

## A NOTE ON MICHAEL POLANYI AND THE CONGRESS FOR CULTURAL FREEDOM

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Permit me to start with three passing, almost off-the-cuff remarks by Michael Polanyi, gleaned from the archives of the Congress for Cultural Freedom of which he was such a representative figure. They give the flavour of his special contribution to the liberal cause – free, independent, informal and committed.

The first anecdote refers to an East-West cultural exchange organized in Venice in 1956 by the Société Européenne de Culture. Soviet hacks and old Stalinists purported to engage in “dialogue” with such Westerners as Ignazio Silone and Stephen Spender. When Silone demanded to know what had happened to the great nonconformist tradition of Russian literature, the Russians refused to answer him. Silone’s response was that he would never again attend a meeting of “cultural exchange” with Communist apparatchiks and stooges.

When the executive committee of the Congress for Cultural Freedom met in Paris to discuss the Venice meeting, Polanyi surprised his anti-communist colleagues by regretting Silone’s stand:

“I think it is a pity. Any meeting is good enough, and if people like Silone are in a minority, so much the better, the more people do they address. I do not see anything wrong with this. It is the way an intellectual movement goes on – very slow and hazardous and patchy. But this is how it happens. I do not think one can do more than to take every opportunity to go on with it”.

In other words, “cultural exchanges” will often be dispiriting, but one makes progress incrementally – by planting doubts, spreading truths, encouraging flickers of freedom. One does not seek or expect damascene conversions.

A second illustration of the Polanyi spirit is his response to the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Its leaders were, in one sense or another, Communists. What should be the policy of Western anti-Communists? Polanyi shocked some on the executive committee by declaring: “These people are our closest allies. We are wrong if today we maintain we are anti-communist. We are not anti-communists. I am not an anti-communist.” In truth he was a committed anti-communist but in the situation of November 1956 he did not want ideological dogma to weaken any support for the Budapest insurgents or the Hungarian Writers’ Association.

A third illustration of Polanyi's independence of mind is his reaction to the "revelation" of CIA funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the related horror of the Left. "I would have served the CIA," he declared, "had I known of its existence, in the years following the war, with pleasure."

The Congress for Cultural Freedom was formed in Berlin in June 1950. It was a rally of some 100 intellectuals who understood – in most cases from personal experience – the Communist threat to intellectual and cultural freedom. Almost all of them were social democrats. Some were former prisoners of Stalin's or Hitler's camps. Some had been Resistance fighters. Others were old refugees. At the end of the conference they adopted a Freedom Manifesto drafted by Arthur Koestler.

Polanyi was not able to attend this foundation meeting. But the Congress executive committee called on him to organize a follow-up conference in Hamburg in 1953 – to defend scientific freedom.

He was an ideal choice. A renowned physical chemist, Polanyi also had a public record of anti-Nazi and anti-Soviet commitment and had been a leader in Britain of the liberal movement for the autonomy of science against the planners. He had also recently been humiliated by U.S. officials who had refused him a visa because of past political associations. In his own person he symbolized what the Hamburg conference stood for.

His 1936 paper "Truth and Propaganda" (reprinted in *The Contempt of Freedom. The Russian Experiment and After*, London 1940) was one of the few to challenge the findings of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (Polanyi's stance, in a period when Soviet prestige remained high, prompted Koestler to dedicate *The Yogi and the Commissar* [1945] to him.) Polanyi also campaigned strongly against the Marxist "social relations of science" movement, which flourished between 1932 and 1945 in Britain and, to a lesser extent, in France and the United States. A reaction to social and political decay during the world Depression, this movement, under the leadership of J. D. Bernal and the World Association of Scientific Workers, popularized the ideas the liberal democracy had failed and that science should be centrally directed and controlled as part of the process of economic planning.

The liberal counterattack began in 1939 with Polanyi's paper "The Rights and Duties of Science" (also reprinted in *The Contempt of Freedom*). In 1940 he formed the Society for Freedom in Science which by the middle 1940's had undermined the Marxist "social relations of science" movement and begun to develop the alternative idea of a self-governing scientific community. That idea would play a central role in the Hamburg conference.

When Polanyi applied in 1951 for a visa to the United States to take up a chair at the University of Chicago, he was, after eighteen months of inquiries and discussions with U.S. consular officials, finally informed by the American Consul General in Liverpool that he was “ineligible to receive an immigration visa as a person inadmissible into the United States.” It turned out that he had once allowed his name to be used as a patron of an anti-Nazi but pro-Soviet front called the Free German League of Culture, which he had addressed in December 1942 (a time of popular pro-Soviet sentiment) on the persecution of scientists in the U.S.S.R. He had also belonged, for a year in 1946-47, to the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the U.S.S.R., along with such writers as Somerset Maugham, Walter de la Mare, and Arthur Bryant. It may also be that his prewar visits to the U.S.S.R. or the radical views of some members of his family were held against him. In any case, his many writings in the liberal anti-Communist cause did not convince State Department officials<sup>8</sup>. When he became chairman of the Hamburg Organizing Committee, he had no illusions about what he called “harsh and stupid conservatism.”

The Hamburg Conference, called “Science and Freedom”, had three themes. The first was to advance the idea of the freedom of science, teaching, and research of science without political control or “ideology”. The second was to arouse scientific opinion against the treatment of scientists and scholars in the Soviet bloc. The third was to stress the freedom of American science<sup>1</sup>, despite the damage to American prestige caused by official obstacles to the travel of European scientists to the United States and some harassment of scientists by Congressional investigating committees.

When 120 scientists and scholars gathered in the Free City of Hamburg in July 1953, the mayor welcomed them, the Hanseatic city put out its flags, and an orchestra played the pleasant first movement of Gounod’s Little Symphony for Winds. (No heroic Egmont as at the Berlin Congress of 1950. For the closing ceremony it played Mozart’s urbane, gracious Serenade for Winds.) No such assembly had ever gathered before. The participants came from nineteen “Western” countries (including Japan, but not Israel, which still discouraged association with West Germany). They were mainly natural scientists, including several Nobel laureates, but there were also several social scientists and philosophers, among Aron, Hook, and Shils.

<sup>1</sup> This last was an urgent theme. In 1952 Edward Shils had edited a special double issue of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* condemning the U.S. visa policy, which stopped foreign scientists with past Communist associations from visiting the United States. Albert Einstein had contributed to the issue, and several British and French scientists had written of their humiliating experiences with the U.S. consular officials. Shils wrote of the “egregious wrong-headedness” of these policies, which “alienate our allies, comfort our enemies, enfeeble our free institutions, and traduce the principles of liberty.”<sup>3</sup> In the same issue Raymond Aron wrote that revision of American visa policy is “urgently needed”: “Prestige is a factor in the Cold War.”

Several had been victims of the Nazi regime. James Franck, the Nobel laureate and physicist (and winner of Iron Cross in World War I) had resigned from the University of Göttingen in protest at Nazi policies and had fled Germany. Hans Thirring had been compelled to retire from his chair in Vienna because of his anti-Nazi views. Lise Meitner, the Austrian physicist who had, with Otto Frisch, coined the term “nuclear fission”, had fled from Nazi Germany in 1938. Edgar Wind, the German art historian and philosopher, had moved with the Warburg Institute from Hamburg to London in 1933. Max Horkheimer had moved with his Institute for Social Research from Frankfurt to Geneva in 1933 and then to New York in 1934. Michael Polanyi had resigned from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in an anti-Nazi protest. While the physicist Max von Laue had remained in Germany, he became a symbol of independent science and its resistance to Hitler, resigning in protest from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in 1943.

Others had fled the Soviet Union, such as Theodosius Dobzhansky, the author of *Genetics and the Origin of Species*, and Fedor Stepun, the historian and sociologist. Still others had experienced both Nazi and Soviet regimes: the former Communist Alexander Weissberg-Cybulsky (the founder of the *Soviet Journal of Physics*) and the physicist F.G. Houtermans, who had both been imprisoned by Stalin and then delivered to the Gestapo on the bridge at Brest-Litovsk at the time of Hitler-Stalin pact.

The British scientists included the zoologist John D. Baker and the chemist E.F. Caldin, who had joined Polanyi to form the Society for Freedom in Science in 1940. Some of the American participants had been deeply involved in the postwar controversies concerning nuclear weapons and “nucleonics”. Arthur Holly Compton, a Nobel laureate, had worked on the Manhattan Project as director of the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago and in July 1945 had arranged a poll of 150 atomic scientists regarding the use of the atomic bomb against Japan. Samuel K. Allison had conducted the countdown for the Trinity atomic test explosion in New Mexico in July 1945, and James Frank had been chairman of the “Committee on Social and Political Implications”, which advised the U.S. War Department in June 1945 against any unannounced use of the atomic bomb and called for international control of nuclear weapons. Eugene Rabinowitch, a Russian-born specialist in photosynthesis, had also worked on the Manhattan Project and later cofounded the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (with a nuclear doomsday clock on its cover, showing the world at 10 minutes to midnight). The *Bulletin* became the organ of the “scientists’ movement” in the United States after World War II, which had some influence on the U.S. Government. (After months of public lecturing, barnstorming, and lobbying, it defeated the plan to turn all atomic energy installations over to the military forces and persuaded the U.S. Government, which then had a monopoly of atomic weapons, to adopt the Acheson Lilienthal plan for the international control of nuclear energy, a plan approved by all governments except those of the Soviet bloc.) Shils, a social scientist, had also been active in the establishment and conduct of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

The Hamburg Conference was not, and was not intended to be, a fighting conference like the Berlin Congress of 1950. Over four days the participants calmly debated the relations between pure and applied science, the plannability of science, and the freedom of science in fact and in principle in the West and in the Soviet bloc. At the end they sent fraternal greetings to their “unhappy” colleagues behind the Iron Curtain and looked forward to the day when they could work together as free men. (The Berlin message of 1950 had offered “material support” in any rebellion.) The conference also established a permanent Committee on Science and Freedom to develop the basic idea of an autonomous city of science in the free society.

Those results, in a tense period between the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as “atomic spies” and the charging of J. Robert Oppenheimer with being a security risk, justified Shils’s description of the conference as “an enormous success”. A writer in the *Times Educational Supplement* described “the friendly mixing” of scholars, who disagreed on so many matters of philosophy and religion but were united in opposition to totalitarianism and in support of intellectual freedom, as “itself an object lesson in liberalism”, although the writer wondered “whether such a coalition would hold together in a time of trial”. It was the mission of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and its new Committee on Science and Freedom, to see that it did.

Polanyi’s committee arranged further international conferences to develop and spread the Hamburg themes. One was in Paris in 1956 and another in Tunis in 1959. It also occasionally called public meetings. But its principal activity was its publication between 1954 and 1961 of its twice-yearly *Bulletin*, edited in Manchester by George and Priscilla Polanyi under the supervision of Michael Polanyi.

Of all the Congress’s publications in the 1950s, it came closest to being a civil liberties journal. It drew attention to crises of academic freedom all over the world. It protested against the appointment of a “neo-Nazi” as Minister for Education in Lower Saxony in 1955, against government policies toward the University of Tasmania in 1955, against the academic color bar in Alabama in 1956, and against the mass arrest of Spanish academics in 1958. It campaigned persistently against *apartheid* in South African universities, publishing a special issue of the *Bulletin* on it, calling a public protest meeting in London to sponsor a mission of inquiry to South Africa, and launching a scholarship fund to help nonwhite students attend open universities. It also encouraged intellectual exchanges with the Soviet bloc, generally supporting Michael Polanyi’s view that this bloc must gradually liberalize.

The *Bulletin*, with its short articles, polemical style, and flavor of broadsheet, was lively and controversial. It had a mailing list of 5,500 people in more than fifty countries. But it lacked the intellectual solidity to advance the cause for which it

had been established after the Hamburg conference, that is, the elaboration of the idea of a self-governing scientific community.

The Congress decided in May 1961 to close down the *Bulletin*<sup>2</sup> and sponsor a new and more scholarly quarterly to be edited by the distinguished American sociologist Edward Shils.

Polanyi was not only a scientist. He was also a philosopher and economist. It was in these latter capacities that in 1955 the Congress for Cultural Freedom invited him to organize an international conference in Milan on economic development – in particular on the free economy, the Soviet economy and the Third World (then still called “the underdeveloped world”).

For Polanyi it was an opportunity to engage in a “passionately controversial subject”: the “new economic order” that would be neither socialist nor capitalist.

“The 150 intellectuals who assembled for a week in Milan, this time mainly economists and social scientists, represented a wider range of countries - extending to Asia, Africa, and Latin America - than at the earlier conferences. If, when it was over, there were some who, like Hannah Arendt, had found the debates “deadly boring” or, like Dwight Macdonald, thought that they had produced “no fire, no drama, no sparkle” there were more like Max Beloff, who recognized that the Conference had “in some important respects altered the shape of our mental world”.

The Bandung Generation, the unaligned and developing world, was about to take the world stage.

Five themes that emerged in the course of the week would be developed at later and smaller seminars. The first was implicit or below the surface (as it had been in earlier Congress activities). In an effort to find a unifying idea in the bewildering variety of papers, Shils articulated a theme that made sense of the Milan conference – and also clarified the underlying mission of the Congress as a whole. In his article “The End of Ideology?” he wrote:

The papers, despite their diversity of viewpoint and subject matter, circled over a single theme. Almost every paper was in one way or another a critique of doctrinarism,

<sup>2</sup> The decision was made public in August 1961. The *New Statesman's* columnist “Critic”, usually Kingsley Martin, alleged that the Congress had closed down the Committee on Science and Freedom and its bulletin in a fit of Cold War pique when it learned that the Committee had planned a public symposium on nuclear politics, which would provide a platform for the Communist scientist J. D. Bernal. Michael Polanyi replied that he did indeed believe that debating the Communist Party line with Bernal would be “unprofitable”, but the Committee was continuing and expanding under Edward Shils.



of fanaticism, of ideological possession. Almost every paper at least expressed the author's idea of mankind cultivating and improving its own garden, secure against obsessional visions and phantasies, and free from the harassment of ideologists and zealots. It was the intention of the conference's organisers to move thought further around the turning point to which we have come in the last years. This turning point might be described as the end of ideological enthusiasm. **The conference was a sort of celebration: "Communism had lost the battle of ideas".**

The second theme was subsidiary but explicit in Polanyi's dismissal of what he saw as the false dichotomy between "socialism" and "capitalism" and his insistence that state controls need not weaken freedom: the debate should only be over the degree and frequency of state intervention.

The large British Labour Party "delegation", led by Hugh Gaitskell, welcomed this theme. "Gaitskellism" was now an international movement. In 1959 it would triumph even in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, which abandoned Marxism and adopted the *Godesberger Programm*. Its triumph at Milan led Friedrich Hayek, adamant in his opposition to state intervention, to declare that the real agenda at the conference was not to plan the future of freedom but to write its obituary. But for the moment he had few allies.

The third theme was the economic achievement of the U.S.S.R., or the Soviet Union as a superpower. In the July 1953 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Peter Wiles had published the article "The Soviet Economy Outpaces the West". His statistics were challenged, although the idea gained dramatic support in 1957 when the Soviet Sputnik defeated the United States in the race to place the first object in orbit. The performance of the U.S.S.R. was debated at Milan generally without rancor – and without reaching and agreed, final view. But Polanyi issued a warning:

Thus it would seem that some of the best equipped minds of Europe and America are unable to decide today whether Soviet Russia is surpassing us by far in economic growth or is, on the contrary, very much lagging behind. The lesson of this for the strategy of freedom seems to me clear and urgent. We must get to know and to know exactly what is the truth about the alleged economic dynamism of Soviet Russia. We are entering today on an intellectual and moral contest with the Soviet Government for the allegiance of men all over the world. Uncertainty concerning the most effective claims of our opponents must reduce our arguments to rhetoric or force us into evasive ambiguities.

The fourth new theme was the "underdeveloped" world. The Bandung Conference had taken place earlier in the year, but the prospect of decolonization had not really sunk into the minds of Western liberals. When the Milan conference debated economic aid, few Westerners bothered to speak, and Beloff provoked a storm when he objected to a note of blackmail in some of the statements: "Give us aid

or we'll turn to the Soviets". Finally, when Minor Masani of India, backed by Chief Akintola of Nigeria, challenged the Westerners to speak out, the conference adopted a resolution expressing the solidarity of intellectuals in the free world with those of the underdeveloped countries and calling for programs of cultural aid. Polanyi referred to "the exhilarating perspective ... opened up to me of this immense area of new companionship. Some, like George Kennan and Beloff, remained skeptical Columbuses. (Kennan thought there was little point for Americans in attending conferences with Asians, Africans, or Latin Americans: Misunderstanding of the United States would never be overcome.) But the Westerners at Milan were in no doubt that the Bandung Generation had arrived and that the Congress for Cultural Freedom had to have a new agenda: The Soviet *mythos* may have been dead in the West, but it was alive and well in the Third World.

The final theme emerged almost accidentally. In his report on the conference for *The Economist*, the Oxford historian G. F. Hudson wrote:

Although the conference showed such a great diversity of opinion, it was remarkable that debate could nevertheless be carried on with so much mutual toleration and effort at understanding. The founders of the organisation seem to have discovered a method of achieving a solidarity of the normally fragmented liberal intelligentsia without imposing articles of faith that would inevitably be unacceptable to large sections of those brought together in these conferences.

This raised the possibility (despite Kennan's skepticism) of building a worldwide intellectual community of which the prototype was the scientific community adumbrated at Hamburg. This indeed soon became the Congress's supreme objective (when it concluded that it had won the battle against the fellow-travelers) and sustained all its programs - seminars, festivals, magazines, centers - for most of the remainder of its life.

Polanyi was appointed chairman of the Seminar Planning Committee, with the objective of arranging or encouraging a continuing series of small seminars in various countries, on circumscribed practical subjects, that might in time create a permanent worldwide round-table, a liberal international community.

But there was one more large-scale international conference in which he inevitably played a major role. Held in Berlin in 1960, it was called "Progress in Freedom". Some 230 intellectuals and scholars from 50 countries assembled in the Kongresshalle to assess the first ten years of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and consider the increasing criticism that the Congress had lost its earlier *élan*.

Polanyi headed the study group on what tentatively, if prematurely, was called the post-ideological age. He titled his paper "Beyond Nihilism". It brought to a head the divisions that had been smouldering within the Congress.



It traced totalitarianism and its horrors to “moral excess”, filling a void left by the rejection of all authority and transformed into ideological fanaticism. The “moral need of our time”, Polanyi said, “is to curb our inordinate moral demands” and to restore a moderate civility based, perhaps, on a “reawakened national feeling”, liberal religion and pragmatism. He saw this new civility as already emerging in both the West and the East - in “the end of ideology” in the one and in “revisionism” in the other. Polanyi regarded the Hungarian Revolution as “the paradigm” of a universal intellectual movement (outside China) that rejected the ideological lie, and *Poem for Adults* (by the Polish poet Adam Wazyk) which depicts the “vomiting” forth of the lie, as a paradigmatic poem of the postideological age.

Richard Löwenthal rebutted in a counterpaper, “Messianism, Nihilism and the Future”, which claimed that, in tracing the origins of totalitarianism, Polanyi had overestimated the role of intellectuals and underestimated the impact of a stubborn conservatism, which had blocked necessary reforms. He also distinguished between kinds of totalitarianism, seeing Nazism as “satanic” but Marxism as retaining links with liberal humanism. For the future he saw the need for rapid social reforms and a “cultural revolution” to internalize morality. “Nor can I believe”, he said, “that the necessary reforms can be achieved by general consent in all circumstances”.

With hindsight one can see in this debate between proponents of “civility” and proponents of a “cultural revolution” the rudiments of the conflict between a new conservatism and a New Left that would weaken the Congress and erode its “vital center” in the later 1960s.

These divisions within the Congress only deepened as the 1960’s progressed. They exploded with the “revelations” of CIA funding. This in turn obscured for a time the enormous contribution which the Congress for Cultural Freedom made to public awareness of the totalitarian threat to civilization. No one contributed more to this great cause than Michael Polanyi.

Peter Coleman is the author of *The Liberal Conspiracy. The Congress of Cultural Freedom and the struggle for the mind of postwar Europe*. New York: Free Press. 1989.