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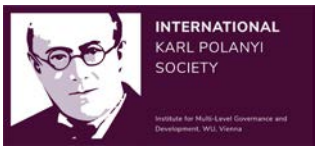

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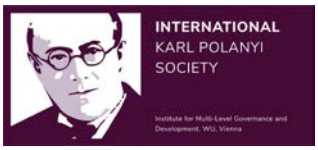

Abstract

Liberal globalism has reached its limits in the context of the climate and corona crisis. Criticism of globalization comes increasingly from the right. As a counter-model, these actors present the return to a capitalism with a nationalistic character, in which (selective) trade regulation to strengthen one's own market positioning (competitiveness) plays a central role. The progressive forces, on the other hand, are divided when it comes to their relationship to globalization. While some actors emphasize that global problems can only be solved globally, others focus on the local level as the central field of action. We differentiate ourselves from both positions and problematize the underlying "spatial fetishism". As an alternative, we propose a strategy of planetary coexistence that cleverly utilizes the scope for action at different levels to enable a good life for as many as possible within planetary boundaries. At the local level, economic areas of everyday economy (health, housing, energy, etc.) as well as economic cycles (repair economy, regional food systems) can become small. At the national and EU level, industrial and fiscal policy offer progressive points of action, while at the global level the regulation of trade relations and the limitation of global financial markets are central. Our policy paper contains specific recommendations for action for different actors (social movements, administrations, decision-makers).

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Universalism, Cultural Difference and the "Revenge of Politics": Revisiting Karl Polanyi in the contemporary global political environment

Ayşe Buğra[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

I am honored to be invited as this term's Vienna Karl Polanyi Visiting Professor and I would like to thank the institutions involved in the Vienna Karl Polanyi Visiting Professorship project for inviting me and for giving me the opportunity to present this public lecture where I will pursue the themes of universalism and cultural difference by drawing insights from Karl Polanyi's work. Perhaps I should add that these themes have a personal significance for me. I do not know whether Turkey, the country where I live and work, can be considered as part of the "Western civilization", but I find it difficult to talk about the Enlightenment ideals, about democracy and freedom, as an outsider.

The subtitle of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* is "the political and economic origins of our time". The book was published in the beginning of the post-Second World War period and it explored the historical background to the emerging post-war international order in an analysis of the nature and the contradictions of the nineteenth century market society. Today, it is with the subtitle of *The Great*

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Transformation in mind that I will make some observations on the late twentieth century neoliberal globalization which forms the background to the current historical conjuncture where the overlapping crises brought along by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have led to intense debates on the future of our global political and economic order.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have begun to hear the views on the different and incompatible value universes of "the West and the Rest" quite frequently. These views are sometimes expressed from a western self-critical perspective problematizing the tendency to attribute a universalist character to what is in fact the ideals rooted in the history and culture of western societies.

I think that the salience of "culture talk" might constitute an impediment to the proper diagnosis of the current trends in global politics which present a threat to democracy and the rule of law in both Western and non-Western countries. An "authoritarian", "illiberal" or "populist" turn in global politics appears as an important characteristic of the political environment of our times. In the large body of literature on the subject, the rise of populism is discussed as a global phenomenon which could be observed in wide variety of country contexts with different histories of the development of political and social institutions. It has been described as an "exclusionary identity politics" (Müller, 2017) characterized by similar discourses insisting on culture and identity and using narratives of history which refer to both victimhood and superiority to sustain the defense of the integrity of the country's civilization against external and internal enemies of the nation. The evolution of this type of culturalized politics toward a form of authoritarian right-wing nationalism with an increasingly uneasy relationship with representative democracy and peaceful co-existence within and between countries now constitutes an anxiously discussed international problem.

So, how did this happen? What is behind this disturbing trend in global politics?

As I said, attempts to examine this challenge of culturalized politics and the ways of responding to it with an approach formulated also in terms of cultural difference are not likely to be very useful. What might perhaps be more useful is a different approach where the illiberal turn in global politics is examined with reference to the ideological environment of the late twentieth century economic globalization. I will insist on an apparent contradiction between the denial and affirmation of diversity which marked the ideological context of neoliberal global capitalism. On the one hand, the idea that there is no alternative to the market economy dominated the policy environment; little room was left

for diversity in economic institutions and policies. At the same time, culture was attributed a crucial role in the analyses of society and politics within the "cultural turn". These analyses included Huntington's dismal prediction of a geopolitical environment characterized by the "clash of civilizations" or the views on "alternative modernities" where social and political relations and institutions are shaped differently from those in Western democracies. Other trends situated in the cultural turn, such as multiculturalist approaches, came with normative positions more compatible with a liberal outlook on social and political relations. But with their emphasis on the role of culture in defining individual identity and social belonging, they have also contributed to the loss of appeal of universalism.

This global environment, where the standardization of economic institutions went together with the emphasis of cultural difference, was marked by **a strong sense of inevitability** brought along by the idea that there is no alternative to the market economy and cultural difference is a historically given reality. I think that this sense of inevitability undermines the ability to act upon and restructure social institutions and relations by means of political competition and negotiation.

The rise of authoritarian nationalism of right-wing populism could be seen as **the revenge of politics** in this environment, which precluded political intervention in the economy, as a political orientation, which extensively draws on the prevailing views on different cultural value universes defining social relations and institutions. A viable response to the challenge presented by this revenge of politics therefore needs to problematize the sense of inevitability, which has limited the realm of political action to culturalized politics. This is what makes Polanyi's ideas so relevant to our present. In Polanyi's work, the emphasis placed on "the reality of society" informs the rejection of the basic tenets of economic liberalism, but also offers a critical perspective on the culturalist denial of universalist values. I think that the current reflections on the future of our international order could benefit from this Polanyian approach.

2. RETURN OF THE MARKET ECONOMY AND THE COUNTERMOVEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CULTURAL TURN

"*The nineteenth century civilization has collapsed*" is the opening sentence of Polanyi's *The Great Transformation.* Polanyi then writes that the key to the system of the 19th century civilization lay in the laws governing the market economy" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 3), and discusses the type of economic organization which characterizes the 19th century globalization as a "historical aberration", a "stark utopia" incompatible with human society.

Polanyi's analysis of the incompatibility of the market economy with the reality of human society is based on his criticism of the economic liberal perception of society where the economy seen as an autonomous domain spontaneously emerging and functioning according to its natural laws is separated from politics. In his discussion of the 19th century market economy, Polanyi shows that there was nothing spontaneous about the emergence and development of this market-dominated economic order. It was put in place by deliberate policy intervention to sustain the expansion of markets to areas which were previously outside the orbit of exchange relations. It was by legislative action that labor, land and money have come to be treated as commodities, and their commodity treatment presented a deadly danger to the human and natural substance of society, as well as to productive organization.

While the emergence of the market economy was not the outcome of a spontaneous process, the rise of a defensive reaction in all societies that were called upon to submit the forces of the market was indeed spontaneous. Polanyi introduced the concept of the **countermovement** to discuss this defensive reaction which was universal, but its political channels of expression had different, society-specific forms.

It is now possible to observe that the economic order of our contemporary neoliberal capitalism in many ways resembles to that of the 19th century civilization whose collapse was announced by Polanyi. Economic liberalism, in Polanyi's words "*the organizing principle of a society engaged in a creating a market system*" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 135), has once again become a defining feature of the ideological environment. An extensive process of institution building and policy design also accompanied the emergence and development of neoliberal capitalism which has emerged through the dynamics of the late 20th globalization. The international institutional mechanisms of regulation which characterized the Bretton Woods system put in place after the Second World War were replaced by new ones designed to sustain the global reach of the market economy. Policies of de-regulation, privatization, and liberalization of trade and finance were implemented in all countries. Forms of economic organization and labour market relations have undergone radical changes.

The impact of socioeconomic changes brought along by the new policy orientation was especially strong in former communist countries and developing countries with national developmentalist regimes that were being inserted in the global market economy. These countries were expected to implement the same set of market reforms following the blueprints presented by international financial organizations in conformity with the basic tenets of the transition paradigm. The policy objectives were defined by the given path to the market ideal, and the term **transition** has helped to

undermine challenges facing the countries undergoing massive socioeconomic transformations. The transition paradigm focused on the contrast between the plan and the market, or state regulation and free enterprise, and, as such, it offered an exercise in comparative statics rather than a dynamic analysis of socioeconomic change.

However, it was not only in the countries in "transition" that the place of the economy in society was changed by the new policy orientation. In *The Great Transformation,* Polanyi has discussed the nineteenth century trends toward global standardization of economic activity as a historical aberration. At the end of the 20th century, too, with the global reach of the market economy the livelihood of people in all countries of the world had changed, including the developed capitalist countries.

Polanyi's work would lead us to expect the societies to react to this loss of diversity in an attempt to defend the institutions that define their way of life. At the initial stage of the implementation of market reforms, the standard policy package could be implemented without a strong popular resistance in former communist and national developmentalist countries. Given the past experience of economic inefficiency and political repression, the existence of widespread mistrust in the state was quite normal; any regulatory action by the state was regarded with suspicion and policies that preclude state intervention could be easily accepted. In societies previously ruled by authoritarian regimes, liberal visions of democracy could sometimes incorporate not only anti-statist but also anti-political characteristics. However, the tendency to associate power with politics and to see the civil society outside the realm of power relations was quite common also in left-liberal circles in countries with mature democracies.

When rising inequality, precariousness of work and income, and the feelings of insecurity and anxiety became a reality of people's lives in all societies where the nation states could no longer be relied upon to contribute to social cohesion by redistributive policy action, the self-protection of society began to find a different expression in the political arena. The political vacuum left by the demise of socialism was being filled by the affirmation of cultural difference and identity as a salient theme in the rise of a new political orientation in global politics.

In a critical essay on the notion of "alternative modernity" Arif Dirlik wrote that *"What is most remarkable with hindsight is that the "cultural turn" came in the midst of a headlong flight globally from a century long search for distributive and political justice"* (Dirlik, 2013, p. 17).

After making a similar observation, Zygmunt Bauman has written that *"The two developments- the collapse of communal distributive claims (and more generally, the replacement of the criteria of social justice by those of respect for difference reduced to cultural distinction) and the growth of inequality running wild- are intimately related. There is nothing incidental about this coincidence. Setting claims for recognition from their redistributive content allows the growing supply of individual anxiety and fear generated by the precariousness of 'liquid modern life' to be channeled away from the political arena- the sole territory where it could crystallize into redemptive action and could therefore be dealt with radically- by blocking its social sources"* (Bauman, 2001, p. 88).

Yet, it might perhaps be more important to situate the current homelessness of the demands for redistributive justice in the changing character of the political arena itself. The quest for social belonging and society still takes place in the political arena and finds a response in culturalized politics. This is a response which does not offer people redistributive justice, but it offers them a place in a community with its historically given cultural way of life. It could be observed that the often- justified concerns with cultural disadvantages associated with non-class identities have been separated from concerns about redistributive injustice.

As Anne Philips has written, "*economic equality has certainly fallen into disuse, tainted as it is by the failures of socialism, and made to seem hopelessly out of kilter with celebrations of diversity and choice"* (Phillips, 1999, p. 1). This, she has argued, has constituted an impediment to the development of a more comprehensive view of proper institutional structures required for democratic societies.

The trend toward the culturalization of politics has been an integral component of neoliberal ideological environment cutting across the accustomed divide between the right and the left. The liberal form of identity politics in multiculturalist approaches, such as those of Charles Taylor or Will Kymlicka, has been quite influential in left-wing politics, and this has led to some critical views on the possibility of a non-universalist socialist orientation. For example, in an article entitled "Left's Lost Universalism", Todd Gitlin has observed that "*While historically it was the Right that denied the possibility of talking about "Man" and "his" rights, at the end of the twentieth century the Left has embraced the primacy and irreducibility of difference and abandoned its former universalist position*" (Gitlin, 2001).

We find, already in the 1990s, Eric Hobsbawm discussing the limited chances of success of a non-universalist left-wing position in democratic politics. Hobsbawm has argued that a political party in a position to stand for representative democracy has to appeal to common values and interests and the

only form of identity politics which is based on common appeal is citizen nationalism. He has then written that "*the Right has always claimed to monopolize this and still manipulates it*" (Hobsbawm, 1996).

This argument has in fact been vindicated by the rise of right-wing nationalisms that have successfully used anti-universalist discourses to legitimate deviations from democracy. This is clearly reflected in some debates on China as a "civilizational state". It has been argued, for example, that China is "*a 'civilization state' rather than a nation-state because for over two millennia the Chinese thought of themselves as a civilization rather than a nation. A shared historical imagination of the unity, cohesion and integrity of Chinese civilization supersedes differences among the people and the Chinese see themselves as belonging to one race, one culture and one state"* (Jacques, 2009).

What becomes clear in these civilizational debates is a tendency to see society as a cultural community which seeks to preserve its integrity not only by affirming its difference, but also emphasizing its unity within its borders. It is this emphasis of both difference and unity which underlies the non-universalist element which could also be found in other types of culturalist politics and entails the risk of providing legitimacy to repressive authoritarian politics. This is where the ideas of Polanyi on the "reality of society" become relevant for the contemporary setting of global politics.

3. REALITY OF SOCIETY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Polanyi's ideas on the reality of society closely reflect the questions pertaining to the possibility of individual freedom and peaceful co-existence at the level of national and international relations.

In Polanyi's work, the term culture refers to the ways of life that characterize a given society and it is natural that societies would react against the disruptive influence of market forces on these ways of life. The idea that "man is a social being" is central to Polanyi's work; the individual exists only as part of the society which is more than the sum of its constituting individuals. The survival of society requires a certain conformity to social norms and loyalty to the state. How could, then, the problem of reconciling personality with society be solved without denying the possibility of individual freedom?

In a lecture entitled "Economic history and the problem of freedom" he gave in 1949, Polanyi defined freedom as "*(I mean by freedom) concrete institutions, civic liberties- freedoms (in the plural) - the capacity to follow one's personal conviction in the light of one's conscience: the freedom to differ, to*

hold views of one's own, to be a minority of one, and yet to be an honored member of the community in which one plays the vital part of the deviant" (Polanyi, 2014, p. 39).

Freedom, in other words, has to do with the possibility of non-conformity, but it is the freedom of individuals as social beings. The reality of society is something to which one has to "resign" oneself and "uphold the claim to freedom, in spite of it". As Polanyi asks in the last chapter of *The Great Transformation* entitled "Freedom in a complex society", given the knowledge of the reality of society, *"is freedom an empty word, a temptation designed to ruin man and his works, or can man reassert his freedom in the face of that knowledge and strive for its fulfillment in society without lapsing into moral illusionism? This anxious question sums up the condition of man"* (Polanyi, 1957, p. 258A).

In his attempt to answer this question, Polanyi insists on the institutional fabric of the society which denies or allows room for the expansion of individual freedom. The individual cannot be isolated from society; the claim to freedom has to be upheld by resigning to the reality of society. But the individuals are not "robots" that would be wishing and acting in conformity with the requirements of the cohesion and survival of the society defined independently of their will.

In the "Essence of Fascism" Polanyi has discussed the fascist denial of the idea that "society is the relationship between people" (Polanyi, 1935), but he has also problematized the market-view of society which, in his words, "*equated economics with contractual relationships and contractual relations with freedom"* (Polanyi, 1957, p. 258). Where individual freedom is thus conceived as a characteristic of contractual relations, any intervention by the state in the realm of these relations is presented as a threat to freedom.

Polanyi argues that this economic liberal imagination is not compatible with the reality of society, and the idea of freedom it incorporates is flawed. It is an imagination which overlooks *"such brutal restrictions of freedom as were involved in the occurrence of unemployment and destitution"* (Polanyi, 1957, p. 258). In the liberal approach, freedom is reduced to free enterprise. This, according to Polanyi, "*means the fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and income need no enhancing and a mere pittance of liberty for people who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter against the power of the owners of property"* (Polanyi, 1957, p. 257). A society marked with such **"unequal freedoms"** could not be called a free society.

The discussion presented in the article "Essence of Fascism" complements the chapter on "Freedom in a Complex Society" in a particularly useful way by revealing the importance of the idea of "equal freedom" in Polanyi's work and, relatedly, the "modernity" of his thought.

In the "Essence of Fascism" Polanyi writes that "Fascist corporative state is "*a condition of things in which there is no conscious will or purpose of the individual concerning the community, nor a corresponding responsibility of the individual for his share in it."* According to Polanyi, *"neither such a will nor such a responsibility can pass from our world altogether as long as we continue to conceive of society as a relationship between persons"* (Polanyi, 1935, p. 394).

This formulation makes one remember Zygmunt Bauman's critical points directed at the multiculturalist perception of society as a cultural community where individual identity and relations between people are defined by the shared culture of society. This leaves little room for the individual members of society to critically evaluate, accept or contest the terms of social co-existence with their diverse values, goals and aspirations. "*Community without freedom is a project as horrifying as freedom without community"* writes Bauman (1996, p. 89).

In a theoretical frame where cultural community appears as an entity entitled to preserve the integrity of its culture can dangerously come close to an understanding of society as a "thing like" entity. Individual differences melt and disappear in society whose structural order is shaped independently of the politically articulated and negotiated ideas and interests of its members. The significance attached to equal freedoms might have little relevance in the structural order the society. At the same time, cultural relativism introduces a position of moral neutrality in international relations. Where the reality of society does not designate a relationship between persons, societies become immune to moral scrutiny with reference to the place assigned to the right to non-conformity.

With all his negative comments on the standardization of societies by the global reach of a market civilization, Polanyi cannot be said to accept this type of moral neutrality that comes with the rejection of universalism.

Polanyi, as we know, has never refrained from using the terms such as "human nature", "Man's economy" or "brotherhood of Man". In Polanyi's conceptualization, socialism is the heir to the Christian notion of the brotherhood Man. Here, the emphasis on Christianity introduces a religious element that might vindicate non-universalist ideas; but the idea of the uniqueness of the individual

and the oneness of mankind, which finds a strong expression in Christian doctrine, holds independently of its religious context and appears, instead, as a crucial element of modernity.

In "For a New West", a text written in the midst of the cold war when the atomic bomb was ever present as a menace to humanity at large, we find a very succinct expression of what Polanyi thought about the relationship between the West and the Rest. According to Polanyi, *"The Russian Revolution of 1917 was patently a continuation of the French Revolution of 1789 in its eastern advance"* and the national uprisings in Asia which came later were *"a link in the chain reaction started by the American, French and Russian revolutions"* (Polanyi, 2014, p. 30). This eastern advance of modernity, with equal freedoms and democracy as its core values, was first frustrated by Stalin's crimes, which "almost reversed" the defeat of fascism, and later by the rise of cold war tensions. "*The West now emerged as a designation for a political power grouping.*" (Polanyi, 2014, p. 30). This, for Polanyi, was a moral defeat for the West. "*They lost caste, when democracy was made synonymous with capitalism- in the USA- and national status was identified with colonial possessions- in Britain and France*" (Polanyi, 2014, pp. 31 & 32).

Polanyi observes that the collapse of the old moral landscape of Western universalism has taken place as the word was conquered by a technological civilization which has produced a variety of separate and distinct cultures with different core values sometimes incommensurable with the western ones. But this observation on cultural diversity does not lead Polanyi to end the text by announcing the death of universalism. The text ends with comments on a new type of universalism which is to be defined by a re-positioning of the West "*as an equal member of a family of (such) societies",* accepting to carry out a real conversation with them rather than sticking to a *"spirited monologue"* as in the old universalism.

Dialogue appears, in fact, as a dominant theme in the contributions to the short-lived journal *Co-existence* designed to address and to contribute to the eradication of cold war tensions which, with the nightmarish possibility of nuclear war in the picture, presented a serious threat to humanity at large. The contributors to *Co-existence* were debating the political issues which define different methods of group decision making compatible or not with democracy.

The debate was about political systems with their accompanying economic institutions, but the Co-existence project was basically an attempt to reach a common understanding between societies with different political and economic systems in capitalist and socialist countries. But, it was closely linked with the question of values which also had to be included in the dialogue to establish a basis of trust.

In an article published in the *Co-existence*, Somerville wrote that "*Peace is strengthened by seeking out, identifying and bringing about a consciousness of common ideological ground, shared values, positions*" (Somerville, 1964). In another contribution to the journal, the same theme was followed with reference to the Pope's call for internal peace in the midst of cold-war tensions. The Pope's call for respect for the natural order laid down by God was interpreted not as a statement which suggests that Christian doctrine has to be accepted by all parties. It was rather seen as an appeal to the idea that all people could accept the common origin of human beings and the whole universe, as well as their common human situation. Abiding by common principles of responsible lawfulness and equity could thus be binding for all human societies beyond their differences (Dewart, 1964).

Polanyi was fully aware that different countries constituting the family of societies are not isolated from each other, neither are they fixed in their culturally informed aspirations. All societies have the capacity to reflect on their terms of coexistence within their boundaries and in international relations. For him, the fact that societies are entitled to remain different does not mean that they are entitled to refuse dialogue with other societies. I believe that he would be in agreement with the way Arif Dirlik formulated his critical assessment of the idea of "alternative modernities". Dirlik wrote that:

"*The self-representation of Euromodernity may be self-serving, ideological or illusory, but there is no denying either the profound changes the world has gone through over the past three centuries or the transformations of self-consciousness that these changes have brought about... Euromodernity has also opened up vistas of human possibilities that by now are a common legacy of peoples globally… In a global modernity caught between the degradations of a globalized capitalism and oppressive nativisms, the need for universal visions of justice and democracy is more urgent than ever before.*" (Dirlik, 2013, p. 37).

In the beginning of my talk I said that the ideological environment of our neoliberal global capitalism has been marked by a strong sense of inevitability stemming from the faith in the market economy and the belief in the historically given cultural differences between societies. Polanyi's challenge to this crippling sense of inevitability is closely related to his insistence on the importance of institutions that could be designed with human will and reason.

In the last chapter of *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi wrote that certain freedoms *"were, like peace, a by-product of nineteenth century economy, and we have come to cherish them for their own sake... We must try to maintain by all means in our power these high values inherited from the market economy which collapsed. Neither freedom nor peace could be institutionalized under that economy,*

since its purpose was to create profits and wealth, not peace and freedom… As to personal liberty, it will exist to the degree in which we deliberately create new safeguards for its maintenance and, indeed, its extension. In an established society, the right to non-conformity must be institutionally protected" (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 254–255). As far as the possibility of peace is concerned, in an early article entitled "The meaning of Peace" Polanyi wrote that "*Dogmatic statements about the psychological nature of war are meaningless"* and argued that that war is an institution whose primary function is to resolve conflicts which cannot be resolved by other means. The establishment of an international order of peace could only be realized by putting in place the institutional basis of this order (Polanyi, 2014, pp. 78 & 83).

Especially in a global context where information and communication technologies make people under undemocratic regimes aware of how other people live in different parts of the world, it is unlikely that authoritarian nationalist definitions of culture and identity could convince all members of society to accept political repression and the violation of human rights. Dissidents who embrace the ideals of equality and freedom will continue to exist in increasing numbers, and ignoring their voices by references to civilizational difference could be compatible neither with global justice nor peaceful international co-existence. Global justice and peace would require a new political imagination to include these dissident voices in a common effort at institutional redesign.

In Polanyi's approach to the reality of society, the realm of the inevitable does not extend to the nature of political choices that would be made and the degree of success with which they would be implemented. In his message, there is an open-endedness which might seem frustrating to those who find his work inspiring. But we must accept that it is also in this open-endedness that the strength of the message lies for our reflections on the possibilities for the future.

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