Commentary

Polanyian pedagogies in planning and economic geography
What pedagogical possibilities open up when the Polanyian formulation of an instituted economy becomes the premise for teaching at the intersection of planning and economic geography? In what ways are Polanyian perspectives well suited to developing critiques of contemporary capitalisms, while also identifying reflexive possibilities for political praxis, even in the most encompassing crises of our times? It is of course imperative to grasp crisis as intrinsic to capital accumulation. Doing so poses a key pedagogical challenge, however, in that it offers up a potentially narrow political horizon—fixed on theoretically necessary, but pragmatically daunting, revolutionary transformation. Prevailing liberal imaginations, of an abstract, disembodied, competitive market with determining effects on lives and livelihoods, make matters considerably worse—serving to depoliticize crisis by locating a naturalized and privatized ‘economy’ in a sphere separate from the political realm.

The concept of a “culturally inflected, institutionally mediated, politically governed, socially embedded, and heterogeneous economy” (Peck, 2013, page 1546) furnishes an important antidote to these challenges. Its pedagogical potency is especially evident in the context of planning programs where students come with progressive ambitions to change the world but carry with them some combination of unexamined market fundamentalisms and romantic nostalgia for community-based modes of provisioning, and where structural critique must answer to planning practice. This commentary explores the pedagogical opportunities afforded by Polanyian perspectives based on the experience of developing a graduate planning/geography course on ‘Planning the Social Economy’. Reflecting on the opportunities as well as the limits of a Polanyian pedagogy specifies some normative and analytical directions for critical planning and geography.

Planning the social economy
‘Planning the Social Economy’ is premised on a claim that the global financial crisis of 2008, and the ensuing recessions, displacements, and debt socialization schemes raise some fundamental questions about how the economy is organized and might be reorganized. If the institutions of global economic governance have failed to pose such questions—opting instead to depoliticize the crisis through bailouts to global capital (Soederberg, 2010)—talk of market formation as a political process, with key implications for social and ecological sustainability, has entered the public domain like never before. The food sovereignty movement (Wittman et al, 2010), the ‘new peasants’ (van der Ploeg, 2008), the movement of unemployed workers (Chatterton, 2005), meanwhile, are examples of globally networked social movements that are pioneering experiments in ‘thinking the economy otherwise’, freeing human and ecological needs from the profit motive. And ‘social economy’ has emerged as the lexicon through which once-marginalized practices like community-supported agriculture, waste recycling, ethical trade, and alternative financial ventures become increasingly celebrated as generators of new work and new markets and the economic empowerment of disadvantaged communities (Amin, 2009; Leyshon et al, 2003).

Naming the present conjuncture in this way establishes at the outset an analytical and a political commitment. Foremost, it dispenses with liberal formulations of the economy as an autonomous entity governed by its own objective laws and devoid of politics and human agency. A conjunctural framing means dispensing also with the prevailing view, aptly characterized by Kanishka Goonewardena (2002), that planners must obey the laws
Commentary 1651

of economics like an engineer obeys the laws of gravity—a view that situates planners as powerless vis à vis universal economic processes. Of course, the laws of gravity and the laws of markets are different. Gravity exists beyond the engineer’s realm of influence, while markets are produced; they do not exist independently of subjective agents, the economists, planners, firms, households, who constitute and inhabit them. Markets can be made and remade, and in fact they must be remade because the prevailing neoliberal orthodoxy guiding the formation of contemporary markets subjugates human life, and the socionatures through which it is coconstituted, to narrowly growth-oriented and profit-oriented objectives that threaten destruction on a planetary scale. By this account the role of planning is to reverse this relationship—to guide the economy according to human and ecological purposes, which are specified in the course as redistributive justice, economic democracy, and relational autonomy.

Thus the course is explicitly built around Polanyi; it begins with reading *The Great Transformation* (TGT), along with secondary reinterpretations probing its contradictions and consolidating its contributions to a critical theory of economy and society (Block, 2003; Burawoy, 2003; Dale, 2010; Halperin, 1984, Hann and Hart, 2009; McMichael, 2004), in combination with Hayek (*Road to Serfdom* 1944 [1967]) and Marx (*On the Jewish Question* 1843 [1975]). The ambiguities are duly explored—the debates around the formulation of ‘embeddedness’, the silences on capital and class, the reification of distinctive modes of provisioning and the, albeit inadvertent, reinscription of unhelpful binaries [eg, economy/culture (see Hart, 2002)]. But on balance it is the utility of the key formulations in TGT for a critique of economic liberalism that is emphasized—namely, the false and depoliticizing separation of the economic from the political, the social, and ecological destruction wrought by the commodification of land and labor, the conjunctural social forces that gather to counter such attempts, and the range of society–economy configurations engendered by these double movements.

The main point for the logic of the course, and for an agenda of scholarship and practice in planning and geography more broadly is this: reading Polanyi against Hayek and Marx presents a political imperative to study the wide-ranging variegation of actually existing economies with diverse modes of provisioning. If liberalism is a lie, moreover, then we need to pay especially close attention to market societies that have historically attempted to manage the commodification of land, labor, and money. How did they do it? What were the costs? What possibilities are revealed for forging democratically organized and socially just economies? The course surveys a range of cases where markets are put to explicitly social purposes, ranging from the Quebec solidarity economy, to the Mondragon cooperative, to the food sovereignty movement. Doing so opens up political questions not only about the configuration of economy–society relations, but also what principles might underpin a more normative articulation of the social economy. While vaguely gesturing toward an expanded interpretation of ‘freedom’ in chapter 21, Polanyi is largely silent on the radical possibilities opened up through a critique of economic liberalism. Finally the course probes the normative principles that are implicit in a kind of ‘freedom’ that is liberated from liberal epistemology, refusing the Hayekian choice between freedom and democracy (Goonewardena and Rankin, 2003). It does so by drawing on scholarship that could furnish a foundation for articulating the contours of redistributive justice (Fainstein, 2011; Fraser, 1997), economic democracy (Goonewardena and Rankin, 2003; McMichael, 2004), and relational autonomy (Chatterton, 2005; DeFilippis, 2004).
Pedagogical openings
Approaching community economic development from a Polanyian perspective has some key pedagogical advantages, which are specified here as (a) comparative sociologies of economy and (b) relational community economy.

Comparative sociologies of economy
TGT establishes the study of economy as an inherently sociological and comparative proposition. Methodologically, the task becomes one of probing the range of society–economy configurations, the multiple forms that actually existing markets can and have taken, and the multiple modes of provisioning—market exchange, but also reciprocity, redistribution, householding, to name the Polanyian formulations—through which societies have organized social reproduction. This formulation opens up important feminist questions about the ways in which social reproduction has been brought increasingly within the capitalist relation in the current conjuncture—with households, for example, turning to the credit system to finance everyday consumption requirements. As Jane Pollard (2012) argues, the “financialization of daily life” extracts surpluses from “parts of life (the reproduction of labor) and sites of life (the household) once held to be beyond reach of capitalist financial calculation”. These practices of course have gendered logics rooted in the monetization of surplus produced by unpaid domestic labor.

At the same time, Polanyian perspectives require research strategies that “provincialize … markets” and attend to “the various social and institutional ways in which provisioning for material wants have been (and can be) organized” (Peck, 2013, pages 1562 and 1555). However much the utopian project of liberal economism may seek to commodify land, labor, and money, systems of market exchange must also articulate nonmarket modes of integration, with conjuncturally specific implications for the dispensation of resources and opportunity. And enduring and emergent systems of market socialism, where markets are held accountable to an ‘ethic of care’ (Smith, 2005), furnish a political counterpoint to which planning and geography students ought to have some exposure.

Thus the course undertakes a comparative sociology of economy, through a series of grounded case studies intended to trace theoretical and political points of connection. It includes case studies from my own research and collaborations, including comparative studies of local shopping streets (Rankin et al, 2013), and of the financialization of development in diverse agrarian settings (Rankin, 2008). It reads across the different permutations that the concept ‘social economy’ itself has assumed in the Canadian context—from the marginalized and relatively precarious ‘social organizations with economic objectives’ (like food cooperatives) in Ontario), to the more systems-orientation coming out of social movements in Quebec, which are geared toward coconstrucing (with the state) a public policy framework for a provincial-scale solidarity economy (Quarter et al, 2009, pages 43–79, 107–133). A range of local-autonomy movements for economic democracy are surveyed. And Polanyi’s reflections on fascism [along with some contemporary examinations of Hindu nationalism in India and Sri Lanka (Ahmed, 1996; Rankin and Goonewardena, 2003)] are highlighted in order to underscore the point that resurgence of social control over the market can occur in an authoritarian as much as in a democratic manner. The task in each instance is to stake out the specific assemblage of actors, practices, institutions, and governance projects through which markets are formed and economies constituted. The goal is to reveal capitalism as variegated, articulated to social forces, and as endlessly confronting other interpretations of socioeconomic life.
Relational community economy

The flourishing of community-based economic planning in the era of neoliberalism would seem to offer some promising prospects that have been duly explored in economic–geographic scholarship on the ‘community economy’. This literature, spawned largely by the theoretical innovations of J K Gibson-Graham, now forms a veritable subdisciplinary cluster of economic geography devoted to chronicling ‘postcapitalist possibilities’ (2006) in local-scale alternative economic practices. It has played a key role in decentring capitalism as a linear teleology with overdetermined effects on lives and livelihoods and in specifying economic subjectivity as a key arbiter of social change processes. By this reckoning, community economies are not comprised merely of particular models of social-economy practice (worker cooperatives, credit unions, participatory budgets, and so on). They must encompass crucially the processes through which people undergo the ‘ethical self-transformations’ necessary to perform their own decentring of the capitalist economy, to shed an affect of despair and vulnerability, and ultimately to participate in collectively building ‘intentional economic communities’.

As important as these interventions have been for claiming the economy as an ‘ethical space of decision’, they also sit uneasily with more materialist readings of community economic development that pose problems of appropriation. Polanyian economic sociologists in particular have cautioned against organizations of the social economy becoming enrolled in managing the ‘new poverty’ arising from roll-back neoliberalisms (Shragge and Fontan, 2000). To the extent that self-regulating communities furnish political legitimation for downloading and decentralizing the costs of social reproduction, they must be recognized as sites of capitalist incorporation, however post- or ‘alternative’ they may be in their modes of provisioning. With these conjunctural conditions in mind, an explicitly relational interpretation of community comes into view. This is a view that emphasizes lines of incorporation and articulation with other places and wider spatial scales of market formation, so that community is understood as emerging out of geographically larger sets of relationships (Massey, 1994). But it is also a view that emphasizes, à la Polanyi, the possibilities for transforming those connections to wider scale political economies so as to equitably improve the lives of people in local communities (DeFelippis, 2004).

As DeFelippis puts it in a sustained engagement with Unmaking (the capitalist) Goliath, local autonomy is “the ability of local actors to control the institutions that connect them to the rest of the world”; it requires “working within a place not about a place” (2004, page 30). That vision of social economy requires Polanyian perspectives married with Gramscian cultural politics (Burawoy, 2003), to foreground contested processes of market formation. Thus many of the cases selected for investigation in the course encompass practices of social economy that involve oppositional not merely alternative politics—where local initiatives to ‘think the economy otherwise’ are linked explicitly to wider mobilizations for social justice, like Via Campesina or the World Social Forum. Following Burawoy (2003), the course is intended to perform a kind of ‘ethnographic archeology’—seeking out local utopian experiments, situating them in relation to wider scale currents and movements, and identifying theoretical and material points of connection through which to begin to build a common language of social economy.

The normative turn

A Polanyian framing thus helps to distinguish ‘Planning the social economy’ from conventional approaches in community economic development that survey models and specify best practices. The cases surveyed are not presented as ideal–typical models, but as configurations of economy and society that are linked in an explicitly comparative endeavor aiming to develop theoretical perspectives on the social economy: its gendered lines of
incorporation (and resistance) to the capitalist relation, the conjunctural social forces through which the economy is constituted, the subjectivities that are produced and enrolled, and so on. The cases are selected in part to model styles of thick description that effectively convey the contingency of market processes. But the emphasis on comparativism and relationality requires going beyond thick description, with all the perils of apolitical relativism it entails (Rankin, 2003), to articulating an expansive vision of socioeconomic life.

What articulations emerge from the comparative engagement with the social-economy cases surveyed in the course? Three are specified and explored theoretically, in order to begin to elaborate more concretely a vision of ‘freedom in a complex society’ with which TGT obscurely concludes: redistributive justice, economic democracy, and relational local autonomy. As features of a social economy that are worth struggling for, these derive from the comparative, historically reflexive method that the course seeks to model. The project of chronicling a decentralized, transnational network of movements for social justice and economic democracy serves a crucial function in this regard. It offers an opportunity to trace the interplay of multiple modes of provisioning through which markets have historically come to serve social purposes. And to trace how processes of market formation in those localities are linked to processes of economic integration in other places and at wider scales—forging contour lines [à la Cindy Katz (2004)] mapping seemingly disparate experiments with local economic democracy.

Of course, multiple normative framings arise from discussions that draw on the wealth of professional and activist experience students bring each year. The key offering of the course is to make the point that no economy–society configuration is permanent or natural, and, as Fred Block (2003) puts it in an article on the “Writing of The Great Transformation”, “there are no inherent obstacles to restructuring market societies along more democratic and egalitarian lines” (page 300). Once the economy is grasped as a sociological phenomenon and comparative object of study, students can begin to pose political questions about what kinds of economy–society configurations might be desirable for a socially just and ecologically sustainable world, and what are the conditions of possibility for such normative visions to be meaningfully pursued.

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