

To translate Michael Polanyi: an intellectual adventure and a personal discovery

1. Why Michael Polanyi?

I have discovered Polanyi when I returned to scholar life, at the beginning of this millennium, this time at the University of Minho, after twenty-five years engaged in the management of business corporations, after a first academic career in the Universidade do Porto (1972-1982). I have stumbled on the work of Polanyi when reading a book that opened new lines of thought and discussion in modern economics (Nelson and Winter, 1982). These authors found inspiration in the work of Polanyi about skills, routines and learning as fundamental concepts of their evolutionary approach to economics (see especially Chapters 4 and 5 of their book). Almost simultaneously I also came across references to Polanyi in other authors, especially Karl-Erik Sveiby (1997), an important precursor of the "Knowledge Management" current, a Nordic which, in turn, reaped strong inspiration from Polanyi to writing his works and also to his consulting practice.

Then I ordered the first books, second-hand. I tried to read something from them, sporadically. During the summer of 2005 I started *Personal Knowledge*, during the usual vacation in the Alto Douro and between daily baths in the Carlão spa. Maybe I read the first two parts of the book. But then I discovered that Polanyi's works are not to be "read": rather, they are to be discovered - and this is not that easy. Just as Polanyi theorized about the process of intimation for discovery, I discovered the intimation of Polanyi's thought: the discovery is a leap, struggling and risky, sometimes even conflicting, which creates a new meaning. Nobody stays the same after knowing something, after a process of discovery. Of course this work of translation and discovery also transformed me.

2. To translate and to discover Polanyi

To translate Polanyi was one intimation arising from the desire to understand and to meet the man and his thought. As I wrote in the introduction to my previous translation of *The Tacit*

Dimension, "to translate a thinker like Polanyi needs an intimate sharing of ideas and experiences, an indwelling of the processes of exploration of ideas and skills associated", a "calling" to which it sought to answer.

After translating *The Tacit Dimension* and *The Study of Man*, we engaged with the translation of other works by Polanyi, in particular from his economic phase (years 30's), translations that will be published soon. But such a project would always be incomplete without translating the most important and complex work of Polanyi: *Personal Knowledge*.

A major incentive to translate *Personal Knowledge* came from teaching activity. Between 1998 and 2012 I taught a course on Innovation to students from the doctoral programs of the School of Engineering, University of Minho. Understanding innovation involves understanding the mechanisms of social and personal discovery in science and technology - innovation is not a technological issue, but a social issue with major economic implications. This was the key message in this course, so no wonder the contributions of Michael Polanyi to understand the processes of discovery and innovation were relevant and they have attracted my interest. The same motivation led us to organize an anthology of essays by M. Polanyi about science and technology (whose translation is now being published). This also helped to convince us to get down to this work: to translate the most important work of Polanyi.

This we decided to embark last November 2012, and that had our efforts during the following months. One year later we are publishing the translation. This has been one of the riskier projects in our academic life, as well as one of the most complex, challenging and rewarding, through the intellectual point of view.

A risky venture because we are not a philosopher, nor even have professional training in philosophy, and we're not professional translator. But we have always considered the translation work as a demanding work of discovery and intellectual conviviality (borrowing an expression from Polanyi), but often not sufficiently appreciated and valued, especially among the academic community in the technological and scientific fields, where traditionally we have lived our scholar life. In the past I have had some experiences of technical translation, which were processes of learning and discovery, and they convinced me of the importance of this activity to the process of learning some important skills which features a career in research and academia.

Considered by some as a "non innovative" and second category scholar work, technical translation has been sadly neglected and ignored.

We are aware that nowadays fluency in the anglo saxon language is of fundamental importance in science (and increasingly in academic culture in general) - idea which incidentally we share, and during last years we taught in english almost all our courses. But we believe that this is not one-way and even technical translation can be part of a virtuous cycle of mastering several languages simultaneously.

There are many reasons to translate an important work of thought into Portuguese. In the case of a work on the role of personal commitments and responsibility in the construction of knowledge, we invoke first the intellectual and personal intimation, the intellectual passion, with the risk that every discovery process involves - process that Polanyi so remarkably discuss. As an artist who exhibits his work, we dare to propose this translation. We expect it to contribute to the study of the thought of Polanyi among Portuguese-speaking communities.

3. Also an intellectual passion

We were born in 1952. I still remeber the post-war episodes, when issues of atomic and nuclear dangers were central. As a young man I have lived the Revolution of 25th April, in Portugal. Before we followed, with surprise, the events of May 1968 in France and painful period of colonial war in Portugal. Later I would, with some amazement and great hope, see the downfall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the harsh socio-political architecture of the cold war. With it the dreams of several generations, who had believed and hoped for a new society, in the larger social and political experiment ever undertaken by mankind, in the name of science, equality and freedom, they have collapsed definitely. An experience that ended destroyed by the internal perversions of a system said to be "scientific."

So, our fascination with the '50s and the period between the two world wars. The fascination with the intellectual, political and social struggle between fascism, communism and capitalism, the struggle for freedom and democracy, forerunner of the European construction, while the world watched the explosion of the role and implications of science and technology in society, with the high expectations for the future of humanity - hope that somehow later influenced my

career choices.

All this period is essential in Polanyi, in his intellectual trajectory, in his personal struggles, in the construction of his thought. Michael Polanyi is a fascinating character of twentieth-century Europe, where the man and the scholar do merge, and where we find an intersection of the great dramas of humanity in the twentieth century, even at his personal level. Add also the simple and friendly sympathy that his personality awakens, something felt when consulting his personal papers (in Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.)

Of great scientist (chemist) to philosopher, through economics and social sciences, he was a genuine renaissance man through the wrenching tragedies of the twentieth century, a man of freedom. The impact and influence of his thought has grown as the decades go by, not only in intensity but also in the scope of areas of the contemporary knowledge (Beira, 2010, 2010b).

4. Translation notes

We included some short notes to clarify the original meaning of the text or to add some context information. This time we opted for an alternative format and we included them in the text, but within square brackets and prefixed with nt: [nt:]. This way we tried to complement the content with a minimum disruption of reading.

At the end we included up a names index, based on the entries in the index included in the original edition, prepared by Marjorie Grene. It is curious to note that some entries in that index does not appear in the text, suggesting that this index has been based on a non-final version of the book. An example is the entry of the French writer Gustave Flaubert, which refers to a passage of Section 13 (The temptation of the intellectuals) in Chapter 7 (Conviviality) about Sartre and Camus, among others, but there appears any reference to Flaubert - although one could easily understand a possible reference to Flaubert's role in the emergence of modern nihilism.

5. Thanks

The review of this paper benefited greatly from comments and suggestions of Dr. Miguel Panão (IN +, IST, Lisbon) and M^a Leonor Fernandes, whose contribution we are very grateful. Of course, the responsibility for all errors can only be mine.

We appreciated the encouragement by several people, in particular by Professor Manuel Heitor (IST, Lisbon), and also the authorization of John Polanyi, son of Michael Polanyi and manager of their publishing rights.

I dedicate this work to my granddaughter, Ema: I hope she will come to appreciate it critically, in freedom and with personal responsibility for her commitments.

Areias (Carrazeda Ansiães) and Candal (Vila Nova de Gaia), September 2013

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