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# Rethinking the Double Movement: Expanding the Frontiers of Polanyian Analysis in the Global South

Geoff Goodwin

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades a rich and diverse body of literature has emerged which uses the ‘double movement’ to analyse social, political and economic change in the global South. The main aims of this article are to expand the boundaries of this scholarship and improve our understanding of how to use the concept to analyse capitalist development in the region. It seeks to achieve this by explaining and extending the original formulation of the double movement, creating a dialogue between scholars who follow alternative readings of the concept, and proposing a revised formulation which builds on the existing literature while moving in new directions. The article concludes by signposting potentially fruitful areas of Polanyian analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Karl Polanyi has become a key reference point in debates over social, political and economic change in the global South. The inspired critique of free market capitalism that he developed in *The Great Transformation* has been particularly influential. The book, first published in 1944, traces the evolution of liberal capitalism from its birth in England to its global-scale collapse in the early 1930s. During this period, Polanyi (1944/2001) famously contended that industrialized capitalist economies experienced a ‘double movement’: as markets expanded, countermovements emerged to limit their reach and influence. He claimed that this dialectic process played out for a century, before bringing down liberal capitalism and ushering in

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political economies based on different policies, principles and ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Some countries moved in broadly progressive directions, while others turned to totalitarian solutions.

Polanyi seemed to believe that the double movement ended at this stage. However, a galaxy of scholars has observed similar trends since the collapse of classical liberal capitalism in the 1930s. Two broad readings of the concept have emerged. The first sees the double movement revolve around economic liberalism, while the second views it as a fundamental contradiction in market capitalism. Scholars in the first group focus on the neoliberal stage of capitalism, seeing this as the start of a new cycle of the double movement. Authors in the second camp point towards underlying continuities in capitalist development, interpreting the double movement as a longer-term, continuous historical process. Exponents of the former reading suggest the double movement can be eased or overcome through reform, while advocates of the latter claim more radical solutions are required.

To date, the first reading of the double movement has dominated in the global South, with scholars using the concept to explore a wide range of issues in a variety of contexts.<sup>2</sup> However, there has been relatively little dialogue between these authors, and their work has not been fully integrated into the rich scholarship dedicated to elucidating and critiquing Polanyi's work and legacy.<sup>3</sup> We therefore lack a clear sense of how the double movement has been evoked or applied in the global South, and how this diverse body of literature relates to the wider Polanyian scholarship.

This article seeks to improve our understanding of the double movement by reviewing studies that have drawn on the concept in the global South and situating this literature within the broader Polanyian scholarship. In doing so, the essay will create a dialogue between authors who have followed alternative readings of the double movement and highlight aspects of capitalist development that have been overlooked or downplayed in the existing scholarship. I will argue that while the first reading of the double movement is insightful, the second formulation of the concept offers a better overarching framework to analyse market capitalism. However, this reading is not fully specified in the existing scholarship and requires elaboration. To this end, I propose a revised formulation of the concept based on the second reading and original formulation.

The article begins by explaining the theoretical foundations of the double movement and proposing extensions to the concept. It then discusses alternative readings of the double movement and offers a revised formulation,

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1. Polanyi delved deep into British history to make this argument, but claimed the double movement lasted a century, starting in the 1830s with the reform of British labour legislation (Polanyi, 1944/2001). For insight into debates over Polanyi's analysis of British economic history, see Dale (2010). I make no attempt to contribute to these debates in this article.
  2. See, for example, Levien (2007), Silva (2009) and Stewart (2006).
  3. See, for example, Dale (2010), Hann and Hart (2009) and Lacher (1999).

building on the existing literature and moving in new directions. It concludes by signposting potentially fruitful areas of Polanyian analysis.

### **THE DOUBLE MOVEMENT IN *THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION*: FOUNDATIONS AND EXTENSIONS**

Polanyi developed the double movement to explain the breakdown of classical liberal capitalism in the 1930s and the transformation of economies, societies and politics in the decades that followed. In this section, I will explain his theorization of this process, showing how the double movement connects with other concepts Polanyi elaborated in his published and unpublished materials.<sup>4</sup> The section attempts to clarify elements of the double movement and proposes new extensions to the concept.

#### **Disembedding the Economy**

For Polanyi, the emergence of the market as the dominant force in society hinged on the commodification of labour and land.<sup>5</sup> He believed their integration into the market was the vital stage in the creation of ‘market society’; a capitalist society based on a system of price-making markets which operated on the principle of self-regulation, pursuit of monetary gain and fear of hunger. He claimed that this peculiar form of socio-economic organization, which emerged in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a radical break with the past. Polanyi (1944/2001) developed the concept of ‘embeddedness’ to explain this historical transformation, famously arguing that whereas the economy was previously embedded in social relations, social relations were now embedded in the economy.<sup>6</sup> In later work, Polanyi (1957a: 68) called this form of organization the ‘disembedded economy’, claiming it splintered society into distinct economic and political spheres and subverted society to the economy.<sup>7</sup> But this did not mean that, empirically, the economy became an autonomous sphere devoid of political influence. The disembedded economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represented a decisive shift in this direction: the market was given autonomy to operate according to its own logic, and

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4. I accessed these unpublished materials at the Karl Polanyi Institute of Political Economy, Concordia University in December 2008. I am grateful to Kari Polanyi-Levitt and Ana Gomez for granting me access to the archive, which has now been digitized. References to unpublished materials in this article are based on the organization of the archive in 2008.

5. Polanyi’s definition of ‘land’ includes agriculture, natural resources, environment and habitat. This article employs his broad definition.

6. See Beckert (2009) and Dale (2010, 2016a, 2016b) for insights into the evolution, intellectual roots and theoretical ambiguities of the embeddedness concept.

7. See also Polanyi (1968, 2014). See Block and Somers (2014: 91–97) and Polanyi-Levitt (2013: 101–03) for competing perspectives on the meaning of the disembedded economy.

society was required to adjust to the supply-and-demand mechanism.<sup>8</sup> Yet the economy was not completely free of political influence. Hence, as Polanyi insisted, a truly self-regulating system of price-making markets was impossible.

The idiosyncrasies of land and labour markets largely explain the impossibility of self-regulation. Polanyi (1944/2001) called land and labour ‘fictitious commodities’ to emphasize their peculiarity in commodity form. He argued land and labour perform multiple non-economic functions in society and therefore cannot be reduced to mere items of exchange or factors of production. Enabling the market mechanism to determine their fate would lead to social disintegration and environmental destruction. Hence the state was required to regulate land and labour markets and self-regulation was impossible.<sup>9</sup> Polanyi claimed that this was also true of the monetary system as money is also a fictitious commodity. That is, it is not produced for sale on the market and performs various, complex functions in society. State intervention was required to regulate the supply of money and ensure the stability of prices and the principle of self-regulation could not be fully extended to this sphere of the economy.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the 19<sup>th</sup> century disembedded economy occupied a radically different place in society, but remained subject to a degree of political control.

### **Countering Commodification**

The ‘countermovement’ concept helps explain this political process. Polanyi claimed fictitious commodification exposed societies to the whims of the market mechanism, triggering protective responses which sought to increase state intervention and promote alternative forms of socio-economic organization. Crucially, the ‘impulse for social protection’ (Putzel, 2002: 2) came from various quarters: workers, peasants, industrialists and landowning elites mobilized to restrict the market at one time or another. Polanyi (1944/2001)

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8. ‘Under a market system the influence of the economy on the social process is, of course, overwhelming. The working of the economy — the interplay of supply and demand — here shapes the rest of society or rather “determines” it, almost as in a triangle, the sides “determine” the angles’ (Polanyi, 1966: xvi).

9. The degree of state power Polanyi believed was required to create and regulate markets for fictitious commodities is captured in his famous assertion that: ‘The road to the free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized and controlled interventionism’ (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 146).

10. I refer to the incorporation of land, labour and money into markets as ‘fictitious commodification’. More broadly, ‘commodification’ is defined as a process through which items are incorporated into and exchanged within price-making markets. The process is gradational, with commodification taking more extreme forms as price-making markets approach self-regulation. The term ‘items’ is defined broadly to include labour, land, money, goods and services. The counterpoint to commodification — ‘decommodification’ — and the relationship between the two processes are discussed below.

conceptualized these multiple and diverse responses as a countermovement which was unified by a basic, if unarticulated, objective: to limit the influence of markets over societies. Or, more precisely, to prevent, manage or reverse fictitious commodification.

Polanyi therefore broke with Marx who saw the mode of production as the main source of tension within capitalist societies and class struggle as the motor of social change.<sup>11</sup> Yet Polanyi did not ignore class. Indeed, tension between social classes performs a critical role in his analysis of the breakdown of classical liberal capitalism. However, in contrast to Marx, Polanyi did not conceptualize class as a form of economic exploitation and believed the market, rather than production, determined the class structure. More generally, he maintained that narrow class interests were not sufficient to explain the protectionist measures introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for the success of class action is ultimately ‘determined by the breadth and variety of the interests, other than its own, which it is able to serve’ (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 163).<sup>12</sup> Thus, according to Polanyi, the countermovement attempted to protect the whole of society from the deleterious effects of fictitious commodification, not a particular social class. The working classes were the main protagonists in this struggle under classical liberal capitalism.<sup>13</sup> But the concept opens the door to other social classes or groups taking the lead in different settings.

By highlighting the plurality of actors involved in contesting market capitalism and identifying fictitious commodification as the main source of tension, the countermovement provides an alternative conceptual framework to explore resistance, activism and contention in capitalist societies. However, its analytical and explanatory power is diminished by its failure to show how social pressure translates into political change. Polanyi (1944/2001) explicitly stated that the countermovement originated within society and pressure for protection came from social forces. But he was less clear about the relationship between the countermovement and the state and the political and bureaucratic process behind protectionism. He claimed universal suffrage transformed the state into the ‘organ of the ruling million’ which enabled the working classes to exert considerable influence over the legislative process (*ibid.*: 216).<sup>14</sup> The state is therefore portrayed as a vehicle through which the countermovement channelled its demands. Yet precisely how this was achieved is unclear. Polanyi depicted a relatively

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11. See Burawoy (2010), Dale (2010), Harvey (2015) and Miyamura and Selwyn (2014) for reflections on Polanyi from Marxist perspectives. See also Hart (2008).

12. Further, ‘the chances of classes in a struggle will depend upon their ability to win support from outside their own membership, which again will depend upon their fulfilment of tasks set by interests wider than their own’ (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 159).

13. Indeed, indicating the emphasis he placed on the broader effects of class action, Polanyi claimed that the working classes ‘saved society from destruction’ (Karl Polanyi Archive, Folder 8.7, Concordia University, Montreal, December 2008).

14. See also Polanyi (1935: 366–67) and Dale (2016b: 120–36; 281–88).

simple, unidirectional political process in which social pressure was converted into laws and policies through representative democratic institutions. The possibility of democratic states weakening, neutralizing or destroying organized sectors of society that demand protection is therefore overlooked. The limits of representative democracies and the complexity of the political and bureaucratic process behind the design and implementation of laws and policies are also absent from his analysis. Thus, while the countermovement offers a useful conceptual framework to explore struggles linked to fictitious commodification, it requires elaboration to capture the complexity of these processes.

Moving in this direction, I propose replacing the simple, unidirectional countermovement–state relationship implicit in the original formulation of the concept with a complex, multidirectional process which involves continuous and contested interactions between state and society. From this perspective, democratic states have the capacity to accommodate, dilute or repress demands for protection, while countermovements have multiple political paths to follow, including routine and contentious forms of political action. Within this formulation, countermovements are not limited to shaping the design of laws and policies, but also influence their enforcement and implementation. Crucially, they may also secure protection without direct state support.<sup>15</sup> Countermovements therefore operate on broad terrain and are not solely dependent on the state to control markets.

### **From Protectionism to Decommodification**

Polanyi (1944/2001) could be forgiven for overlooking the complexity of these processes given the myriad protectionist policies introduced by governments in Europe and America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He provided examples of protectionist laws and policies introduced during this period;<sup>16</sup> however, he failed to explain their general characteristics. His rather loose categorization is problematic because virtually any measure can be classified as a form of protection and the precise relationship between protectionist measures and the operation of the market is unclear. The ‘decommodification’ concept provides greater clarity on this issue. However, this term has been used to explain a variety of phenomena in the social sciences and therefore requires clarification when employed in this context.<sup>17</sup> Within the double movement framework, I conceptualize decommodification as a

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15. Polanyi (1944/2001) stressed this point, noting how, for example, workers organized into cooperatives and associations to manage labour commodification.

16. Polanyi believed the three most important measures were: a) factory laws and trade unions (labour); b) agrarian tariffs and land laws (land); and c) management of currency (money) (Polanyi, 2014).

17. Scholars who have referred to decommodification in relation to Polanyi include: Esping-Andersen (2000), Offe (1984), Sandbrook (2014), Silva (2009) and Silver (2003).

gradational process which operates within the domain of fictitious commodification and comprises three analytically distinct categories: 1) intervening; 2) limiting; and 3) preventing or reversing.<sup>18</sup> ‘Intervening’ involves direct state intervention in markets; examples include minimum wages, trade tariffs, managed exchange rate regimes, and food price regulation. ‘Limiting’ entails assuaging commodification by creating supplementary mechanisms; examples include social security, housing benefits and food stamps. ‘Preventing or reversing’ involves maintaining or creating mechanisms that avert or reverse commodification; examples include communal land, national parks and community water systems. Even in these cases, however, decommodification is generally only partial. For example, communally owned pastoral land might be outside or removed from the land market, but items produced on the land might be integrated into and exchanged within price-making food or agricultural markets. Furthermore, as I explain in greater depth below, decommodification can support commodification over the long run. Hence decommodification is intrinsically contradictory.

Some further points of clarification are required. First, decommodification is not synonymous with ‘re-embedding’ (Dale, 2010: 204). The decommodifying measures Polanyi described were introduced within the disembedded economy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and were therefore not successful in re-embedding the economy in society.<sup>19</sup> While there is a great deal of debate over the degree of change Polanyi thought was necessary to re-embed the economy, he clearly believed more radical changes were required to transcend the disembedded economy. I view decommodification in this light. My approach does not overlook the radical potential of decommodification or the possibility of decommodification leading to re-embedding. However, I treat decommodification and re-embedding as two analytically distinct processes. Second, decommodification is the outcome of the countermovement. Polanyi sometimes blurred the lines between ‘protection’ and ‘countermovement’, without clearly differentiating between the two. Viewing decommodification and countermovement as related but distinct concepts enables the operation of the double movement to be analysed with greater precision. Third, decommodification includes items which have not been integrated into the market. This ensures that struggles to prevent items being incorporated into the market for the first time are captured within the double movement, which is particularly important in settings where fictitious commodification has been less comprehensive and struggles related to the process are not limited to already commodified items.<sup>20</sup>

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18. Within the Polanyian literature, some see decommodification as a gradational process (e.g. Sandbrook, 2014), while others view it as the removal of fictitious commodities from the market (e.g. Munck, 2013).

19. Thus, viewing the double movement as a process of dis-embedding and re-embedding is problematic. See Clark (2014), Dale (2010) and Harvey et al. (2007).

20. See Gerber and Gerber (2017) for a different take on this.

### Double Movement as Dialectic Process

Bringing together commodification and decommodification reveals a spectrum running from self-regulation at one extreme to the absence of the market at the other. The two connected processes, which take place concurrently and centre on fictitious commodities, move in opposite directions along this continuum. The double movement is therefore a synchronic and dialectic process: commodification and decommodification, movement and counter-movement occur simultaneously (Neale, 1994; Polanyi, 1944/2001). Polanyi claimed that this simultaneous process created unresolvable tensions within liberal economies. The Great Depression was the catalyst for change. During the 1930s, governments abandoned the central tenets of classical liberal capitalism and introduced sweeping social, political and economic reforms. The Great Transformation saw the emergence of diverse political-economic regimes, but the general trend was towards greater state intervention and a reduced role for the market in driving socio-economic change.

Polanyi saw this shift as a rebalancing of the role markets performed in society, with forms of organization prevalent before the birth of market society becoming more prominent. This was consistent with his belief that there are no predetermined stages in economic development and economic regimes can ultimately only be organized around three broad patterns: redistribution, reciprocity and market exchange. He called these patterns 'forms of integration', claiming that the three modes usually coexist, but one dominates or 'integrates' economic life. The extent to which one pattern dominates is indicated by the degree to which it provides 'the provision of the daily necessities of life'<sup>21</sup> — that is, the principal mechanism through which societies access land, water, food, clothing, shelter and income.

Of course, markets continued to perform prominent provisioning and organizing roles in capitalist nations after the collapse of liberal capitalism. However, they were more heavily regulated and more emphatically supplemented by redistributive and reciprocal mechanisms. The ferocity of Polanyi's attack against the self-regulating market in *The Great Transformation* obscures the fact that he anticipated this outcome. He made this clear in the plan of the book, claiming that 'there is no reason why the market should not discharge its unique functions in the framework of a set of regulations' and 'there is no reason to regard a regulated market system as utopian'.<sup>22</sup> What Polanyi did not foresee was the erosion of the 'set of regulations' that were established after the demise of liberal capitalism and the return of market fundamentalism as the hegemonic economic doctrine and political ideology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the spectre of the self-regulating

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21. Karl Polanyi Archive, Folder 6.4, Concordia University, Montreal, December 2008. See also Polanyi (1957b).

22. Karl Polanyi Archive, Folder 19.5, Concordia University, Montreal, December 2008. See also Polanyi (1944/2001: 259) and Clark (2014: 80–81).



market looming, scholars looked for inspiration to understand this threat: *The Great Transformation* was the obvious place to look.

**THE DOUBLE MOVEMENT IN THE WAKE OF *THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION*: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND NEW HORIZONS**

While the importance of *The Great Transformation* was noted when it was published, it was not fully recognized until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book, as numerous commentators have noted, appeared to describe contemporary events. A trickle of studies drawing inspiration from Polanyi turned into a stream, and *The Great Transformation* soon became essential reading for students and scholars across a wide range of disciplines. Of the numerous concepts in the book, the double movement has become the most widely applied or evoked (Dale, 2010). Two broad readings have emerged. The first sees the double movement revolve around economic liberalism, while the second views it as a fundamental contradiction in market capitalism. Exponents of the former reading suggest the double movement can be eased or overcome through reform, while advocates of the latter claim more radical solutions are required.

**Competing Perspectives: The Soft and Hard Polanyi**

The divergence between these two readings of the double movement echoes wider debates over the meaning and significance of *The Great Transformation*. Within the Polanyian scholarship, these debates typically revolve around ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ readings of Polanyi.<sup>23</sup> The difference between the two rests largely on the extent to which Polanyi is read as a champion of reformed capitalism or democratic socialism. The soft reading casts Polanyi as the gospel of the welfare state and social democracy, while the hard version portrays him as a lifelong socialist calling for the overthrow of capitalism. Clearly, whether scholars choose to follow the soft or hard reading partly reflects their own ideological and normative convictions. However, there are also three important conceptual differences.

First, scholars who follow the soft reading tend to view embeddedness as a matter of degree and often see capitalism evolve through cycles of dis-embedding and re-embedding.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, exponents of the hard reading tend to conceptualize embeddedness in absolute terms and equate the

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23. Summarizing these debates, Dale (2016a: 6) argues: ‘Of the two interpretations, the “soft” Polanyi enjoys greater following but has less textual support’. Sandbrook (2014) makes a similar point, although he is less sympathetic to the hard reading. See also Dale (2016b) and Polanyi-Levitt (2013).

24. See, for example, Block (2001), Levien and Paret (2012) and Sandbrook (2011).

disembedded economy with the capitalist market economy. The possibility of re-embedding under market capitalism is therefore rejected. Second, the countermovement in the soft reading is generally seen as a) necessary to protect society from the market, and b) compatible with market capitalism (Dale, 2016a). The hard reading accepts the first point, but rejects the second, claiming that interfering with markets for fictitious commodities leads to strains and tensions which cannot be resolved without radical change. Third, the double movement within the soft reading is conceptualized as a self-equilibrating mechanism or basic tension in market capitalism which is manageable through reform (Dale, 2016a).<sup>25</sup> The hard reading, by contrast, views the double movement as a fundamental contradiction in market capitalism. Exponents of this interpretation tend to advocate some form of socialism to overcome the contradiction.

Most scholars who have used or evoked the double movement in the global South have followed the soft reading of Polanyi and have not engaged with the more radical interpretation of his work. Hence the picture of the double movement in the region is somewhat lopsided. Moreover, there has been little dialogue between scholars who have drawn on the concept, so it is also rather fragmented, with references to the double movement strewn across the canvas, but with few attempts to join the dots.

In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to correct this picture by reviewing studies that have used or evoked the double movement in the global South and create a dialogue between these authors and scholars who follow a hard reading of the concept. I will argue that the hard reading offers a better overarching framework to analyse capitalist development but requires elaboration to explore empirical phenomena. To this end, I propose a revised formulation of the concept, based on the second reading and the modified version of the original formulation presented in the previous section. The section starts by discussing the soft reading before bringing this interpretation into conversation with the hard reading and highlighting the strengths, weaknesses and differences of the two approaches.

### **The Dominant Narrative: The Soft Reading of the Double Movement**

Scholars who follow the soft reading of the double movement offer their own twists on the concept but follow a similar formulation.<sup>26</sup> I interpret it as follows. Economic liberalization causes socio-economic dislocation. Countermovements emerge which attempt to regulate markets, strengthen alternative forms of organization, and bolster the state. Effective

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25. For example, Sandbrook (2014: 64), who is too astute a reader of Polanyi to view the double movement as an automatic self-equilibrating mechanism, defines it as 'a persistent and unstable tension in capitalism rather than an irreconcilable contradiction'. See Taylor (2000) for an illustration of the self-equilibrating reading.

26. See, for example, Robinson (1999), Silva (2009) and Stewart (2006).

countermovements force states to break with economic liberalization and introduce laws and policies that reform capitalism and promote decommodification. Countermovements dissipate only to reappear if states dismantle decommodification and liberalize markets. Hence when the full cycle of the double movement is complete, capitalism passes through sequential stages of commodification and decommodification.<sup>27</sup> The synchronic character of the double movement is therefore understated or overlooked. Briefly considering how scholars who follow this approach have interpreted the transition to neoliberal capitalism indicates this tendency.

Referring to the broad mix of policies introduced in the decades before neoliberal reform, Stewart (2006: 6), who focuses on the idea of the 'Great Transformation' but evokes the double movement in her analysis, claims 'developing countries virtually skipped Polanyi's unregulated market phase, moving straight into a situation of extensive regulation and a large public sector'.<sup>28</sup> Silva (2009: 41) casts the political economic regimes that emerged in Latin America during this historical period in similar light. Concentrating on Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, he argues that governments in these countries 'decommodified labor and land for urban and rural popular sectors and many middle-class social groups'. These regimes started to crumble in the 1980s as Latin American governments embarked on structural adjustment. These programmes, Silva claims, constituted the 'first step toward the recommodification of labor and land because they dismantled or weakened institutions and bargaining mechanisms that protected people, especially the popular sectors and the middle classes, from the market' (ibid.: 24). Neoliberal reform is then seen to accelerate these trends. Silva (ibid.: 3) sees this shift as analogous to the attempt to construct market societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, claiming Latin American governments aimed to create regimes which 'subordinated politics and social welfare to the needs of an economy built on the logic of free-market economics'. Stewart (2006: 8) sees a similar shift occur across the global South, suggesting the transition 'might be best interpreted as being parallel to the move to the market in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century' with the region seeing the introduction of markets for fictitious commodities in 'more-or-less pure form for the first time'.

Capitalism is therefore seen to have passed through distinct phases of decommodification and commodification, with structural adjustment and neoliberal reform triggering a wave of fictitious commodification across the global South.

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27. Other scholars have recognized the sequential character of this reading of the double movement. Jamie Peck, for example, depicts it as a two-step process with the 'market' acting and 'society' responding (Peck, 2013: 1540).

28. Stewart equates the 'Great Transformation' with the countermovement, suggesting a sequential reading of the double movement (Stewart, 2006: 22). Elsewhere, she employs the metaphor of the 'pendulum' to capture these shifts, describing the process as 'swings back and forth between strong restrictions on the market and market domination, each resulting from excesses of the dominant model' (Stewart, 2009: 765). See also Silver (2003).

**The Alternative Perspective: The Hard Reading of the Double Movement**

Viewing this transition through the lens of the hard reading offers a different interpretation of events.<sup>29</sup> Implicitly or explicitly, these authors question the degree of decommodification that occurred in the decades before neoliberal reform and see the double movement as a contradiction hardwired into market capitalism. Polanyi-Levitt (2006: 385) offers the clearest articulation of this reading, arguing that taking a longer view of the double movement shows that it is ‘not a self-correcting mechanism to moderate excesses of market fundamentalism but an existential contradiction between the requirements of a capitalist market economy for unlimited expansion and the requirements of people to live in mutually supportive relations in society’. She therefore extends the contradiction her father saw in classical liberal capitalism to the varieties of capitalism that emerged in its wake. Notably, she also explicitly situates the double movement within a capitalist system that demands perpetual growth. Lacher, perhaps the most vociferous critic of the soft reading, adopts a similar position. He claims Polanyi’s broader thesis represents ‘a social and cultural contradiction between the disembedded market and the conditions which make society, and social relations between human beings, possible’ (1999: 315). Restricting his argument to advanced capitalist economies, he argues that welfare states that emerged after the breakdown of liberal capitalism failed to overcome this contradiction. The market remained the dominant form of integration and the decommodification welfare states achieved merely softened the worst excesses of market fundamentalism. Bernard (1997), who approaches Polanyi from a political ecology perspective, also highlights the limitations of the capitalist regimes that emerged during this period, stressing the level of environmental destruction and ecological dislocation that occurred during this period. These authors therefore adopt a more critical stance towards the capitalist regimes that emerged in the wake of the Great Transformation and point towards underlying continuities in historical processes of fictitious commodification.

**Defensive and Offensive Countermovements**

The two groups of scholars also offer different interpretations of contemporary countermovements. The tendency to conceptualize them as ‘defensive’ is a salient feature of the soft camp. Udayagiri and Walton (2003) highlight this in their influential study of structural adjustment and neoliberal reform in India and Mexico. They claim countermovements emerged as a response to the removal of entitlements and protections gained during earlier phases of capitalism. Building on these insights, Almeida (2007: 127) offers a similar interpretation of popular protests in Latin America, arguing the ‘movement

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29. See, for example, Clark (2014); Lacher (1999); Polanyi-Levitt (2013).

away from the developmentalist state to a neoliberal regime creates a countermovement of social forces that mobilize to protect groups whose safety nets are threatened and contest the pace and logic of the transition process'. Silva (2012) casts Latin American countermovements in similar light, although he focuses more explicitly on commodification. He argues the regimes that emerged in the region in the decades before neoliberal reform set a high-water mark of decommodification and 'much mobilization against market liberalization was a defensive reaction to recommodification of those protected spaces' (ibid.: 8). Thus, these authors frame countermovements as defensive responses to the breakdown of pre-existing regimes. Other scholars in this camp conceptualize these reactions somewhat differently.<sup>30</sup> Henderson (2017: 35), for example, classifies countermovements as defensive as they seek to 'reshape' rather than 'transform' existing regimes. He contrasts these with Gramscian 'counter-hegemonic' movements which seek to transform 'underlying mechanisms of exploitation, oppression and impoverishment' (ibid.). Hence Polanyi is cast in the role of reformer, à la the soft reading.

By seeing the double movement as a fundamental contradiction in market capitalism, scholars who follow the hard reading open the door to countermovements being linked to long-term processes of fictitious commodification. Exploring this possibility is particularly important in the global South, as the level of decommodification achieved prior to neoliberal reform was lower than in the global North, and the level of social and ecological dislocation was higher.

I take a step in this direction in a separate article which explores land reform and indigenous mobilization in Ecuador through the lens of the double movement (Goodwin, 2017). My analysis shows that land commodification and decommodification took place simultaneously from the 1960s. However, relatively little decommodification occurred due to the failure of the state to respond to indigenous demands to implement comprehensive land reform. Drawing on the countermovement concept, I characterize indigenous struggles as the attempt to bring land under social and political control as commodification accelerated from the 1960s. My analysis therefore contrasts with studies that frame contemporary countermovements as defensive reactions to structural adjustment and neoliberal reform. In doing so, I illustrate the possibility of 'offensive' countermovements emerging, which seek to establish new forms of decommodification rather than simply defend the status quo.

Scholars who follow the hard reading of Polanyi tend to stress another feature of the countermovement that is often overlooked in the soft reading: its potentially destabilizing and destructive character. Clark (2014: 74) makes this point forcefully, arguing that within the original formulation of the

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30. See also Gemici and Nair (2016); Itzigsohn and Rebón (2015); Silver (2003).

double movement the 'protective response did not alleviate the contradictions of the market society, but rather refracted them onto the international terrain, thus creating the conditions for a catastrophic and global collapse'. Lacher (1999) also makes this point powerfully.<sup>31</sup> While these authors provide scant empirical evidence to support these claims, their insights highlight a feature of the original formulation of the double movement which is generally missed or understated in the soft reading.

### **Routes out of the Double Movement**

Viewing the countermovement as necessary but destructive prompts authors who follow a hard reading to propose radical solutions to the double movement. Lacher (1999: 325), for example, demands 'some form of socialism in which land, labour and money are no longer thought of as commodities'. Adaman et al. (2007) also advocate completely removing fictitious commodities from the market. They propose participatory planning to achieve this, claiming that under this form of organization, 'labour, land and money would cease to be fictitious commodities, society would control economic activity, and the economy would be re-embedded in both society and nature' (ibid.: 108). Similarly, Bernard (1997: 87) suggests that 'a reorganisation of work, a democratisation of state structures, and the socialisation of decision making about technology and the relationship between economic activity and local, regional and national ecological carrying capacities' is necessary to re-embed the economy. Crucially, however, he also notes that 'none of this is possible without a shift in power relations and ideologies at the local and global levels' (ibid.: 87).

Sandbrook (2011) also emphasizes the importance of establishing regimes that decommodify fictitious commodities, but argues that less radical changes are required to achieve this. He expresses clear preference for social democracies over socialist regimes, claiming the former 'have shown themselves to be far more astute in handling the contradiction between market efficiency, on the one hand, and social equity, justice, and stability, on the other' (ibid.: 417). He acknowledges, however, that establishing social democracies may be impossible in countries 'with fragile states, mass poverty and societies driven by ethnic, religious or regional cleavages' (ibid.: 433). In these settings, he suggests communitarian mechanisms are a more viable way of securing decommodification (ibid.: 433–37). Stewart (2006) also points to less radical reform, proposing policies that fit within the social democratic tradition, including labour regulation, universal welfare provision and minimum income guarantees.

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31. See also Adaman et al. (2007) and Dale (2010, 2016a).

### Countermovement Activity and Impact

What evidence is there of social and political forces emerging in the global South to force these kinds of changes? The existing scholarship provides some clues. Following a soft reading of Polanyi, Levien and Paret (2012) suggest there is a broad desire for countermovements to take hold. Having analysed changes in public opinion in 20 countries, the authors claim there is 'compelling evidence for the existence of a latent global countermovement, in the form of a widespread increase in desire for re-embedding the market at a time of global dis-embedding' (ibid.: 741).

However, the literature highlights the challenge of converting latent desires into concrete countermovements. Robinson (1999: 42), for example, argues that global capital's emancipation has restricted the ability of social and political movements to force substantive changes at the national level, claiming that at the turn of the century it was 'structurally impossible for individual nations to sustain independent, or even autonomous, economies, political systems and social structures'. With countermovements unable to force states to act, he urges them to adopt transnational strategies. Munck (2002) makes a similar claim. He argues that the liberalization of capital flows and globalization of capitalist production have limited nation states' ability to respond to countermovements. To overcome this structural constraint, countermovements have to think and act globally, seeking to construct international networks and organizations that transcend formal/informal and North/South boundaries (see also Munck, 2013). Stewart (2006) also stresses the limited room nation states have to manoeuvre, leading her to conclude that changes are likely to be limited unless the global institutional architecture is overhauled and the power of multinational enterprises is constrained. Sandbrook (2014: 15–16) takes a similar but broader view, claiming global and national 'opportunity structures' influence the operation and effectiveness of countermovements.

The literature shows countermovements must overcome internal as well as external barriers to secure decommodification. Levien (2007) clearly illustrates this point in his analysis of India's National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). His research highlights the challenge of integrating organizations with distinct agendas, ideologies and bases into viable countermovements. The problems the NAPM faced reflect the wider challenge of establishing what he calls 'a Polanyian constituency' (ibid.: 144). Individuals, communities and classes experience market dislocation in diverse ways which opens the door to the 'proliferation of single-issue movements whose commonality is hard to perceive and unity difficult to build' (ibid.: 119). Sandbrook (2014: 12) makes a similar point, noting the 'countermovement has the numbers, but it is stymied by a cacophony of voices and divergent interests'. A critical point is that countermovements have to accumulate sufficient political power to secure decommodification.

There is also evidence to suggest countermovements simply fail to materialize. Li (2014) offers evidence of this in her ethnographic study of socio-economic change in rural Indonesia. She argues that families and communities in rural Sulawesi embraced rather than resisted land commodification as they attempted to develop viable economic strategies and escape chronic poverty. The lack of resistance to land commodification, the conversion of landowners into wage labourers, and the emergence of competitive capitalist relations leads her to argue that ‘followers of Polanyi who might have expected to find a locally generated countermovement that put social protection ahead of profit, have to confront the processes identified by Marx’ (ibid.: 181–82).<sup>32</sup> If nothing else, Li’s analysis shows the importance of not assuming that countermovements will automatically appear to challenge fictitious commodification.

Yet, as already indicated, the literature also shows that countermovements are capable of challenging and reshaping market capitalism. The clearest evidence of this comes from Latin America where waves of social mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to the emergence of political leaders and parties committed to breaking with the neoliberal orthodoxy.<sup>33</sup> Silva (2009: 267) argues that this shift suggests ‘the dawning of a Polanyian countermovement to contemporary market society in Latin America’. Munck (2013: 157) sees a similar trend emerge in the region, claiming Latin American countermovements ‘took different shapes and not all were politically progressive, but they undermined the notion the market can simply impose its logic on society’.<sup>34</sup> On a wider level, Gemici and Nair (2016: 585) claim that ‘successful collective mobilization against market reforms occurs quite regularly’. Drawing a distinction between Marxist and Polanyian forms of contention, the authors indicate that there have been at least 31 instances of the former and 37 of the latter in the global South during the neoliberal stage of capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

### **Rethinking the Double Movement**

The existing scholarship therefore provides important insights into social, political and economic change, highlighting the prevalence of the basic

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32. Li offers a more detailed and sympathetic discussion of countermovements elsewhere (see Li, 2007).

33. It is worth noting that some politicians and parties within this group have drawn directly on Polanyi when formulating their political programmes. See, for example, ‘Programa del Gobierno, 2013–2017: 35 Propuestas para el Socialismo del Buen Vivir, Alianza País’, the political agenda that underpinned President Rafael Correa’s last term in office in Ecuador.

34. See Sandbrook (2014) for further reflections on these regimes from a Polanyian perspective. For additional insights, see Almeida (2007), Goodwin (2017), Henderson (2017) and Itzigsohn and Rebón (2015).

35. Gemici and Nair (2016) offer these instances of countermovement activity as illustrative cases of a wider phenomenon. Moreover, their study focuses on contentious politics and therefore does not capture the whole gamut of countermovement activity.



tensions and processes embodied in the double movement and providing important insights into the concept. However, the soft reading has dominated the literature which means the double movement has largely been applied or evoked to interrogate neoliberal capitalism. Long-term processes of commodification and contestation have therefore been underexplored and the radical implications of the double movement have been largely ignored. By conceptualizing the double movement as a contradiction hardwired into market capitalism, the hard reading brings these issues sharply into focus. Viewing capitalist development through this lens encourages more detailed analysis of the dislocation and contestation that accompanied earlier waves of fictitious commodification. Thus, the hard reading demands greater critical analysis of the capitalist regimes that emerged prior to structural adjustment and neoliberal reform. This is not only important for understanding historical events, but crucial for comprehending contemporary conflicts and processes. The hard reading points towards tensions that run deep into market capitalism, suggesting rolling back structural adjustment and neoliberal reform will be insufficient to satisfy the demands of contemporary countermovements. The point is not to ignore the enormous social, political and economic changes that have taken place over the last 30 years, but to ensure underlying continuities in capitalist development are not overlooked and contemporary countermovements are not reduced to reactions to structural adjustment and neoliberal reform. Following this approach ensures the explanatory power of 'neoliberalism' and 'globalization' is not overstated and the long-standing limitations of capitalist regimes are integrated into Polanyian analysis.

The hard reading of the double movement, therefore, has important advantages over the soft formulation. However, it is not fully specified in the existing literature, making it difficult to apply to the study of empirical phenomena (see, for example, Polanyi-Levitt, 2013). To overcome this, I propose a revised formulation of the concept which is based on the hard reading but incorporates the definitions and extensions proposed in the previous section. This formulation sees market capitalism comprise two dialectically related forces: the movement towards incorporating items into price-making markets (commodification) and the countermovement towards limiting, stopping or reversing commodification (decommodification). These two forces are located on a spectrum with self-regulation at one end and the absence of the market at the other. Capitalism evolves through a simultaneous process of commodification and decommodification without resolving the underlying contradiction between the two forces.<sup>36</sup> States perform a dual role in this process, creating, maintaining and expanding markets on the one hand, while regulating, limiting and eliminating them on the other.

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36. I define a contradiction as a situation in which two opposing forces are simultaneously present and through which change, conflict, crisis and transformation occur. Hence, contradictions can generate positive as well as negative outcomes.

Fictitious commodification is at the heart of the contradiction.<sup>37</sup> The overriding aim of countermovements is to decommodify fictitious commodities through the regulation of markets and the protection, expansion or creation of forms of organization based on redistribution and reciprocity. Countermovements take two analytically distinct forms: defensive and offensive.<sup>38</sup> The former involves protecting existing forms of decommodification while the latter entails creating new mechanisms. To secure decommodification, countermovements have multiple paths to follow, including routine and contentious politics and establishing forms of organization without direct state support. The state–countermovement relationship is multidirectional with democratic and authoritarian states capable of embracing, weakening or crushing countermovements. The internal composition of countermovements is not predetermined and can stretch across class and ethnic lines. No specific ideological or normative characteristics are attached a priori and efforts to tackle fictitious commodification can therefore take progressive or regressive forms.<sup>39</sup>

Within this formulation, the double movement is seen to comprise multiple movements which occur in various sectors of the economy and involve different actors, groups and classes. Hence, it is conceptualized as a plurality of movements rather than a singular process which moves uniformly toward or against the market. The double movement takes place within the context of the disembedded economy and is therefore not conceptualized as a process of disembedding and re-embedding. Re-embedding only occurs if the double movement and the disembedded economy are transcended.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Some points of clarification about this formulation of the double movement are necessary. First, the disembedded economy is a capitalist market economy that demands perpetual growth (Polanyi-Levitt, 2013). The pursuit of profit and need to accumulate capital drive commodification. Decommodification influences but does not necessarily impede this process. Dale (2016a: 9) makes this point forcefully, noting decommodification can work in the ‘interests of capital accumulation’ and ‘reinforce commodifying logics over the long run’. The decommodification concept elaborated above helps us understand this relationship with greater analytical precision. The first two

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37. The fictitious commodities concept could be usefully extended to include other items which are a) not originally designed for sale on the market and b) perform crucial non-economic functions. Examples include education, healthcare and sport.

38. Silver (2003) also proposes a defensive/offensive classification. However, she uses it to distinguish between Polanyian and Marxist labour struggles, with the former considered defensive and the latter offensive. See also Gemici and Nair (2016).

39. Various other authors have stressed this point. See, for example, Block and Somers (2014), and Munck (2013).

forms of decommodification — intervening and limiting — are more conducive to capital accumulation than the third — preventing or reversing. For example, social security underpins accumulation by supporting consumer demand and ensuring the political viability of capitalism over the long run, whereas communal land impedes accumulation by preventing the full incorporation of land and labour into the market and creating room for alternative forms of organization. However, social and political conflict occur across all three forms of decommodification as capitalist firms attempt to secure ‘cheap’ labour and land and expand into new social and natural spheres (Arrighi, 2005; Harvey, 2015; Moore, 2015). These basic traits of capitalism, which have intensified over the last three decades, are at the heart of the double movement and must be integrated into Polanyian analysis.

Second, viewing the double movement as a dialectic process means commodification and decommodification are treated as interconnected and simultaneous rather than discrete and sequential (Peck, 2013). The reading therefore rejects interpretations of the double movement that conceptualize the process as linear or causal. Third, explicitly conceptualizing the double movement as a plurality of movements encourages the analysis of commodification-decommodification processes which occur within specific spheres of the economy and involve particular social classes, groups and movements.<sup>40</sup> The aim is not to discourage macro-level analysis but to ensure important processes and struggles are not overlooked in pursuit of the scale of transformations Polanyi described. Fourth, the defensive/offensive classification seeks to support a more nuanced use of the countermovement. The categorization widens the net of the concept to capture struggles related to long-term processes of fictitious commodification and incorporate countermovements which seek to create and transform as well as protect and reform.<sup>41</sup> Countermovements are therefore not reduced to defensive reactions against economic liberalism. It is important to note that this classification is not binary or static. Countermovements can exhibit defensive and offensive characteristics synchronically or sequentially. For example, indigenous struggles linked to fictitious commodification in Latin America have simultaneously sought to protect traditional customs and practices, and create new forms of social and political organization.

## **CONCLUSION: EXPANDING THE FRONTIERS OF POLANYIAN ANALYSIS**

The double movement has cast a longer shadow than Karl Polanyi anticipated. Over the last two decades a voluminous body of literature has

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40. Goodwin (2017) and Levien (2007) offer examples of this type of Polanyian analysis.

41. Wolf (1969: 282) pointed towards the dual character of Polanyian struggles in his classic analysis of peasant mobilizations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claiming peasants could seek protection from the market by ‘cleaving to their traditional institutions’ or could pursue ‘new social forms which would grant them shelter’.

emerged which has applied or evoked the concept. The central aim of this article has been to expand the boundaries of this scholarship and improve our understanding of how to use the double movement to analyse capitalist development. I have attempted to achieve this in three main ways. First, I explained and extended the original formulation of the double movement, stressing the simultaneous character of the process and proposing refinements to the countermovement and decommodification concepts. Next, I created a dialogue between scholars who follow alternative readings of the double movement, arguing that the soft reading has dominated the literature, but the hard version offers a better overarching framework to explore capitalist development. Then, I sketched a revised formulation of the double movement, which is based on the hard reading but incorporates the definitions and extensions presented in the opening sections of the article.

In doing so, I have not attempted to provide the final word on the double movement but invite critical and creative engagement with the concept and open up new paths of analysis. One such path concerns the relationship between decommodification and capital accumulation. The conceptualization of decommodification elaborated in this article provides some insight into this relationship. However, greater theoretical and empirical work is required, especially on how accumulation and decommodification interact and evolve across time and space. Combining insights from Polanyi and Marxist social theories has the potential to shine light on this issue, moving beyond simply using the latter to critique the former. Harvey (2015: 85) hints at the potential of this approach, arguing ‘the gradual decommodification of basic needs provision is a feasible long-term project, which fits neatly with the idea that use values and not the perpetual search for augmenting exchange values should become the basic driver of economic activity’. Thus, he explicitly links decommodification and value, drawing on Marx’s distinction between use and exchange value.

Another path relates to countermovement activity. Bolstering the state is generally seen as a central objective for countermovements. Yet, under certain conditions, extending the regulatory and bureaucratic reach of the state can undermine countermovements and set limits on decommodification. Greater critical attention needs to be paid to the form and structure of the state and the relationship between the state and society. Examining countermovement–state interactions at the local level has the potential to provide fresh insight into these issues. Why have countermovements been able to secure decommodification through the state at the local level in some cases but not in others? What social, political and economic factors explain these diverse outcomes? The potential for countermovements to secure decommodification without direct state support also demands greater scholarly attention. Further research is required on the tools communities, grassroots organizations and social movements use to limit or avert commodification and how these forms of decommodification interact with the wider political

economy. Within the domain of countermovement activity, greater analytical attention also needs to be paid to class, especially Polanyi's insistence that the success of class action ultimately rests on its capacity to serve broader social interests. What particular limits do the historical evolution and social structure of countries in the global South place on this? What are the practical and conceptual implications for the countermovement? These are two of many possible avenues of future Polanyian analysis. With regressive responses to the tensions embodied in the double movement escalating, this research agenda takes on renewed importance.

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**Geoff Goodwin** (g.goodwin@lse.ac.uk) is a LSE Fellow in the Department of International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. His research interests include land, water, community organization, social movements and state–society relations. He has spent the last few years investigating the political economy of water in the Ecuadorian Andes.