

NOTES ON A FILM¹

MICHAEL POLANYI

The film which I have outlined is an attempt to introduce into public life a means of expression which, if adequately developed, could overcome the essential difficulty of our present civic life.

A complex structure that cannot be seen cannot be understood. If it cannot be brought bodily before the eyes we must be given a picture of it. Nobody would try to explain the inside of the human body without dissection or an anatomic atlas, or the working of a steam-engine without a diagram. One cannot teach chess without a chessboard or geography without maps. The social body is not present to our eyes, it extends over wide areas; its anatomy is as complex as that of the human body, its working is more intricate than that of a steam-engine and the rules which it obeys, the situations which arise in it are more varied than those of chess. Clearly, it is hopeless to grasp the life of this body from descriptions given in speech. Words are the most powerful and subtle instruments of our thoughts, but they remain meaningless if referring to a complex structure that has never been shown to the eye.

Supreme ingenuity has been applied by economists to give in words a picture of the economic mechanism. Their discoveries have not reached the public; they form a secluded community from which only rumours, in the form of popular fallacies, spread out into the masses. They have, as it were, learned to play chess without a chessboard; they carry a board in their heads, which they have made up of words, and in words they are now playing on it; a public which has never heard of chess watches this admirable feat with puzzled inattention. Sometimes a word of the players is re-echoed as a wild slogan, then again there is silence around.

An economist to whom I suggested that a more popular expression should be invented for economics replied that he would rather in favour of a secret language which would obviate the spreading of popular fallacies from economic studies. This economist did not recognize that these spreading fallacies were a symptom of a need for enlightenment, of a craving for social consciousness which must be satisfied if this civilisation is to survive.

For no real devotion is possible to daily work which is involved in a conundrum of perplexities. No man can be satisfied by thinking of himself only; robbed of clear consciousness of his relations to those with whom he actually co-operates, he feels

¹ Box 25, Folder 10, Polanyi Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library.

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that the complex structure which thus isolates him is bad, inhuman, revolting. The burden of work of which the full meaning eludes us is demoralising; acquiescence to the inequalities in fortune can go on passively, unsanctioned by justice, or even by resignation based on a conviction of their necessity; but social self-respect is decaying amongst the rich, unrest is spreading amongst the poor. The paradox of unemployment makes the riddle of finance and trade organisation even more exasperating. Growing masses are inflamed by fallacious economic issues: Class Wars and Trade Wars, New Deals, 'Share-out-Wealth' and 'Social Credit' Campaigns, Attacks on Finance or Persecution of the Jews.

All this exasperating confusion would vanish and a true consciousness of our common life would arise if we could be made to see our world. Clearly, if we could put up a working model for our economic mechanism, a machinery incorporating in lucid symbols the interaction of the economic forces, showing that flow of goods, the fabric of credit, the various interdependences and possible equilibria; if we could present all masses and actions in true proportions and do embody the principles underlying our economic life as to be able to demonstrate on our working model the effects of possible changes, technical or institutional; if we could thus convey to the eye and put under the testing hand bodily a scheme of our working life; clearly our civilisation could be saved.

From such centres where our model would be exhibited and studied a calm light would spread out, imparting to everyone a more or less simplified version of the central truth and conveying to all the reassuring knowledge of its existence in our midst. The nightmares haunting us now would vanish and a keen spirit of enquiry would permeate public life, directing controversy to relevant issues and actual reconstruction. No interest vested in injustice or in blunder could resist the forces of a thus enlightened public opinion. Our common life as revealed by the workings of the symbolic machinery would inspire our daily life and release the moral forces, hitherto groping in the darkness to create an adequate code of social obligations, a teaching of social wisdom and ultimately, to achieve common sense in social and economic matters. The arts, discovering the social body, as the Renaissance discovered the human body, would teach us the beauties, and impose on us the tragedies of our common life. In fact, a social consciousness would arise, encompassing all our activities, offering a basis for fruitful controversy; thus reconquering the foundation of freedom.

However, we have no such symbolic working model of economic life and it seems improbable that human ingenuity could devise one. The next best possibility for a visual presentation of social life seems to be by the moving picture. I will try to explain this.