

Book Review: Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left by Gareth Dale

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/09/30/book-review-karl-polanyi-a-life-on-the-left-by-gareth-dale/

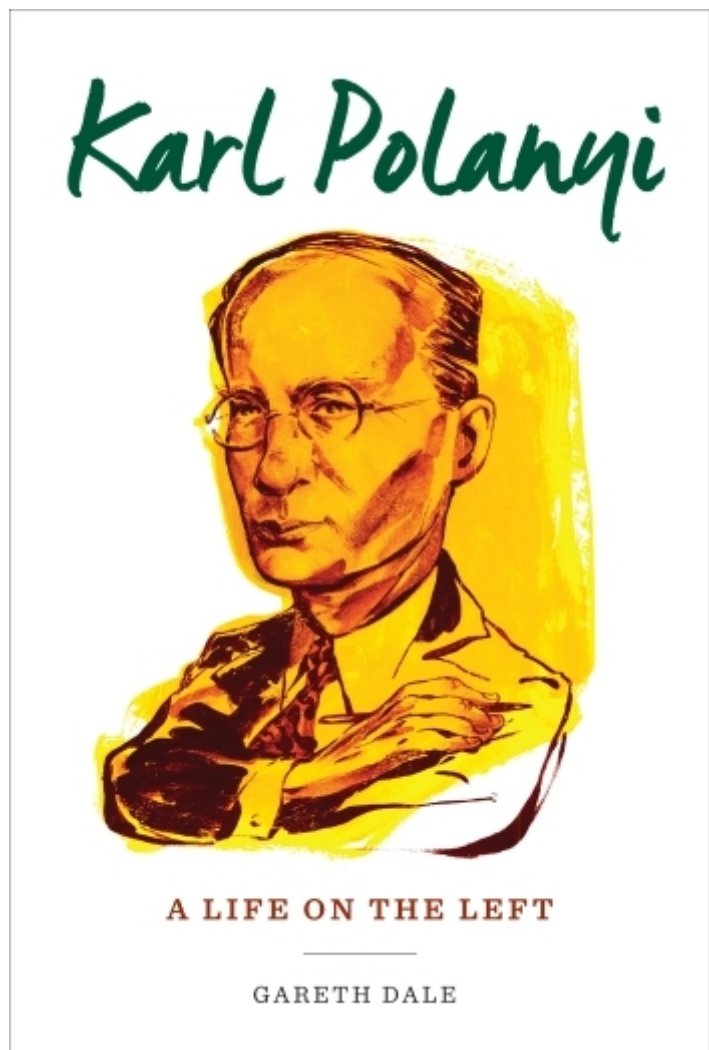
September 30, 2016

In Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left, Gareth Dale continues his longstanding intellectual engagement with one of the twentieth-century's leading theorists of the market economy in a biography that traces the development of Polanyi's thought against the backdrop of his life. While the book may not fully grapple with the contradictions that emerge within the account, Chris Moreh praises this laudable and definitive work that is likely to inspire a new generation of activist scholars through its exploration of Polanyi's life and times.

Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left. Gareth Dale. Columbia University Press. 2016.

Find this book: [amazon](#)

It is unlikely that any social scientist today will be unfamiliar with at least some of the works of Karl Polanyi (1886–1964), the social historian of the market economy whose biography, authored by Gareth Dale, was recently published. For the uninitiated, Dale's previous book *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market* serves as a perfect introduction. In this he critically examined the Polanyian oeuvre and the main concepts emerging from it – such as the distinction between 'embedded' and 'disembedded' economies; the 'ports of trade' characteristic of the former and the 'fictitious commodities' dominating the latter; the 'economistic fallacy' by which mainstream economics has linked market behaviour with human nature; and, perhaps most famously, the Toynbee-inspired postulate of the 'double movement', in which the expansion of marketisation into new areas of life necessarily triggers a protectionist reaction that safeguards the survival of society.



Nevertheless, despite the conviction with which this critical introduction thrust Polanyi to the forefront of socio-economic theory, Dale felt obliged to admit the dilemma he encountered while writing the book: namely, that ‘a fully developed account of Polanyi’s work requires a close look at his life’ as well as an understanding of ‘that “Great Generation” of Jewish Budapest intellectuals to which he belonged’ (*The Limits of the Market*, 6). *A Life on the Left*, alongside shorter biographical articles and an edited collection of Polanyi’s hitherto unpublished works (*Karl Polanyi: The Hungarian Writings*), takes up this challenge.

There is no nutshell that could accommodate Polanyi’s eventful life, and this becomes apparent from the pages of Dale’s biography. Born in Vienna ‘of liberal minded Jewish parents of the upper classes [...] of German culture and western education’ – in Polanyi’s own words (11) – he spent most of his youth in Budapest. In his formative years in the Hungarian capital, Polanyi became involved in various organisational, educational and political activities, and developed the Christian socialist worldview that he would espouse, in one form or another, throughout his lifetime.

Emerging from the turmoil of the First World War into a new life in ‘Red Vienna’, he began a fulfilling journalistic career and experienced for a whole decade the possibility of social democracy, while developing more nuanced guild socialist arguments through direct polemics with Ludwig von Mises and other notable thinkers of the Austrian School. At the end of 1933 – when ‘Vienna was Red no more’ (109) – he resettled to Britain. It was there that he ‘arrived at the thesis for which he was to make his name’ (156).



Image Credit: Clotilde Palace, Budapest ([Michiel2005 CC BY 2.0](#))

The manuscript of his magnum opus, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, was completed while in exile in the United States during World War II. The book, however, ‘gained only a “marginal” place in mainstream and leftist social analysis [in the US], while in Britain it was “greeted with a deafening silence”’. It would only gain a larger readership in the 1980s, but ‘that turn of fortune lies outwith the scope of this biography’ (173). Unable to find appropriate employment in Britain after the

war despite several attempts, Polanyi eventually settled at Columbia University, where he developed a new body of work on the 'substantive economics' of pre-capitalist societies. His intellectual story ends with the address delivered in the autumn of 1963 at the University of Budapest: 'the same institution that had expelled him from its student body nearly six decades earlier and from whose podium he had denounced the rising communist tide in early 1919' (280).

Around this flimsy skeleton and across seven well-rounded chapters Dale builds up a sense of a person not in isolation, but rather as embedded in intricate familial and intellectual relationships. Based on substantial archival research in Montréal, Chicago, New York, Oxford and Budapest, supplemented with interviews with Polanyi's family members, friends and former students, the book can safely be considered the definitive biography of Polanyi, unlikely to become rivalled by any other that may emerge on the wave of Polanyi's increasing popularity. The book not only benefits from its author's deep familiarity and sympathy with Polanyi's work, but also from Dale's skilful pen. His masterful balancing of chronological and topical exposition should satisfy most of his readers, while the sparse and well-placed apparent trivia – such as the humorous illustration of Polanyi's limited cookery skills (148) – will offer a moment of repose to the reader, before they begin to assess the broader significance of such details.

Perhaps the only times when the text leaves us expecting more are the references to 'contradictions' in Polanyi's thought and actions, which remain hanging in the narrative as impenetrable black boxes. Such instances will remind the reader that:

the many unresolved contradictions in his work [...] such puzzles and paradoxes provided the initial impetus for the writing of this biography, in part because to understand them requires a thinking through of Polanyi's life and times, but also because it is the tensions and contradictions in his personal commitments and his oeuvre that give them their engagingly maverick character (7).

That these 'contradictions' remain unpacked in the biography may be due to Dale's treatment of Polanyi as a Lukacsian 'typical character': one who 'is not the average representative of a social class or a historical movement nor an allegorical avatar but a person in whom general aspects common to the mass are synthesized with the peculiarities of their own singular life story' (283). Insofar as Polanyi's 'individuality [is] condensing the defining elements of a movement or era' (283), it could hardly be reduced to anything but contradictory particles.

Rather than an exercise in elucidating individual conflicts in Polanyi's life and work, *A Life on the Left* should be seen as another laudable step in Dale's intellectual struggle to reveal the dangers of neoliberal market fundamentalism and to delineate the possibilities of a 'countermovement'. Polanyi's life is, above all else, desired to inspire a new generation of activist scholars who will see in him an intellectual hero, one able to unify around a higher cause voices on the Left as yet disjointed by various 'tensions and contradictions'. As such, the book is anything but an antiquarian undertaking, inasmuch as Polanyi's work is far from merely historical. 'Despite common misconceptions' – Dale reminds us – *The Great Transformation* in the title of Polanyi's now famous book 'alludes

to his prognostication, not to any historical sociology' (170). And yet, as Dale has argued elsewhere, the primary significance of Polanyi's work lies not in 'any one or other of his specific theses', but in 'the general example it sets' through 'the sort of critically engaged social science of which Karl Polanyi is an outstanding representative' (*The Limits of the Market*, 250).

Chris Moreh is a Research Fellow at the ESRC Centre for Population Change at the University of Southampton. He received his PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, and holds an MA in Sociology and Social Anthropology from Central European University, and an MA in Cultural Anthropology from Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest. His recent research focuses on the political sociology of transnational citizenship, primarily in the context of migration from Central Eastern Europe to the United Kingdom, having previously studied migration to Spain and Hungary. He has also conducted research on topics as varied as gentrification and urban heritage, and the political discourse of Asianisation. He Tweets [@CGMoreh](#), and his writings are available on [academia.edu](#). [Read more by Chris Moreh](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.