Extract I: Polanyi and the Importance of Embedding the Economy

In his account of the rise of the market economy, Karl Polanyi addresses this issue of the separation of economic systems from the social systems on which they inevitably depend. Polanyi conceived of the economy as ‘submerged in social relationships’. To him the ‘market economy’ was a ‘utopian myth’, since it assumed that economic structures could prevail over social structures. Polanyi used the concept of ‘embedding’ to describe the need for the economy to be enmeshed within a complex system of social rules and cultural norms. He cites a wealth of evidence from anthropological studies making clear that the majority of human societies have used material goods to establish status. An example might be the potlatch ceremony: a gargantuan and decadent feasting ritual that appalled Christian missionaries with its boisterous rejection of frugality. Its aim was for those with plenty to demonstrate their status by giving it away: Polanyi thus argues it to be a social rather than an economic form. In order for the great transformation from a provisioning society to a market economy to take place, a dehumanising process of commodification was necessary: people and the land needed to be turned into products that could be bought and sold:

*Machine production in a commercial society involves, in effect, no less a transformation than that of the natural and human substance of society into commodities. The conclusion, though weird, is inevitable; nothing less will serve the purpose: the dislocation caused by such devices must disjoint man’s relationships and threaten his natural habitat with annihilation. (Polanyi, 1944: 44)*

Polanyi is concerned not merely with the economic and social consequences of this creation of what he calls ‘fictitious commodities’ (land and labour), but also with the psychological distortions it gives rise to. The inherent motivation of human beings is fundamentally changed, he argues: ‘for the motive of subsistence that of gain must be substituted’. This process changes the focus of human life away from gaining the respect of one’s community and achieving a shared excellence in living and loving and towards the smaller and narrower objective of acquiring goods and exchanging them for the maximum amount of the key fictitious commodity in a market system: money.

Embedding the economy is important not only for purposes of security but also, and perhaps more importantly, because of the opportunity it offers for accountability: ‘The rise of the market economy in everyday life, with exchange occurring over ever greater distance, can be thought of as a wedge between our contact with nature and with the moral consequences of the decisions we make’ (Kallis,  *et al*., 2009: 19). The bioregional economy is proposed precisely because of its ability to reconnect economic actors with each other and with their local environment: ‘The only way people will apply “right behaviour” and behave in a responsible way is if they have been persuaded to see the problem concretely and to understand their connection to it directly—and this can be done only at a limited scale’ (Sale, 1991: 53). Far from the rational economic man of the market, the bioregional citizen would act as a social being first, and an economic agent second. ‘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 so far as they serve this end.’ (Polanyi, 1944: 48).

Extract II. Defining the Bioregion [Explain Trueman]

Coming closer still to home, and to Stroud where I am typing these words into my computer, I shall dwell for a while on the area in which Trueman locates me: the Cotswold Stone Belt.Local patriotism notwithstanding, it might provide some context for this discussion to reproduce a quotation from the acerbic and well-travelled clergyman Sydney Smith:

*The sudden variation from the hill country of Gloucestershire to the Vale of Severn, as observed from Birdlip or Frocester Hill, is strikingly sublime. You travel for twenty or five-and-twenty miles over one of the most unfortunate desolate countries under heaven, divided by stone walls and abandoned to the screaming kites and larcenous crows: after travelling really twenty and to appearance ninety miles over this region of stone and sorrow, life begins to be a burden, and you wish to perish. At the very moment when you are taking this melancholy view of human affairs and hating the postilion and blaming the horses, there bursts upon your view, with all its towers, forests and streams, the deep and shaded Vale of Severn. (quoted by Trueman, 1938: 20)*

Smith, we may rapidly ascertain, lived in a time when high and bleak ground was considered barren and before the Romantic poets had relabelled it sublime. He communicates effectively, however, the dramatic nature of the Costwold landscape and especially of the escarpment which marks the break between the hills themselves and England’s most mystical and lively river: the Severn. Alongside the oolitic stone that forms the Cotswolds and so clearly delineates its vernacular architecture, the river valleys also help to define this area as a distinct bioregion. There are three main river systems: the Gloucestershire Avon, the higher reaches of the Thames, and the north-western arm of the Kennet. In addition, the (Stroud) Frome drains the edge of the Cotswold westwards, into the Severn.

These natural features begin to define the bioregion, and naturally influence not only its architecture, as already identified, but also its traditional crafts and cuisine. This can be better explained in the case of our neighbouring bioregion of the Somerset Levels, an area of wetland that I describe in detail elsewhere (Cato, 2011*a*). Here the local climatic and soil conditions perfectly suited various native willow species (especially *Salix triandra*), giving rise to a tradition of basket-making and related crafts. One particular form of basket was designed particularly for fishing for eels in the River Severn which, with its enormous tidal range (the second highest in the world), offers great opportunities to catch fish as it rises and falls twice daily. This begins to give an idea of the way human communities traditionally interacted with the local landscape to develop particular cultures; how those cultures might play a role in creating alternative consumption identities is discussed further in Chapter 7.

In the North American bioregional movement the species we share our landscapes with can also be used to define their boundaries, as in the example of the Salmon people of the American west coast. The UK, being much smaller, has more uniform animal life, although the chough is sufficiently distinctive to be used as the symbol of the county of Cornwall and the Red Kite is used as a local marker in Mid Wales. Domestic animals, such as the Gloucestershire Old Spot pig, are also identified with specific regional areas, as are crops that thrive in local soils and climates. The apple is a source of local identification in the area where I live and is widely used for cider-making in Britain’s western counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Somerset.

Extract III. Provisioning Potential of Woodlands

In his *Earthcare Manual* Patrick Whitefield (2004: 299) notes that ‘Any discussion of productive woodland in Britain must be seen in the context of our consumption of timber. At present we import 90% of what we consume, so if we’re talking about sustainability it’s premature to look at domestic production until we’ve firmly grasped the nettle of reducing consumption.’ Whitefield cautions against exaggerating the uniqueness of trees in supporting a healthy biosphere: ‘Peat bogs, for example, keep much more CO2 out of the atmosphere than any plantations of trees which might replace them, and in some cases grassland ecosystems can be more diverse than a woodland which might succeed them’. He concludes that woodlands are especially valuable because they are capable of offering sustainable yields of a whole range of useful products without this affecting their ability to play a positive role within a healthy ecosystem.

The next slide data from Whitefield (2004) concerning the ecological and economic potential of woodlands. They can absorb pollution, sequester carbon, support microclimates, regulate water systems, underpin soil formation, and provide habitats for a diverse range of creatures. Without threatening this role, it is possible to harvest a wide range of products from living forests. These are illustrated on the next slide and include food, fodder, timber, and biofuel. A range of other opportunities to generate livelihoods are also illustrated in the figure including recreation and aesthetic enjoyment. The way in which working with materials drawn from nature can support a different kind of relationship with the natural world is crucial to the process of re-embedding that I think it constitutive of a sustainable lifestyle. Here I will just briefly draw attention to the way in which woodlanders seek out woods that suit their purpose, and how this requires an intimate knowledge of the different trees. To a wood-worker, wood is no longer just wood, since different trees are suitable for different uses. Hazel is ideal for coppicing (cutting to promote additional growth of poles at ground level) because it will grow again from the stool (the remaining stump). Alder is a water-loving wood that grows close to rivers; it is thus resistant to rot and hence useful in the making of wooden clogs. Cricket bats use *Salix Alba Caerulea* (Cricket Bat Willow) because it also holds water and so is flexible. Sycamore is ideal for bowls and rolling pins because it has a smooth grain and does not impart any flavour to the food. Beech is for furniture, because it grows tall and straight and without frequent knots, but ash is also useful for furniture because it is very good to work when green and this can be used to add to the firmness of joints. This represents a layman’s introduction to the way of the woodlander, but gives a hint at the depth and subtlety of the relationship with natural products that a subsistence lifestyle entails.