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KARL POLANYI AND THE REALITY OF SOCIETY

FOR A NEW WEST: ESSAYS 1919–1958. By Karl Polanyi. Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity, 2014. Pp. xv, 258.

THE POWER OF MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM: KARL POLANYI'S CRITIQUE. By Fred Block and Margaret R. Somers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Pp. 296.

ABSTRACT

This essay reconsiders Karl Polanyi's famous thesis about the "embeddedness" of the economy through an examination of two recent books: *For a New West*, a collection of previously unavailable essays by Polanyi, and Fred Block and Margaret R. Somers's *The Power of Market Fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi's Critique*. The guiding thread of this analysis is the claim that a constant in Polanyi's thought was his belief in what he called "the reality of society," that is, that society exists as a social fact over and above the individuals that constitute it. The essay begins by tracing Polanyi's intellectual development, drawing primarily on the essays found in *For a New West*. Polanyi's quest to reconcile individual freedom with social solidarity led him first, in the years between the First and Second World Wars, to embrace liberal socialism, before his readings in anthropology persuaded him that traditional economies "embed" the economy in social relations and that the nineteenth-century liberal project of a "disembedded" economy (through the so-called free market) is a departure from this anthropological norm. The essay then examines and questions Block and Somers's claim that Polanyi maintained that the economy is always "already embedded," arguing notably that Polanyi believed that the advent of market society entailed an economy that was actually disembedded from social relations, not merely one that was re-embedded in an alternative set of institutions.

Keywords: embeddedness, markets, capitalism, socialism, liberalism, society, anthropology

In his own day, Karl Polanyi (1886–1964) was known for his incisive analysis of economic liberalism at a time when, like many of his contemporaries, he believed that this ideology was fast becoming a historical artifact. The title of his best known work, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (1944), a study of the rise of "market society" in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and its precipitous collapse after the First World War, refers less to the advent of laissez-faire liberalism in the nineteenth century than to its seemingly imminent demise as the Second World War drew to a close. Though the origins of what he called "the breakdown of our civilization" lay "more than a hundred years back in that social and technological upheaval from which the idea of a self-regulating market sprang in Western Europe," the "end of this venture," Polanyi maintained, "has come in our time," bringing to a

close “a distinct stage in the history of industrial civilization.”¹ Yet if there has been, in recent years, renewed interest in Polanyi, it is not merely because of the account he offers of liberalism’s past, but because of the perspective he provides on neoliberalism’s present and future; the post-1945 rejection of the free-market system, which Polanyi not only welcomed but believed was necessary to humanity’s survival, proved relatively short lived: within forty years, the free market had regained its luster, and its apostles were expanding its purview with seemingly unstoppable momentum.

But exactly what does one gain by turning to Polanyi for theoretical insight, now that market society, whose obituary he wrote, has been resuscitated? What does he offer that cannot be found in a long line of critics of capitalism extending deep into the nineteenth century? He provides neither a rigorous analysis of economic exploitation, nor of the class character of social and political dynamics that one finds in Marx. Neither does he probe the way capitalism generates ideology and the illusion of consent, like the Frankfurt School or Antonio Gramsci, or critique the reification of consciousness, as did his compatriot Georg Lukács. Rather, Polanyi’s originality and importance as a thinker lies in the fact that he was a student of economics who took the notion of *society* seriously. His key intuition, and the dominant theme of his mature work, was that economics is essentially a subsystem of social relations, the quasi-universal framework upon which the quality and resilience of human life depends. “Aristotle was right,” Polanyi observed in 1947: “man is not an economic, but a social being,” who is eager less for material possessions than for “social good-will, social status, and social assets.”² To describe this order of priorities, Polanyi contended that the economy is “embedded” in society. Though the specific ways in which the economy is embedded in society vary considerably, as Polanyi demonstrated in his studies of economic history, the modern age had laid bare the fundamental and ultimately normative choice that determines a society’s fate: either to recognize and embrace the economy’s embeddedness, or, rejecting the verdict of history and anthropology alike, to disembed the economy from the matrix of social relations. Margaret Thatcher’s famous remark that “there is no such thing as society” is, from a Polanyian perspective, a rigorously exact description of the free-market outlook: the economy is truly disembedded from society only when economic relations, understood nominalistically as relations between private individuals, are seen as real. In different ways, two recent books enrich our understanding of Polanyi’s claim that the economy exists only in relation to the web of human interaction that we call society. A new collection of Polanyi’s previously unpublished papers, entitled *For a New West*, informs us of the intellectual contexts and personal trajectory that shaped Polanyi’s crucial insight. Fred Block and Margaret R. Somers’s study, *The Power of Market Fundamentalism: Karl Polanyi’s Critique*, offers a bold theoretical reconstruction of his thought that seeks to prove the enduring relevance of his core idea.

1. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* [1944] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 5.

2. Polanyi, “Our Obsolete Market Mentality” (1947), in *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies*, ed. George Dalton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 65.

POLANYI'S LIBERAL SOCIALISM

For a New West is a collection of previously unavailable essays. The vast majority of them, culled from the archives of the Karl Polanyi Institute of Political Economy at Concordia University, appear in print for the first time. In addition to essays in economic history that anticipate his later work, the volume includes articles on a broad range of topics: perspectives on the post-World War II world; analyses of international relations and the nature of pacifism; reflections on English and American culture; and essays on the social sciences and political theory. Of particular interest is the light the volume sheds on Polanyi's early intellectual development. From the handful of papers dating to the beginning of his career, we learn something rather unexpected: this thinker, who is best known for his critique of *economic* liberalism, identified, as a young man, with *political* liberalism, however quixotic and inchoate his position may have been.

A close reading of Polanyi's work and consideration of the context in which it was written makes clear that this liberal disposition is less surprising than it might seem. In many ways, Polanyi's intellectual project was to make sense of the world into which he had been born—a late nineteenth-century Europe that had been decisively shaped by liberalism—and to assess it both from the standpoint of liberalism's apparent collapse after World War I and the more radical ideologies that collapse spawned. His views on liberalism's fate were, consequently, as ambivalent as one might expect: he believed that liberalism and its fundamental disregard for human needs were responsible for the breakdown of nineteenth-century European society and the rise of totalitarianism, even as he held that liberalism had, however imperfectly, articulated a vision of freedom and the individual that no decent society could, in good conscience, dismiss.

Born in Vienna in 1886 to a family of assimilated bourgeois Jews, Polanyi was raised in Budapest, in circles that viewed Hungary, which had only recently acquired a degree of autonomy within the Habsburg Empire, as a cultural and political backwater, steeped in Catholic mysticism and feudal hierarchy. The decades following the Compromise of 1867 have been described as the "golden age of Hungarian liberalism."³ Polanyi's father was a successful railroad engineer, and his mother was close to Vienna's Russian expatriate community (where she rubbed shoulders with, among others, Leon Trotsky).⁴ The Polanyi household was a mainstay of *fin-de-siècle* Budapest's intellectual life, exemplifying the assimilated Jewish culture that Hungarian liberalism made possible. Mary Gluck writes: "Budapest, which in the 1880s and 1890s was just in the process of being transformed into a cosmopolitan, sophisticated city consciously imitating Paris and Vienna, offered a way of life and a kind of sociability in which most assimilated Jews took conscious pleasure

3. Mary Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 49.

4. For an account of Polanyi's family and his early years, see Erzsébet Vezér, "The Polanyi Family," in *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi*, ed. Kari Polanyi-Levitt (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), 18–25.

and pride.”⁵ The informal salon the Polanyi home hosted welcomed the city’s leading literary figures, including the aspiring philosopher Georg Lukács.

Polanyi’s early years were marked by active engagement in contemporary politics. In 1904, Polanyi entered the law faculty of Budapest University, where he was close to the student socialist movement. In this milieu, it was becoming increasingly clear that the liberal consensus that had shaped late nineteenth-century culture was unraveling. In 1908, a battle with right-wing university students resulted in the founding of the Galilei Circle, a subsidiary of the Hungarian “free thinkers” movement. Its mission, Polanyi’s wife recalled, was “[t]o mobilize against clericalism, corruption, against the privileged, against bureaucracy—against that morass ever-present and pervasive in this semi-feudal country!”⁶ By 1914, Polanyi had taken the step toward participating in parliamentary politics, becoming the secretary of the National Radical Bourgeois Party in 1914.⁷

In 1919, Polanyi’s support for the failed Hungarian Revolution forced him to seek refuge in Vienna—making him, with the Habsburg Empire’s dissolution, an exile. Postwar Vienna provided two crucial contexts for Polanyi’s intellectual development. First, he witnessed the achievements of “Red Vienna,” the municipal government run by the Social Democratic Workers’ Party of Austria. He saw this experiment as an example of a genuinely democratic form of socialism, one that, because it operated at a local level and was based on popular suffrage, could address human needs far better than central planning could.⁸ In *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi characterized the Viennese experiment as “one of the most spectacular cultural triumphs of Western history.”⁹ Second, Polanyi paid close attention to the vigorous critique of the Social Democrats’ policies by the Vienna school of liberal economists, including Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, who believed that the city’s interventionism, by circumventing the price mechanism, vitiated the economy’s very basis. It was the debates over the socialist city government’s policies that led to his interest in early efforts to mitigate the social impact of industrialization in Britain, notably the Speenhamland system, which he would analyze at length in *The Great Transformation*. Whereas Austrian socialists attempted to “transcend” the market economy, Austrian liberals sought to equate the Viennese policies with the “maladministration of the [British] Poor Law.” Reflecting on his Vienna sojourn, Polanyi concluded: “Thus the Vienna experience and its similarities to Speenhamland, which sent some back to the classical economists, turned others doubtful of them.”¹⁰

Kari Polanyi-Levitt once said of her father: “All his life a socialist.”¹¹ Yet Polanyi’s socialism was infused by an equally characteristic attempt to associate it

5. Gluck, *Georg Lukács and His Generation*, 48.

6. Quoted in Iлона Ducyńska Polanyi, “Karl Polanyi: Notes on His Life,” in Karl Polanyi, *The Livelihood of Man*, ed. Harry W. Pearson (New York, San Francisco, London: Academic Press, 1977), xi, n. 1.

7. Ferenc Múcsi, “The Start of Karl Polanyi’s Career,” in Polanyi-Levitt, ed., *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi*, 29.

8. Lee Congdon, “The Sovereignty of Society: Polanyi in Vienna,” in Polanyi-Levitt, ed., *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi*, 81.

9. Polanyi, “Speenhamland and Vienna,” in *The Great Transformation*, 288.

10. *Ibid.*, 287, 288.

11. Kari Polanyi-Levitt, “Karl Polanyi and Co-existence,” in Polanyi-Levitt, ed., *The Life and Work of Karl Polanyi*, 253.

with everything that he found progressive and true in liberalism. During the inter-war years, the desire for a distinctive blend of socialism and liberalism was shared by a number of intellectuals, who were equally apprehensive of Bolshevism's anti-democratic practices and liberalism's lack of a cohesive social doctrine. In 1930, the Italian intellectual Carlo Rosselli argued, in his essay *Liberal Socialism*, that a socialist society is one in which liberty is extended to the poor.¹² Polanyi seems to have largely agreed with this insight. In an undated conference paper included in *For a New West*, Polanyi wrote, for instance: "we can afford to be both just and free" (38). For Polanyi, however, liberal socialism was not confined to extending freedom to the economic realm. It was also a question of social ontology. What is society? And what must society be if human nature demands both freedom and security? In many ways, these questions would be the leitmotif of Polanyi's career.

What we learn from *For a New West* is that the need to reconcile liberty and security was a crucial dynamic in Polanyi's intellectual development before his thought coalesced into the argument of his masterpiece, *The Great Transformation*. Of particular interest is an essay from 1919 entitled "The Crucial Issue Today: A Response," the earliest text in the collection. A controversy had been triggered by the publication of an article in the Austrian socialist journal *Neue Erde* by Friedrich Wilhelm Förster, a German philosopher. In his first reply, Polanyi agreed with Förster's ethical stance, using it as an occasion to declare Marxism defunct as a viable *Weltanschauung*. Thus at the very moment when his compatriot Lukács was arguing for a renewal of Marxism, Polanyi maintained that the time had come to bid it farewell. The alternative was what he specifically called "liberal socialism" (*liberale Sozialismus*). Intriguingly, Polanyi placed in this category not only socialists and revolutionaries like Proudhon, Dühring, and Kropotkin, but also liberals such as Turgot, Smith, and Bastiat. These thinkers shared a core intuition: "Freedom is the foundation of all true harmony. The condition to which freedom gives rise is the natural condition, whose harmony is grounded in itself and is solid and unshakable" (167). Polanyi's liberalism thus implied—some might say paradoxically—an organic conception of society. He wrote: "The image of social life that, as liberal socialism conceives of it, measures up to reality is an image of an *organic entity*." The "living process" of the economy cannot be replaced by a "mechanical apparatus, however subtly and ingeniously conceived" (169). Consequently, the true injustice of capitalism lay in its "restrictions on the true freedom of labor" (169).

Yet despite—or perhaps because of—his criticism of capitalism, Polanyi acknowledged the vital role that the market plays in society. Building on his metaphor of society as an organism, he described the market as a "peculiar sense organ in the literal sense" through its "perceptual function": through unimpeded price formation, the market allows society to identify its changing needs (170). Thus "cooperative socialism is synonymous with market economy": not, however, a market in which prices conceal the "plunder of surplus value," but an "organically structured market of equivalent products of free labor" (171).

12. Carlo Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, transl. William McCuaig (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

In this way, Polanyi's apology for liberal socialism in this early essay defines his intellectual project and prefigures some of his mature work's key arguments. His task was to find a model of society in which individual freedom, social connectedness, and the promise of social justice might be reconciled. Several ancillary insights accompanied this concern: the belief that the market was an important and probably inevitable social institution, but that modern capitalism had erred in subordinating all other social functions to it; the view that the capitalist labor market is not even nominally free, but reliant, in fact, on legal and political coercion that preserve some of society's most reactionary elements; and a critique of Marxism as simultaneously too illiberal (in its effort to hasten social change through force) and too philosophically akin to capitalism.

CHRISTIANITY, FASCISM, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, Polanyi's emerging outlook was shaped by three factors. First, he increasingly came to see religion, and particularly Christianity, as central to the liberal conception of freedom because of the way it rooted liberty in social cohesion. During these years, Polanyi, according to his wife, Ilona Polanyi, completed a manuscript (which has never been published) emphasizing "the transcending value of the individual Christian ethic, the reality of society, [and] society's final and inescapable nature," ideas that would become "cornerstones of Polanyi's future life-work and of his philosophy of life."¹³ Second, due to the European situation, including Hitler's seizure of power and the onset of authoritarianism in Austria, Polanyi was forced into a second exile, abandoning Vienna for London. These events made it urgent for him to reach an understanding of fascism. The third factor was Great Britain itself, a country that was in many respects a revelation for him. Ilona Polanyi recalled: "we had imagined that we knew all that is worth knowing" about England. Yet they were shocked to find that "the houses which Engels had described were still standing; people lived in them."¹⁴ Polanyi found work teaching adult classes through the Workers' Educational Association and the University of Oxford's Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies. As he traveled to small towns in Kent and Sussex to give his courses, he came into direct contact with the English working class, whose stories of the "dark, Satanic mills" were still handed down from generation to generation. To prepare for his classes, he studied industrialization's history. Moving to Britain, in short, made him an economic historian.

The effect of these factors is evident in a remarkable essay that Polanyi contributed to a 1934 conference of British Christian socialists. Though it is, regrettably, not included in *For a New West*, it sheds light on many of the volume's pieces. Polanyi argues that fascism's essence lies in its denial of Christianity and the conceptions of individual and community that Christianity embraces. His analysis begins with a question: why has fascism targeted both socialism and Christianity with similar vehemence? His answer is a puzzling one: what fascism sees and rejects in both instances is "individualism." Ultimately, Polanyi

13. Duczynska Polanyi, "Karl Polanyi," xv.

14. *Ibid.*, xv-xvi.

contends, Christianity's central ethical teaching is the belief in the transcendent value of personhood. In modern times, this principle has informed the advent of democracy, as it will, in the future, lead to socialism's triumph. Yet fascism rests on a fundamental confusion: it conflates two distinct forms of individualism, and disingenuously claims to have refuted one when all its intellectual energy has, in fact, been mobilized against the other. What fascism seeks to discredit is the Christian idea of the person. It executes this task skillfully, though dishonestly, for it equates Christian individualism—which reached its apotheosis in socialism—with capitalism itself. “By denouncing Socialism and Capitalism alike as the common offspring of Individualism, [anti-individualism] enables Fascism to pose before the masses as the sworn enemy of both.” Through an ingenious “trick,” “Liberalism is identified with Capitalism,” after which “Liberalism is made to walk the plank; but Capitalism is no worse for the dip, and continues its existence unscathed under a new alias.”¹⁵

For Polanyi, the fascist critique of socialism and democracy is thus, by way of an attack on individualism, a circuitous rejection of Christianity, which he regards as the ultimate font of Western values. Christianity is also—and for the same reasons—the foundation upon which liberal socialism must be built. Whereas in 1919 he had claimed that “Freedom is the foundation of all true harmony,” he now asserted that the Christian conception of the person is the source of genuine community:

Christian Individualism arises out of the precisely opposite relation to the Absolute. “Personality is of infinite value, because there is God.” It is the doctrine of the Brotherhood of Man. That men have souls is only another way of stating that they have value as individuals. To say that they are equals is only restating that they have souls. The doctrine of Brotherhood implies that personality is not real outside community. The reality of community *is* the relationship of persons.¹⁶

This position throws into relief fascism's “essence,” to wit: “The central proposition of Fascism is that society *is not* a relation of persons.”¹⁷

For Polanyi, the real significance of this definition is the light it sheds on the incestuous relationship between fascism and capitalism. One might be inclined to see socialism as essentially anti-individualistic, just as it is tempting to view socialism and fascism as “alternative roads, as it were, to the conditions of closer human community.”¹⁸ In fact, fascism accentuates a trend that was already present in capitalism toward the rejection of democracy (which, Polanyi maintained, originated in Christianity and culminated in socialism). The practical consequence of the belief in the dignity of the human person and the “brotherhood of man” could, in his mind, only be an economy organized on democratic principles—in short, the socialist realization of democracy. This is, in fact, precisely what fascists aim to prevent. In contemporary society, only two plausible alternatives exist: “the extension of the democratic principle from politics to economics, or the abolition

15. Polanyi, “The Essence of Fascism,” in *Christianity and Social Revolution*, ed. John Lewis, Karl Polanyi, and Donald K. Kitchin [1935] (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 367.

16. *Ibid.*, 369-370.

17. *Ibid.*, 370

18. *Ibid.*, 381.

of the Democratic ‘political sphere’ altogether.”¹⁹ This is a goal that fascists ultimately share with Austrian liberals. “Liberals of the Mises school,” he notes, “urge that the interference with the price system practiced by representative Democracy inevitably diminishes the sum total of goods produced; Fascism is condoned as the safeguard of Liberal economics.”²⁰ In a way, Polanyi offers a sophisticated restatement of the Comintern’s classic definition of fascism: in its denial of the authoritarian tendencies implicit in liberal capitalism, fascism is indeed the “*dictatorship of the most reactionary . . . elements of finance capital*.”²¹ For in its embrace of corporatism, fascism’s telos, for Polanyi, is the de-politicization of human nature and the reduction of human beings to economic subjects. “After abolition of the democratic political sphere only economic life remains; Capitalism as organized in the different branches of industry becomes the whole of society. This is the Fascist solution.”²² Fascism, in this sense, is the *Aufhebung* of liberal capitalism.

Liberal socialism raised the question of how to reconcile freedom with social integration; the problem of fascism highlights the fact that Christianity—to which fascists were implacably opposed—had, through its notion of the “brotherhood of man,” made personhood and community coterminous. Polanyi’s efforts to find a form of human integration that did not yield to the Marxist (in fact, Leninist) view that political dictatorship could alone produce cohesion in a socialized economy only seems to have been truly satisfied, in his own eyes, with his discovery of the lessons of anthropology. We see this in Polanyi’s introductory lecture (included in *For a New West*) for the course on “General Economic History” at Columbia University, where he taught after the war. The work of early anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, and Richard Thurnwald suggested a “critique of a so-called ‘economic man’” (138). In his study of the Trobriand islanders, for instance, Malinowski established, against the prevailing view that “savage” economics was primitive and largely unorganized, that “primitive” societies were in fact governed by extraordinarily complex economic practices, emphasizing the redistribution of goods through kinship networks and an almost constant exchange of gifts and counter-gifts. Far from being “the sum of uncorrelated individual efforts,” production in these societies was, Malinowski concluded, “a complex and organically united tribal enterprise.”²³ This organic unity was made possible, Polanyi realized, by the fact that economic relations—which he always regarded as potentially divisive—were woven into bonds rooted in culture, politics, religion, and kinship. “Kinship relations tend to be complicated,” Polanyi observed, “since they have to provide the groundwork for a social organization that is designed to *substitute* for a separate economic organization” (143).

19. *Ibid.*, 392.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Georgi Dimitrov, “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism. Main Report Delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International” (1935), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm (accessed June 27, 2015).

22. Polanyi, “The Essence of Fascism,” 392.

23. Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Primitive Economics of the Trobriand Islanders,” *Economic Journal* 31 (1921), 6.

Several important conclusions followed from this initial insight. First, thanks to his readings in anthropology, Polanyi realized that in most human societies, the economic sphere, rather than being independent and self-regulating, is “embedded” in the many overlapping layers of relationships that constitute a society. Second, if the latter is the case, then the distinctive feature of modern Western society was the unprecedented way in which the economic sphere was “disembedded” from all other social relations. Thus not only is “market society,” as Polanyi called it—preferring this term to “capitalism” or “industrial society”—a historical anomaly, but it is an arrangement that one should expect, for this very reason, to prove dysfunctional. Finally, as a result of this claim, the focus of economics becomes not mathematized models of economic decision-making (emphasizing loss and gain or marginal utility) but institutions—the organized and collective procedures shaping social interaction. Malinowski had shown, Polanyi maintained, that it was “not so much the mind as the institutions of the savage [that] differed from our own” (141).

Polanyi’s celebrated argument about the embedded economy can thus be seen as the culmination of an effort to conceptualize a society that reconciled freedom, security, and social cohesion. The solution that he found most fruitful was neither liberal socialism nor the Christian community of persons, but what he called, in a lecture delivered at Columbia (“Five Lectures on the Present Age of Transformation: The Trend toward an Integrated Society,” included in *For a New West*) “the institutional unity of society”—that is, a single “set of institutions . . . designed to serve both the economic and political needs of society” (215). Polanyi teased out the political philosophy implicit in this idea in the final chapter of *The Great Transformation*, entitled “Freedom in Complex Society.” His core theoretical claim is conceptually similar to the arguments he had previously employed in defense of liberal socialism and the Christian community of persons: namely, that well-defined social bonds, far from restricting individual freedom, are in fact constitutive of it. “Institutions,” Polanyi wrote, “are embodiments of human meaning and purpose.”²⁴ More prosaically, though just as essentially, “institutions are required to make the rights effective”: specifically, he mentions “the right of the individual to a job under approved conditions, irrespective of his or her political or religious views, or of color and race.”²⁵

Yet even more important than his argument about modern society’s need for a complex notion of freedom embedded in institutions was his belief that the post-1945 world could dispel the dangerous fantasy that had been so forcefully entertained during market society’s brief but disastrous reign: the “radical illusion . . . that there is nothing in human society that is not derived from the volition of individuals and that could not, therefore, be removed again by their volition.”²⁶ What the proper study of economic history reveals is that “society” is not merely a conventional name given to an aggregation of individuals, but an entity with its own being and character: Polanyi calls this “the reality of society.” Though he never mentions Emile Durkheim, Polanyi subscribes to largely the same position

24. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 254.

25. *Ibid.*, 256.

26. *Ibid.*, 258.

as the French sociologist: human beings cannot exist without a system of norms and structures that transcend the individual. Liberal capitalism is “utopian” in that it entertains the impossible fantasy of a society of completely self-determining individuals. Even after the Second World War, some liberals were still attacking “[p]lanning and control” as “a denial of freedom” and denouncing the “freedom that regulation creates” as “unfreedom.”²⁷ In “Five Lectures on the Present Age of Transformation,” Polanyi refers to the “unbending fanaticism of a Lionel Robbins or a Ludwig von Mises” (216)—the same characters, in other words, who sought to equate Keynesianism and the welfare state with totalitarianism. Yet it was ultimately the liberal rejection of the traditional means through which human beings have embedded freedom in institutions that, in Polanyi’s view, made fascism possible:

Freedom’s utter frustration in fascism is, indeed, the inevitable result of the liberal philosophy, which claims that power and compulsion are evil, that freedom demands their absence from a human community. No such thing is possible; in a complex society this becomes apparent. This leaves no alternative but either to remain faithful to an illusionary idea of freedom and deny the reality of society, or to accept that reality and reject the idea of freedom.²⁸

Society had “remained invisible” during the long liberal interregnum; now, it was becoming visible again—something fascism, as abhorrent as it was, had helped make possible. An economy that accepted regulation and planning, and rediscovered the centrality of redistribution, reciprocity, and exchange to human sociality, proved the only way to anchor and render meaningful the idea of freedom under modern conditions. A re-embedded economy in which society had once again become visible proved to be the ultimate and most sophisticated formulation of the “organic” society that Polanyi had, at least since 1919, maintained was the necessary counterpart to freedom.

This final statement of what one might call Polanyi’s liberal socialism also allowed him to scale back his earlier claims about the Christian underpinnings of an integrated society. In an essay entitled “The Meaning of Peace” that appears in *For a New West*, Polanyi specifically contrasts the world-historical but outdated notion of the Christian “society of persons” with modern “institutional society.” This essay, according to the volume’s editors, dates from Polanyi’s British sojourn, having first appeared in typescript form in the *Bulletin* of the Christian Left Group in August 1938. Although his 1934 essay on fascism can be read as an appeal for a recovery of Western society’s Christian roots, the 1938 piece leaves little doubt that he now held that Christian ethics were an inadequate foundation for a just community in modern times. The problem with Christianity is that while it manages to tie the notion of personhood and its “essential freedom” to its conception of community, its reflexes are “anarchist” and “pacifist.” Thus despite a real commitment to freedom and solidarity, its attitude toward social structures and institutions is ultimately antinomian. For Christians, “[n]either institutions nor customs nor laws were the substance of social existence, but the community

27. *Ibid.*, 256.

28. *Ibid.*, 257.

as a relationship among persons: an interpretation of the nature of institutional society that amounted to its rejection” (84). He adds: “Power, economic value, coercion were repudiated as evil” and the “discovery of the nature of personal life” linked to a rejection of “permanent forms of social existence” (84). Though he described Christianity as communist, it seems in many ways that he came to see it as prefiguring modern liberalism in its repudiation of social structures and of the “institutional totality of society.” What this shows us is that Polanyi’s mature thought hinged not on an abstract or idealized vision of social cohesion, but on the belief that integration could be achieved only by taking seriously the means that human beings employ to organize their collective existence. “Power, economic value, coercion,” he avers, “are inevitable in a complex society” (84).

This explains Polanyi’s cryptic pronouncement in the final paragraphs of *The Great Transformation*, in which he remarks, in ways that recall Freud’s famous account of the successive blows to human narcissism, the three “constitutive facts” upon which Western consciousness is based: knowledge of death, which derives from Judaism; knowledge of freedom, a legacy of Christianity; and knowledge of society, which we owe to socialism. It was Robert Owen’s great achievement to “recognize that the Gospels ignored the reality of society.”²⁹ Owen realized Christian freedom could not be achieved in a complex, industrial society; his own goal was to uphold humanity’s claim to freedom in this kind of society—an objective that Polanyi made his own.

IS THE ECONOMY ALWAYS EMBEDDED?

The Great Transformation, Polanyi’s most complete intellectual statement, is the focus of the excellent new study of Polanyi’s thought by two American sociologists, Fred Block and Margaret R. Somers. Although their goal is to reconstruct Polanyi’s theoretical positions as a tool for, among other things, grasping the contemporary state of capitalism, they also provide an intriguing interpretation of Polanyi’s masterpiece based on close reading and consideration of historical context, while also drawing on the same archive from which *For a New West* is culled.

Block and Somers remind us of the circumstances in which *The Great Transformation* was written. During the Second World War, the Rockefeller Foundation awarded Polanyi a two-year fellowship to complete the book as a scholar in residence at Bennington College in Vermont, where he stayed from late 1941 until the spring of 1943, thus freeing him from his teaching obligations in Great Britain. The book was published in New York in 1944, after he had already returned to England (Polanyi would not begin his career at Columbia until 1947). Block and Somers cite at least two reasons why Polanyi wrote this book. First, they claim it was intended as a primer on economic history for the British workers whom he had taught in the 1930s. Specifically, he believed that the postwar international context would mark a decisive break with economic liberalism, which would give the “working class the opportunity to push Britain

29. *Ibid.*, 258A.

toward democratic socialism” (Block and Somers, 70). Second, Polanyi was eager to weigh in on the debates that would shape the postwar era. Consequently, Block and Somers maintain, Polanyi was eager to finish his manuscript before hostilities ended. This haste and some resulting oversights in the published texts play, as we will see, a significant role in their exegesis. In short, Polanyi wanted the world—and particularly the victorious Allies—to understand that the prolonged crisis that had begun in 1914 was ultimately due to market society itself. Block and Somers write: “Polanyi sought to point the way toward a more humane and rational structure for the postwar world by illuminating the origins of fascism and World War II in the rise of the self-regulating market” (48).

In order to appreciate Block and Somers’s analysis, it is worth recalling the basic argument of Polanyi’s classic text. Its main thesis, as we have seen, is that economic relations have historically been embedded in complex matrices of social relations (kinship ties, codes of honor, social hierarchies, forms of solidarity, and so on). What makes modern society different from other systems of social organization is that, beginning in Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the economy has been gradually “disembedded” from every other kind of social relations, a process that Polanyi traces from the enclosure movement through to the early Industrial Revolution. For Polanyi, the essential nature of modern society is to be found not in industrialization or even, strictly speaking, capitalism, but in the idea of the market, conceived as an economic mechanism that is both independent of and superior to all other social relations. It is crucial to Polanyi’s argument that economic liberalism, the theory that rationalizes the modern state of affairs, is demonstrably false, as it fails to grasp that the society it defends contradicts rather than supports its core assumptions. In particular, economic liberalism falsely explains the advent of capitalism as a spontaneous mechanism, overlooking the fact that market society was actually dependent on authoritarian institutions inherited from earlier forms of social organization. Specifically, the allegedly free labor market was in fact enmeshed with a much older system of controlling rural populations in Britain, rooted in the “squirearchy,” that is, the bastions of local authority in the English countryside. Far from being on the decline, traditional rural hegemony had reasserted itself during the Napoleonic Wars—at the very moment when the Industrial Revolution was burgeoning—through the so-called Speenhamland system. The heir to the Elizabethan Poor Laws, Speenhamland, adopted in 1795, was a system whereby parishes sought to ensure social order by offering the indigent a handout or “poor rate” (paid for by the landowning class) that could be received in addition to earned wages. The Speenhamland system meant that far from relying on a free market of labor, early industrialization in fact depended on a chastened and disciplined working class, which had “sacrifice[d] . . . the virility of the common people.”³⁰ Economic liberalism, particularly as it was articulated in David Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), which maintained that the tendency of wages to hover at subsistence levels was an insurmountable economic law, were really erroneous attempts to invoke the abstract ideal of the market to explain a system

30. *Ibid.*, 122.

that was steeped in authoritarianism and social repression. The disembedded market that economic liberals advocated proved, in Polanyi's view, so contrary to human nature and needs that it invariably mobilized society to defend itself, a reflex that was part of a process he dubbed the "double movement": "the market expanded continuously but this movement was met by a countermovement checking the expansion in definite directions."³¹ The high-water mark of laissez-faire economics achieved in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s thus elicited, from roughly 1879 to 1929, a counter-movement characterized (very roughly) by economic protectionism (high tariffs), greater taxation, and social laws (such as Bismarck's health pensions). This is, moreover, the basis upon which Polanyi attempts to answer the question that motivated him to write *The Great Transformation*: how is one to explain the utter collapse of nineteenth-century European society in the 1920s and 1930s, of which the most telling symptom was the rise of fascism? Polanyi's answer is that fascism was the final paroxysm of the nearly permanent crisis triggered by the disembedding of the market from European society, the ultimate verdict placed on "a market society that refused to function."³²

In their interpretation of Polanyi's great work, Block and Somers identify a key ambiguity in his idea of "embeddedness." There are two basic ways in which this central concept can be understood. Most commonly, Polanyi is assumed to be saying that, under normal conditions, the economy is embedded in social relations, and that only in exceptional historical circumstances is it "disembedded." This argument is the normative basis for Polanyi's critique of market society: it is precisely because, under capitalism, the economic realm is effectively disembedded from other social relations that it parts ways with forms of human social organization that have existed for millennia. Alternatively, one can read Polanyi as saying that an economy can, in fact, *never* be truly disembedded from society. According to this interpretation, even market society embeds the economy in a thicket of social norms and political exigencies. Whereas in the former reading, market society seems abnormal, it appears, from this perspective, as deluded as to its own reality: even as society's central institution, the self-regulating market exists only thanks to social rules and norms that give the lie to its alleged autonomy (and thus "disembeddedness"). Block and Somers call the latter view the thesis of the "always-embedded economy": from this standpoint, free-marketeers are not disembedding the economy so much as "*re-embedding* it in *different* political, legal, and cultural arrangements" (10, 9).

In their analysis of the composition of *The Great Transformation*, Block and Somers argue that Polanyi initially held the first position but that, as he was writing it, he came to embrace the second. In his account of the contradictions of market society that ultimately culminated in the First World War, Polanyi, they maintain, intended to show how reactions against the disembedded market in late nineteenth-century Europe (notably protectionism) obstructed the free-market mechanism. Yet while making this argument, Block and Somers contend, Polanyi gave "the concept of embeddedness a new and unanticipated meaning." He realized no economy, not even the market economy, can exist

31. *Ibid.*, 130.

32. *Ibid.*, 239.

unless it is embedded in some way: “market societies *must* maintain some threshold level of embeddedness or else risk social and economic disaster,” a point validated by the fact that proponents of protectionism were among market society’s staunchest defenders (92, 93). Thus for Block and Somers, Polanyi’s most powerful insight is that *no* economy — *not even* the market economy — can ever truly extricate itself from social and political relations.

The advantage of Block and Somers’s argument is that it allows them to enlist Polanyi in a kind of immanent critique of contemporary “market fundamentalism,” showing the way in which an ideological commitment to the idea of a self-regulating market (whether in the nineteenth century or under contemporary neoliberalism) is constantly belied by its dependence on political intervention and legal frameworks. The fact that Polanyi’s thought authorizes such a critique is, they persuasively argue, one of its most useful aspects. However, their view that Polanyi came to see the market economy less as disembodied than embedded in a different way is not entirely convincing and downplays some of Polanyi’s most powerful contributions to social thought.

First, Block and Somers’s claim that Polanyi embraced the idea of an “always-embedded economy” would seem to conflate two of the thinker’s main concepts: embeddedness and the double movement. In chapter 4 (“Societies and Economic System”) of *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi explains the concept of embeddedness:

The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man’s economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end.³³

He adds that in an embedded economy, the “economic system is, in effect, a mere function of social organization.”³⁴ The idea of the “double movement” receives its most careful theoretical elaboration in chapter 11 (“Man, Nature, and Productive Organization”). In a nutshell, it refers to the fact that the free market is so threatening to basic human needs that its introduction necessarily triggers a social reaction aimed at limiting its harshest effects. This dual movement consists, on the one hand, of “the principle of economic liberalism, aiming at the establishment of a self-regulating market,” relying on a merchant class and using *laissez-faire* and free trade as its methods; and, on the other hand, of a “principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature as well as productive organization,” relying on the support of those most exposed to the free market’s dangers and “using protective legislation, restrictive association, and other instruments of intervention as its methods.”³⁵

It is perfectly understandable that Block and Somers would emphasize the proximity of these two concepts: both are based on Polanyi’s conviction that the economy is a dimension of social life rather than an autonomous mechanism and that this means, in practice, that an economy can function only on the basis

33. *Ibid.*, 46.

34. *Ibid.*, 49.

35. *Ibid.*, 132.

of rules and norms that are more or less explicitly articulated (along the lines of Durkheim's notion of the "noncontractual bases of contract" [93]). Yet it seems over-hasty to conclude that Polanyi's discovery of the double movement led him to maintain that even market society is embedded. First, the counter-movement that occurs in the double movement is primarily the work of the state (even if Polanyi clearly emphasizes that the demand for such action arises from particular social interests). Block and Somers acknowledge this: "In short, competitive markets require ongoing state action" (93) (protectionism in the interest of defending a national economy being the most obvious example). Yet Polanyi is quite clear that what we call the modern state is intimately tied to the rise of market society itself. He notes that "the centralized state was a new creation called forth by the Commercial Revolution."³⁶ Even more important, he observes: "A self-regulating market demands nothing less than the institutional separation of society into an economic and political sphere," adding that this "dichotomy is . . . merely the restatement, from the point of view of society as a whole, of the existence of a self-regulating market."³⁷ State intervention and the counter-movement against the self-regulating market thus provide a cautionary tale about the dangers human beings incur when they stray from a socially embedded economy, but they are not a form of embeddedness per se. They are, rather, attempts to put Humpty Dumpty back together again—a latent expression of the need for embeddedness on the part of the very mechanisms (namely, an autonomous political sphere) that render it impossible.

Second, embeddedness for Polanyi undeniably involves a subordination of economic matters to other concerns, whereas the entire problem of market society is its subordination of all social priorities to economics. He stresses this subordination when he describes embedded economies as being "submerged" in, "enmesh[ed]" in, and a "function of" social relations.³⁸ Modern society departs from this social arrangement due to the "dominating part" played by markets in society as a whole, the fact that the "running of society" becomes "an adjunct to the market."³⁹ Implicit in these assertions is the idea that the free market is inseparable from a type of society, with all this implies in terms of norms, laws, and political choices. He writes: "For once the economic system is organized in separate institutions, based on specific motives and conferring a special status, society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws. This is the meaning of the familiar assertion that a market economy can function only in a market society."⁴⁰ Yet the fact that the market requires non-market institutions and rules to function does not change the fact that economic considerations are allowed to determine social organization rather than vice-versa. This is why we should read Polanyi as taking seriously the notion that market society is *truly* disembedded (with all this implies in terms of a departure from historical norms), even if he *also* gives the lie to the "economistic

36. *Ibid.*, 65.

37. *Ibid.*, 71.

38. *Ibid.*, 46, 52, 49.

39. *Ibid.*, 56, 57.

40. *Ibid.*, 57.

fallacy” that markets are natural and self-regulating. The counter-movements in the free-market system do not alter this fact of disembodiedness. Because they believe that the regulations the free market needs to function constitute a form of embeddedness, Block and Somers think Polanyi paints himself into a corner when he tries to argue that the market’s disembodiedness was ultimately responsible for post-1914 European crisis. They write: “But even by the logic of his own argument, there can never be a self-regulating system, so the idea of impairing its functioning is illogical. It is similar to saying that one’s efforts to capture a unicorn were impaired by the noisiness of those who came along on the expedition” (94). Yet Polanyi’s point is not merely to show that the so-called free market is in fact highly regulated (which seems to be Block and Somers’s core assumption) but to argue that that it is the (all too real) *priority* that market society gives to economic considerations over all other social functions that makes that society anomic, dysfunctional, and dangerous. It may be delusional to believe in unicorns, but organizing a society around that belief can nonetheless have very real consequences. Similarly, the belief that the market can become society’s primary regulative institution can have tangible effects, even if this belief is mythical due to the market’s dependence on a host of other social arrangements. That Polanyi was reluctant to see the double movement as a form of embeddedness can be seen in his analysis of the crisis of early twentieth-century Europe, which provided a telling lesson in the chaos that results when there is no principle integrating the various functions that “embedded” societies typically manage to unite. He observed: “when tensions between the social classes developed, society itself was endangered by the fact that the contending parties were making government and business, state and industry, respectively, their strongholds. Two vital functions of society, the political and the economic, were being used and abused as weapons in a struggle for sectional interests”—a “perilous deadlock” from which “the fascist crisis sprang.”⁴¹

THE REALITY OF SOCIETY

At times, Polanyi seems to suggest that societies are ultimately determined by their economies, although in a way that differs considerably from economic determinism of the Marxist variety. Polanyi’s argument makes sense only if one assumes that all human beings implicitly intuit that a social arrangement that gave free reign to purely economic instincts would be destructive. The question is what collective attitude societies take toward this permanent option to allow economic relations to prevail over all others. Polanyi frequently defines this decision in disjunctive terms: one must either place society over the economy, or the economy over society. His argument about society’s attitudes toward the possibility of markets parallels in this way the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres’s claim about society’s options in relation to the possibility of politics. For Clastres, some societies deliberately choose to organize themselves in ways that preempt the possible emergence of the state as a distinct institution: they are “societies against

41. *Ibid.*, 133-134.

the state.”⁴² For Polanyi, some societies—indeed, most societies, historically speaking—intentionally decide to prevent the emergence of markets (if this is the name for the economic realm insofar as it is disembedded) by submerging them in other social relations: they might be called “societies against the market.” Indeed, much of Polanyi’s work is devoted to studying and theorizing the specific ways in which early societies have sought to develop institutions that manage to embed the economy in social relations, thus averting the emergence of an autonomous market. Polanyi does so in chapter 4 of *The Great Transformation*, and these pages in many ways set the agenda for the rest of his career, which he devoted less to the critique of market society than to a quest for alternatives to this model in earlier forms of economic organization. This is what Polanyi did in his work on the Dahomey slave trade, and most important, in his posthumously published study, *The Livelihood of Man*. In the latter he specifically examined reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange as ideal-typical forms of social integration based on the social embedding of the economy. Perhaps the only regrettable feature of Block and Somers’s outstanding study is the fact that, due to their emphasis on Polanyi’s critique of market fundamentalism, they say little about Polanyi’s reflections on these earlier forms of social integration (which replaced, in a sense, his earlier interest in socialism). They accurately observe that “Polanyi was never interested in generating visions of a return to a preindustrial past” (47). Even so, it is crucial that Polanyi absorbed himself in conceptualizing and exploring the viability of preindustrial systems rather than proposing an immanent critique of market society. Thus in an essay on ancient history, “Market Elements and Economic Planning in Antiquity,” included in *For a New West*, Polanyi writes:

The study of the manner in which market and nonmarket elements are jig-sawed in the various periods of history is of the greatest interest and importance—importance also for the present and the immediate future, in which roughly similar problems are again set to us. The study of ancient history may prove to be one of the most urgently needed toolboxes for the conceptual mastery of the problems of everyday life. (162)⁴³

Polanyi’s interest in preindustrial economies ultimately has less to do with primitivism per se than with his lifelong interest in the problem of what he called “integration,” a term that is critical to *The Livelihood of Man*. In *The Great Transformation*, what Polanyi finds appealing about Owenite as opposed to Marxist socialism is its conception of “man as a whole”—a position that Polanyi promptly equates with Owen’s “social approach,” that is, his refusal “to accept the division of society into an economic and political sphere.”⁴⁴ What Owen grasped is what Polanyi called “the reality of society,” which is one of the definitive theoretical and normative insights of his work. Block and Somers persuasively show that the reality of society was a challenge to market fundamentalism’s “epistemological infrastructure” (166). By the latter, they refer to three characteristics of market fundamentalism’s outlook that they draw from Polanyi: social naturalism (the belief that social relations are essentially biological rather

42. Pierre Clastres, *La société contre l’état: Recherches d’anthropologie politique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974).

43. This essay seems to be from the 1950s.

44. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 170.

than instituted); theoretical realism (the belief that the free market is best justified in a priori rather than a posteriori—or empirical—terms); and a conversion narrative, premised on insight into the alleged perversity of attempts to improve the natural relations of society through conscious planning (such as with welfare policies). The belief in the reality of society is the cornerstone of what Block and Somers call Polanyi's "public philosophy" (225). It is based, first, on replacing an economic conception of social relations with one that sees society as "comprising multiple social institutions and dense networks of social relationships" (226). But what does it mean to say that society is "real"? Block and Somers are committed to the idea that market fundamentalism, particularly in its Malthusian form, is based on axiomatic and deductive principles that are comparable to Newton's physics (this is what they call "theoretical realism"). They believe that Polanyi, in asserting society's "reality," is, by contrast, the true empiricist, who sees "the world as it actually is," thus challenging "economic theory as a form of knowledge that is based on abstract logic and unobservable assumptions about human nature and social equilibrium" (228).

Yet Polanyi's notion of the "reality of society" seems to be something more than an empirical claim (though it is certainly that, too). In the concluding chapter of *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi implies that the problem with market fundamentalism is *precisely* its empiricism—the fact that it fosters the "radical illusion . . . that there is nothing in human society that is not derived from the volition of individuals and that could not, therefore, be removed again by their volition." When the world was seen through these lenses, "[s]ociety as a whole remained invisible."⁴⁵ The reality of society thus refers not so much to something that can be seen and felt as to a transcendent dimension of human existence. The difference between political systems that deny society's reality (liberalism) and those that acknowledge it (socialism and fascism) is not ultimately economic, but "moral and religious." Moreover, the reality of society involves accepting that social life involves constraint—"power and compulsion"—even if a good society is one that tries to work freedom into these limits. Although "society" can certainly be studied empirically (as anthropologists undoubtedly remind us), it is important to hear Polanyi's appeal to recognize the reality of society as a moral claim, admonishing us to acknowledge the social warp into which the weft of our individual aspirations for liberty must be woven if the social fabric is to remain whole.

CONCLUSION

We are living in times when a return to Polanyi seems to be the order of the day. If many societies sought, in the aftermath of the Second World War, to re-embed the economy in society through welfare states, social insurance, and economic planning and regulation (so that David Harvey and others could speak of the postwar decades as an age of "embedded capitalism"), we have witnessed, since the 1970s, a new disembedding, as political leaders have torn down trade barriers,

45. *Ibid.*, 258.

stripped organized labor of its power, slashed tax rates, auctioned off public services to the highest bidder, and deregulated the economy in the name of liberating the free market. Meanwhile, this reversion to market fundamentalism has triggered its own counter-movements: Occupy Wall Street, anti-austerity parties like Greece's Syriza and Spain's Podemos, and political figures ranging from Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders to Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. These movements and figures have proposed any number of measures designed to show that (as the "alter"-globalization movement puts it) "another world is possible," from reformist measures such as the taxation of financial transactions and the reintroduction of walls between commercial and investment banking operations to far more radical ideas, such as "de-growth" and "de-globalization." The clamor generated by such initiatives is the sound of that second shoe falling that Polanyi, with his idea of the "double movement," teaches us to recognize. Yet his extraordinary oeuvre does more than explain (like Marx before him) why opposition to capitalism belongs to capitalism's own internal dynamic. He also provides us with a theory and a normative standpoint from which any oppositional movement to the neoliberal order must be assessed: does it re-embed the economy in social relations, and, consequently, recognize the "reality of society"—that is, social relations as the ultimate matrix of human existence? Whether or not the twenty-first century will be "Polanyian" will hinge on how this question is answered.

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