Green Transformations from Below: Learning from Karl Polanyi and His ‘Double Movement’

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Abstract

Following the recent financial crisis, social scientists have been paying increasing attention to the works of the political historian Karl Polanyi, particularly his classic work The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time. Yet few scholars working on resilience and sustainability issues have engaged with his ideas. Of particular interest to this agenda is Polanyi’s concept of the ‘double movement’, which reveals how the (re)structuring of the economy based on the ideals of the self-regulating market inevitably leads society to protect itself against the commodification of land, labour and money through a variety of measures. In this paper, I argue that Polanyi’s thinking deserves further attention from resilience researchers, as it may help provide insights into how a protective counter movement of grassroots resistance could emerge to challenge the dominant force of global capitalism and the current patterns of production and consumption based upon it. In particular, the paper examines how sometimes spontaneous, often local, social movements are responding to the disabling affects of globalisation and neoliberalism in an attempt to create conditions for a more sustainable and socially just society. But rather than working in isolation, these movements are taking advantage of new information and communications technologies and forms of organisation to link local groups into regional and even global networks in order to assert their interests and claims, whether around the activities of governments, multinational corporations or the international community. Thus, drawing on Polanyi, this paper highlights how a new green transformation may come from a disaggregated ‘network of networks’ or ‘movement of movements’ aimed at replacing the dominant global regime with one that maximises democratic political control and makes the equitable development of human capabilities and environmental stewardship its priorities.

Keywords: decision, making, development, dialog, discourses, empowerment, epistemology, ethics, governance, history, institution, market, narratives, network, political ecology, power, socio, ecological systems, state, transformation

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