

Essay 1

Polanyi used “institutions” to reframe the conceptual architecture and describe the relationships between market, state and civil society. Because of institution’s social and historical complexity and enrichment, Polanyi successfully arrange the above three objects into the two “spheres” without “separating economy from the social” or “sharply (demarcating social world) into neatly bounded and essentially separate realms” (Krippner, 2001, p.777). Rather, with the formulation of the concept “embeddedness”, he referenced it as “the fluid mixing of social objects in a way that defied disciplinary boundaries”. (Krippner, 2001, p.778) In this sense, “the economy (is an) instituted process” in that “social activities, insofar as they form part of the process, may be called economic... any components of the process may be regarded as economic elements.” However, Polanyi was wise enough to remind us that “without an accompanying concept of institutions, such an understanding of economic process as the movement of materials is reductionist”. “[R]educed to a mechanical, biological, and psychological interaction of elements, that economic process would possess no all-round reality... The interacting elements of nature and humanity would form no coherent unit, in effect, no structural entity that could be said to have a function in society or to possess a history.” (Krippner, 2001, p. 779)

In Polanyi’s eyes, there is no human nature as utilitarians believe, or to be more precise, there is no biological human nature, instead, human can only be social being or relational self – they are shaped by social aspects, they are involved in various human relations and the interdependence is the most valued. Even with the so-called

basis natural motives such as “hunger” and “gain”, they are definitely not “timeless and universal forces that molded society into its market form”, but also “an artifact of institutional arrangements. In particular, hunger and gain only dictated human behavior under particular historical circumstances in which land, labor and money were fully commodified.” (Krippner, 2001, p. 780) For Polanyi, motives could be “religious, political, or aesthetic” and “pride, prejudice, love, or envy”, thus, far from some mere biological body, “human beings will labor for a large variety of reasons as long as things are arranged accordingly.” (Krippner, 2001, p. 780) For Polanyi, the economy is definitely not some “fundamental, driving motives” or only belonging to “the realm of rational, self-interested, optimizing behavior”, instead, it involves in the whole “economic life” to “entailing all of the institutional arrangements through which humankind obtained subsistence” (Krippner, 2001, p. 780).

Since Polanyi’s main focus was on the instituted process of the economy and market, his challenge against liberalism was mostly towards the market liberalism who hold a firm belief in the self-regulating market, which in Polanyi’s perspective is not only totally “starkly utopian”, but also “reduce civilization to a wilderness” (Krippner, 2001, p. 779). It “... could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society; it would have physically destroyed man and transformed his surroundings into a wilderness. Inevitably, society took measures to protect itself.” (Polanyi, 1957) Such danger brings about the “double movement”, a resistance from all quarters of the society. Then comes the state who breaks liberalists’ ideal dream of pure market in that “only aggressive state action

could make these so-called ‘fictitious’ commodities conform to the dictates of the market” (Krippner, 2001, p. 779), however at the same time also proved the insustainability of the market society in its pure form. Ironically, to the extent that a pure market society does exist, it was merely “a creature of politics” (Krippner, 2001, p. 780) – a form of institutions – since only with the power of the state could it possibly get there. In Polanyi’s world, there is no pure market, state or civil society; everything is an institutionalized process, a historical and relational combination, and a complication between universalism and particularism.

Arendt used the pair of “rights” – human rights (or the rights of humanity/man) and “the right to have rights” (or the rights of the citizenship) – to redefine the relationship between the three parts. It is said that Arendt has always refused to be labeled as a philosopher since she thought philosophy is concerned with “man in the singular”, but what she really concerned about were “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” It is obvious that what she focused on are the human people, instead of the biological body. As a result, people should not be decided whether to be given rights or not on their biological features; as long as they are human beings, they should have the human rights, which are the basis of “the right to have rights”, however, which are in return crucially protected and guaranteed by “the right to have rights”. “The rights of man and the rights of the citizen, which the modern bourgeois revolutions had so clearly delineated, were deeply imbricated. The loss of citizenship rights, therefore, contrary to all human rights declarations, was politically tantamount to the loss of human rights altogether.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 50) In this way, human

without a political country is no human, and thus loses every chance for every kind of rights. “We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights (and that means to live in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions) and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 50)

Corresponding to liberalism and in succession to the pair of “rights”, another pair of concepts comes from a macro-level: nation and state. As nation is relating to a pre-political situation when human beings are faced with total unfreedom and no choice at all, when blood decides everything, and when “ethnos” and “sameness” dominates human firmly, state is referring to a set of political rules of law, a framework to judge people by what they do with “demos” and “difference” playing the main roles. Thus nation and state are about their membership or their respective rules of inclusion and exclusion, of whom “to be recognized as a right-bearing person” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 57). From Arendt’s point of view, “such recognition is first and foremost a recognition to ‘membership’, the recognition that one ‘belongs’ to some organized human community. One’s status as a rights-bearing person is contingent upon the recognition of one’s membership.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 58) Also, the person to give such recognition and the “addressees of the claim that one ‘should be acknowledged as member’” should exactly be humanity itself. In this sense, Arendt is advocating “a ‘civic’ as opposed to an ‘ethnic’ ideal of polity and belonging. It is the mutual recognition by a group of consociates of each other as equal rights-bearing

persons that constitutes for her the true meaning of political equality.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 60) If nation is only some representation of biological bodies, state or “people’s sovereignty” is truly representing the human person, who should be actively involved in the society with enough political agency and freedom, and thus consociated with each other based on the shared identity of equality – humans are humans only when they enjoy membership in a community – in this way, human are socially determined again. “The nation was an eternal organic body, the product of inevitable growth of inherent qualities; it explains peoples, not in terms of political organizations, but in terms of biological superhuman personalities.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 62) While “[p]eople’s sovereignty’ refers to the democratic self-organization and political will of a people, who may or may not share the same ethnicity, but who choose to constitute themselves as a sovereign and self-legislating body politic.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 63)

Alexander used “solidarity” to reconstruct the conceptual architecture. Instead of power and self-interest, he concentrated on the ethical and emotional convictions as the strength that binds societies together in a good order. In his language, solidarity is “a common secular faith” driving people to coexist and respect one another. He was trying to root his argument at the same time in empirical social science and in normative philosophy, in the interlacing of which his challenge for the utilitarian and liberalism lie.

To be in a normative philosophical way, he tried to build the civil sphere as a generalized abstracting solidarity illustrated while experienced in specific, as well as

meaningful institutions and practices. To be a social science, he claimed that action should not be articulated in mere self-interest way, and society should not be described only upon instrumental relations. Rather, “[a] satisfactory interpretation of social action needs to take into account morality as a dimension rooted in solidarity membership nurtured by emotional and moral identifications and regulated by cultural structures and social influences. Societies, moreover, can be understood only by taking into account both the existence of solidarity and its possibility, not only as an abstract normative ideal, but also as a mundane social realm generalized enough to transcend and bind – albeit to varying degrees – any specific interest and identity to a positively valued common membership.” (Sciortino, 2007, p. 562) In Alexander’s world, there are no biological bodies, but are people with their emotion and culture to feel the existence and echoes of others within the same sphere; and exactly because of the mutual identity, the societies fall into solidarity naturally and voluntarily.

All of the three theorists are opposing the existence and significance of biological humans; instead, their individuals are all socially made. For Polanyi, people’s every choice or even motives are institutionalized; for Arendt, people without a country, or generally a political community, are no people; for Alexander, the emotional identification with other members and the feeling of sharing the same destiny tempered the pressure of specific interests and particularistic loyalties and commitments.

All of the three theorists are discussing the relationship between state, market and civil society from a process or movement perspective. For Polanyi, he used the term

“process” to implicate the “fluid mixing” relationships between the society and economy, while the “double movement” even more strongly binds economy with its social and political institutions. For Arendt, “the formation of the democratic people with its unique history and culture can be seen as an ongoing process of transformation and reflexive experimentation with collective identity in a process of democratic iterations.” (Benhabib, 2004, p. 64) For Alexander, civil change is a “dynamic, process-oriented account of the ways in which the established definitions of civil solidarity may shift – or to be shifted – to include or exclude, to marginalize categories or groups or to repair their solidarity.” (Sciortino, 2007, 567) It seems to me that all of the three theorists are trying to strike a balance between universalism and particularism, or between ideal and the real world through the process perspective, which is flexible and inclusive enough to involve the complicated society and its actors as a whole across the conceptual architecture of state, market and civil society.

Both Arendt and Alexander are mentioning the term of “membership” and “identity”. For Arendt, these terms are trying to depict the human beings’ fundamental features as something represented by the political rights, and the mutual identity between the members is based on the democratic identification; however, for Alexander, the membership and the identity is more related to emotionally and culturally communicative dimensions.

Although all of the three theorists are probing into the relationships between state, market and civil society from a social perspective, they are placing different weights on the three of them. For Polanyi, market is the key and intermediate parts of the

relationship; mostly through the process of market being institutionalized, state and civil society both get into the horizon. For Arendt, nation and state are the key parts; exactly by the inclusion and exclusion of membership for them the civil society are given the space for discussion, though market is almost not discussed directly at all. For Alexander, civil society is the direct and ideal concern, with state and market pulling it to the real world as opposed to the “imaginary communities” and “generalized normative patterns and symbolic codes” (Sciortino, 2007, 563).

References

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