Karl Polanyi’s Countermovement and Polycentric Governance in Socio-Ecological Systems

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Abstract

The extension of the market to socio-ecological spheres previously untouched by it involves the imposition of boundary conditions on these spheres in order to harness their surplus, while creating higher forms of social organization. Karl Polanyi proposed that societies spontaneously generate a countermovement to protect themselves against the boundary impositions of market ideology. Such countermovements can be seen as an additional set of boundary conditions the imposition of which lead to the emergence of yet higher forms of socio-political organization (the welfare state or the third sector being possible expressions). Building on Michael Polanyi’s (Karl’s youngest brother) notion of polycentrism, Vincent and Elinor Ostrom formulated polycentric governance as the coexistence of multiple centers of power and decision-making, each promoting different goals and values, and all competing to gain ascendancy. Polycentric governance can be seen as a higher form of social organization that can impose boundary conditions to the machine-like totalizing vision imposed by an hegemonic market ideology. In polycentric systems, trust and reciprocity have been identified as key forms of integration fostering collective action over individualistic propensities. Karl Polanyi’s distinction between real and fictitious commodities and his plea to reinstate labor as a human activity in life, land as nature, or money as a token of purchasing power can inspire further developments in the field of socio-ecological systems polycentric governance.

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