individual to do as he pleases, so long as he respects the other fellow's right to do likewise, plays only a minor part in this [the Polanyian] theory of freedom.' In a similar vein, 'the free society is not an Open Society' (a swipe at Popper?) 'but one fully dedicated to a distinctive set of beliefs'. Polanyi noted that private freedom may survive in totalitarian states, unlike public liberty which they crush. Public liberty is extensive in liberal societies whereas private liberty may

be severely curtailed by custom and informal sanctions (the fear that animated Tocqueville and Mill). Soviet citizens under Stalin, in Polanyi's estimation, had more private liberty than the English enjoyed last century.<sup>13</sup> What he (1951, p. 158) was saying in effect was public liberty is the distinctive and defining freedom of liberal society: 'A free society is characterized by the range of public liberties through which individualism performs a social function, and not by the scope of socially ineffective personal liberties'.

Polanyi's view of the free society differs from that of classical English liberals and their heirs. We have noted his inclination to take subsystems as the basic units of society, in contradistinction to classical liberalism's ontology of individualism. His emphasis on public over private freedom indicates a further key difference. Plamenatz (1973, p. 36 emphasis added) explains classical liberalism's 'idea (or family of ideas) of freedom in terms of the individual's enjoying rights against those in authority. They are entitlements to act as the individual so chooses, enjoyed by the individual *qua* individual, as distinct from rights enjoyed by individuals as incumbents of institutional roles' and—in contrast to Polanyi's public freedom—'*without reference to any service or duty expected of them*'. Whereas Polanyi (1940, pp. 57–60) appears to envisage public liberty as a *via media* between private liberty and central planning, Cranston (1967, p. 39) gave the idea short shrift as one of those 'new definitions' of freedom that 'writers continue to issue . . . seasonally', implying that Polanyi's notion was peculiar and evanescent. Not so: freedom is similarly conceived by a number of writers (e.g., Malinowski (1944, p. 170), Nisbet (1953, pp. 210, 238), and Benn (1988, pp. 218–221)).<sup>14</sup>

What are the grounds of public liberty? Polanyi's justification of it was not that it supports private freedom and permits self-enjoyment. Judges, scientists and business people may enjoy their work but it is not for that reason that they are granted public liberty. As Polanyi (1951, p. 193) conceived it, a person is only entitled to public liberty if he believes 'in the validity and power of things of the mind and in our obligation to' serve these objects. This belief in the end of a spontaneous order as real and worthy of pursuit is not a conclusion of reasoned argument but a commitment or an article of faith, which was a point Polanyi (1951, pp. vi and 46) had in mind when he referred to the 'fiduciary foundations' of public liberty and the 'transcendent ground' of the free society. Truth, justice and other ideal ends are located in a transcendent mental or spiritual reality: entities, existing in their own right, that are *sui generis* or irreducible to physical or psychological aspects of our being,

<sup>13</sup>I wonder about this particular claim when an authority such as Conquest (1967, p. 7) opined that the USSR had no 'opposition thought' after 1920.

<sup>14</sup>Does Polanyi's notion of public liberty have a genealogy? One suggestion made to me is that it could reflect Christian liberalism of Lord Acton and G.K. Chesterton. I find, however, no acknowledgement of such influence by Polanyi in his published works. Dr. Gregory Gronbacher of the Acton Institute, Michigan, and Dr. Jeremy Shearmur of The Australian National University have advised me that they doubt if Polanyi's concept owed anything to Acton. My own readings of Acton (and Chesterton) lead me to the same conclusion. As I previously indicated, themes of Polanyi are redolent of Continental liberalism. Tocqueville as a case in point affirmed free *moeurs* of personal independence and initiative, individuals freely participating in associations which manage their own affairs rather than appealing to the state for help. Tocqueville believed that associations assist 'individuals to learn the art of adapting themselves to a common purpose . . . Participation in political groupings engenders a taste for, and reveals the advantages of, associations for other purposes as well—educational, scientific, commercial' (Zetterbaum (1987, p. 775)).

to class interests or whatever. These beliefs form a faith and the faith is *transmitted by tradition*, which is to say dogmatically. If the beliefs of which Polanyi was speaking are subjected to doubt and criticism, their ideal ends, he said, would lose their binding power and the grounds of public liberty be destroyed. Public liberty, relying on faith, conveyed by tradition, is necessary for the pursuit of ideal ends. This is its justification.

It may be asked whether public liberty as quintessential liberty of Polanyi's free society is a property of the society as a whole or is it confined to component spontaneous orders? The question may look academic but the way it is answered makes an appreciable difference to how one understands Polanyi's overall theory of the liberal order. Is it a freedom enjoyed by all citizens and exercised as part of their daily life, or is it a liberty existing in discrete localities within society, particularly those involving professional and commercial vocations, which is to say spontaneous orders? Are all citizens fully and actively involved in exercising the true freedom of liberalism or are many of them bystanders in regard to it?

'The Growth of Thought' essay seems to confine public liberty to spontaneous orders, notwithstanding that one of these—the market economy—includes most citizens.<sup>15</sup> But on occasion Polanyi (1951, p. 198) appeared to believe public liberty extends across the free society, speaking for example of a 'good society, respecting truth and justice, and cultivating love between fellow-citizens.' In 1949, connecting public liberty to pursuit of ideal objects (and to market activity), he suggested such ideals are 'held in common' across the free society. He (1949, 1951, p. 29 emphasis added) explained that 'the free society *as a whole*' is supportive of and supported by citizens earnestly endeavouring to live up to their moral convictions. He (1947, 1951, p. 47; also Polanyi and Prosch (1975, p. 19)) appeared to speak in a similar socially inclusive way when noting 'The general foundations of coherence and freedom in society may be regarded as secure to the extent to which men uphold their belief in the reality of truth, justice, charity and tolerance, and accept dedication to the service of these realities'. Among these ideal objects and corresponding public liberties at least truth, charity and tolerance are likely to exist in the wider society, not confined to spontaneous orders. The Polanyi-Prosch study, *Meaning* (1975, pp. 19, 200), contains both points of view, with talk of 'enclaves of [public] freedom' in society and mention of truth and possibly certain other ideals as bearing on activities throughout society.<sup>16</sup> In the final analysis it has to be said that the present issue is not one that Polanyi satisfactorily dealt with. It represents one of those 'loose ends' which, as Polanyi wrote in his major work, the epistemological *Personal Knowledge*, are part of every system of thought. Perhaps we can say, though, that spontaneous orders are his principal repositories of the public liberty of liberalism.

Another question worth raising in this context is what relations Polanyi envisioned between spontaneous orders and the wider society. First, he noted that the general public supports both morally and financially the (cultural) enterprises of spontaneous orders. It is an indispensable condition of their functioning, as illustrated by science (Polanyi (1942, 1951, p. 57)):

The ideas and opinions of so small a group can be of importance only by virtue of the response which they evoke from the general public. This response is indispensable to

<sup>15</sup>See also Polanyi (1946, 1964, pp. 78–79, 81).

<sup>16</sup>The 'enclave' interpretation is also supported by Prosch (1986, p. 280).

science, which depends on it for money and to pay the costs of research and for recruits to replenish the ranks of the profession. Clearly, science can continue to exist on the modern scale only so long as the authority it claims is accepted by large groups of the public.

Is the relation symmetrical, such that members of spontaneous orders work for the benefit of society in return for its support? The answer suggested by Polanyi is that society may be improved by the work but this is a side-effect of its true purpose which is to pursue the ideal of the order concerned. Apart from being unintended, any social improvement resulting from mutual adjustments within spontaneous orders has to be regarded as fortuitous, Polanyi considering their social consequences as basically unpredictable (Gelwick (1977, p. 39)). The picture is confused slightly by Polanyi's claiming at one point that participants in spontaneous orders have as their 'primary aim' creation of a good society (promoting truth, justice, and fellow-feeling). But there is more evidence to suggest he regarded the supreme concern of those in spontaneous orders as discovering or achieving works that conform to their order's ideal. The comment, 'Scientists, judges, scholars, ministers of religion, etc., are guided by systems of thought to the growth, application or dissemination of which they are dedicated', typifies Polanyi's attitude (1951, p. 194). He (1951, p. 194; cf. Polanyi and Prosch (1975, p. 211)) explicitly described these people as motivated by 'professional interests' and duties, and by 'standard incentives which do not aim at promoting the welfare of the social body as a whole', the judge, for example, trying to find relevant facts and laws, substantially guided in this by precedents and other components of tradition.

Did Polanyi see the free society as a whole as a spontaneous order? Even though, as noted, he may have intimated at times that he considered public liberty as existing throughout liberal society, not just within the confines of its various spontaneous orders, which might seem to imply that liberal society as a whole is another such order, fact is he never explicitly described it as one. A check of the Index of *The Logic of Liberty* confirms this with several pages listed against 'spontaneous order in society' but no entry for 'spontaneous order of society'. The only piece of *prima facie* evidence of the possibility of liberal society being a spontaneous order to be found in Polanyi's (1947, 1951, p. 46) writings in the most productive years of his political theorizing (the 1940s) is the following tenuous suggestion: 'all contacts with spiritual reality have a measure of coherence. A free people . . . will show a spontaneous coherence of this kind'. But this is only a vague hint, of little evidential weight. Whereas ample text supports the contrary view, Polanyi (1948, 1951, p. 115 emphasis added) characterizing spontaneous social orders as ones whose members 'mutually adjust their *full-time activities* over a prolonged period', this quality being evident in all his featured examples (law, science and production in free market economies). The later work, *Meaning* (1975), is consistent with the drift of Polanyi's earlier thoughts on the matter, the free society being referred to as a system of spontaneous orders rather than as a spontaneous order in its own right.

This fact of plural spontaneous orders is the defining feature of Polanyi's (1951, p. 165) liberal society. Aside from the pervasive market order, and apart from science and law as orders inspired by spiritual reality, other spontaneous orders are religion, literature, philosophy, arts and crafts. In each such order freedom is provided for initiatives and decisions, typically in regard to one overriding goal. 'Freedom of science, . . . of worship,

... of thought in general, are public institutions by which society opens to its members the opportunity for serving aims that are purposes in themselves' (Polanyi (1951, p. 193)).

### Postscript

This paper has shown Polanyi's social-economic-political thought to be historically significant and to have continuing relevance. The topic is a substantial one, however, with various facets in need of intensive investigation. Suggestions for further research follow.

The impact of Polanyi on the distinguished liberal-conservative thinker Oakeshott would repay close study.<sup>17</sup> A start has been made on this by Wells (1994, p. 137) whose 'The Philosophical Oakeshott' outlines some of Oakeshott's debt to Polanyi in the 1940s.<sup>18</sup> 'Oakeshott's views of knowledge, as expressed in his 1947 "Rationalism in Politics," appear to be almost identical to those espoused by Polanyi' in *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), writes Wells (1994, p. 137). But he (1994, p. 138) proceeds to suggest that in subsequent essays, including 'Political Education' (1949) and 'Rational Conduct' (1950), 'Oakeshott abandoned Polanyi's model when he insisted that technical knowledge can have no meaningful existence for itself and that it is simply a way to summarize (and distort) practical knowledge. Polanyi believed in two kinds of knowledge, but Oakeshott came to believe there is only one type of *real* knowledge—practical knowledge.' A more careful reading of these essays and of others that Oakeshott published in the second half of the 1940s and in the early 1950s is likely to show that Polanyi's influence on Oakeshott remained profound indeed, Wells to the contrary. In 'Rational Conduct', for example, Oakeshott (1947, 1991, p. 121) asserted that all action arises within an 'existing idiom of activity', and the only way to learn such an idiom of appropriate behaviour is to 'practise it.' In time, on the basis of practise, one can make informed speculations about its inherent 'rules and principles', but these formulations are never more than 'abridgments', having no existence independent of the activity, nor exerting any external motive force on it. Wells failed to realize that such thinking, pervasive in Oakeshott's essays through these years, reflects Polanyi's themes in *Science, Faith and Society* (1946, 1964) concerning science and, by implication, diverse other activities as well as life in the free society. Polanyi depicted science as a consensual *community*, its inquiries guided by premisses and ideals. The historically evolving premisses—'ultimate suppositions' about nature, standards, rules of research—'cannot be explicitly formulated' (Polanyi (1946, 1964, p. 85)). They and the ideals are largely unconscious and uncritically accepted. Premisses, method rules, etc. cannot be set out, existing only embodied 'in the practice of ... a communal art', the 'practical art' of discovery serving to guide scientists' decisions and personal judgments (Polanyi (1946, 1964, pp. 33, 39, 42)). Practical art or 'practice of a tradition' refers to cultivation of traditional premisses and their transmission by tradition from one generation to the next (Polanyi (1946, 1964, pp. 52, 67, 76)). The art can only be acquired in the course of apprenticeship, intelligent imitation 'through close personal association

<sup>17</sup>There is one citation (approving) of Polanyi in Oakeshott: 'Rationalism in politics' (1947) in Oakeshott (1991, p. 13n.).

<sup>18</sup>Affinities between Oakeshott and Polanyi are fleetingly noted by Franco (1990, pp. 109–110, 127, 242 n. 95).

with the intimate views and practice of a distinguished master' (Polanyi (1946, 1964, p. 43)).

In a further foreshadowing of Oakeshott, Polanyi described scientific discovery as the pursuit of *intimation* involving 'a dim foreknowledge of the possibilities which lie ahead', including predictions that become apparent 'only years after the discovery was made'. Each such discovery 'applies, renews, and confirms scientific tradition' (Polanyi (1946, 1964, pp. 24, 28, 56)). Polanyi criticized the heirs of Bacon and Descartes along with the whole 'rationalist age' for deriding 'traditional beliefs' as obstacles to intellectual advance, and for advocating a radical sceptical examination of all propositions and a suspension of belief until verification can proceed. There is abundant scope for a finely nuanced examination of the presence of these Polanyian themes in Oakeshott.

In the next place, there is need of detailed comparison and contrast of Polanyi's theory of spontaneous orders with that of Hayek, most influential analyst and supporter of spontaneous order this century. Tentatively sketching a few differences between them, Polanyi is more obviously a pluralist with regard to spontaneous orders than is Hayek. Polanyi devoted considerable space to analysing various spontaneous orders, failing to explain whether liberal-democratic society is itself such an order, whereas Hayek's examination of spontaneous order in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* focusses on the free society as the principal instance.

Did Hayek see the free society comprising strategic spontaneous orders in the way Polanyi did? He (1982a, p. 47) certainly writes of 'numerous . . . spontaneous sub-orders or partial societies' existing in a free society, citing law, morals, language, and money. Having noted such cases, however, Hayek, unlike Polanyi, offered no analysis of them such as would serve to establish the accuracy of his classification, and in fact his description of them as spontaneous orders looks rather dubious. I support this claim using one of Hayek's alleged examples of the free society's component spontaneous orders, laws and in particular the rules of just conduct. Notice firstly that when he (1982a, pp. 43–46, 98, 104–105, 112, 125) analysed the rules in detail, he referred to them not as a spontaneous order of, but as *foundations* of, the free society as a whole, repeatedly differentiating between the spontaneous order of the free society as an order of *actions* and the rules of justice on which that order depends. These doubts on whether Hayek in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* envisaged rules of justice as a spontaneous order are supported by a distinction he (1967, p. 67) drew in another work between 'the systems of rules of individual conduct and the order of actions' resulting from adhesion to such rules, Hayek stating they 'are not the same' in spite of being 'frequently confused' as in the misnomer "order of law". Nor is it clear whether Hayek's other examples of spontaneous order (apart from the free society) are genuine cases, for what are language, money and the like orders of—if not actions, what; and how do they spontaneously order themselves?

A further difference of emphasis between our authors is this. At least some of Polanyi's examples of spontaneous order are dedicated to a single aim—science to truth, law to justice, etc. He writes (1951, p. 193) that 'Freedom of science, freedom of worship, freedom of thought in general' open to people 'the opportunity for serving aims that are purposes in themselves.' Whereas Hayek (1978, pp. 73–74) appeared to regard as a defining condition of spontaneous order that it has no one purpose but—'not having been deliberately made'

by people—is ‘serviceable in the pursuit of many purposes’. On a related matter, did Hayek agree with Polanyi that science is a spontaneous order? In *The Road to Serfdom* (1944, p. 161) he suggested that natural and human science are, when freely practised, animated by ‘the disinterested search for truth’, a condition that planners subvert. But if the social system of pure science is animated by a sovereign aim rather than by an unspecifiable number of purposes, its being a Hayekian spontaneous order would appear to be excluded. Its supreme aim notwithstanding, pure science does not appear to be a planned order either, so—a question for Hayek-scholars—what kind of order (if any) is it?

The influence and suggestiveness of the Polanyian system of social ideas in recent intellectual history, and the intrinsic importance of the system, have barely begun to be appreciated.

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