

THE TRANSLATIONS AND RECEPTION OF KARL POLANYI'S OEUVRE IN TURKEY

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Extended Abstract

The posthumous interest in the work of Karl Polanyi has gained momentum since the 1970's. A number of factors are responsible for this, among which we can enlist the resurgence of the quest for novel interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches as an alternative to orthodoxies (official Marxist or ossified academic) in the wake of the intellectual revolution of 1968, the collapse of the welfare and developmental states, and the so-called 'neoclassical synthesis' and modernization theory that supported them; and the dire need for an antidote to neoliberal restructuring of global political economy via a return to policies reminiscent of the interwar period. The combined effect of these factors has been to bring to light the work of Karl Polanyi as subject to a number of rival interpretations.

We wish to explore here the main tenets of the reception of Polanyi's work in Turkey since the 1970's. During this period, Turkey has remained a lower middle-income country that qualifies as a semiperiphery as far as the international division of labor is concerned. Turkey has attained considerable modernization by way of state-led inward-looking industrialization strategy coupled with a multi-party system that has survived albeit brief interregna of military rules. In the meantime, Turkey has occupied a geostrategic location first on the borderline of the once Cold War, and later as a connection to the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as to the Middle East. These factors have imposed certain limits on the development and foci of social sciences in Turkey. The reception of Polanyi's work by Turkish academics is to be understood with keeping in mind this critical geocultural backdrop.

The influence of Polanyi's work in Turkey is traceable to two main sources. One main source has its origins outside Turkey. This source has two distinct lines of influence. First, some people have come to learn about and/or read Polanyi while they pursued study or research abroad. Second, some foreign scholars who came to Turkey in the 1960's played a role in cultivating an interest in Polanyi's work by including him in their course syllabi and assigning readings from him. On the whole, the first line of influence has had a much stronger impact than the second. We can surmise this conclusion in retrospect by comparing the relative commitment and continued allegiance to Polanyi of the two targeted audiences. Whereas those linked to the first line of influence have maintained their intellectual affinity with Polanyi and have served as links in a chain expanding with a snowball effect, the others linked with the second line have not had experienced a lasting influence, never mind influencing those to come after them. The second main source of influence was situated in Turkey. Here we have in mind the central role of published translations of Polanyi's work into Turkish without which many people who did not know English could not have been as easily and as early exposed to Polanyi's work as had been the case.¹ In this paper we will confine our research, observations and judgment to this second main source of influence.

¹Obviously, the origins of the translations are also traceable to Polanyi and therefore to an outside source. Nevertheless, we find the distinction between foreign and domestic influences practically useful.



*When we are concerned with the formative influence of Polanyi's specific works on the minds of the newly initiated, we see that the most influential has been his *The Great Transformation*. His article 'The Economy as Instituted Process' comes second. Both pieces were translated into Turkish. In the course of our research we realized that 'Aristotle Discovers the Economy' has also been influential albeit to a lesser degree and surprisingly more among sociologists than economists. This work nevertheless remains untranslated in to Turkish.*

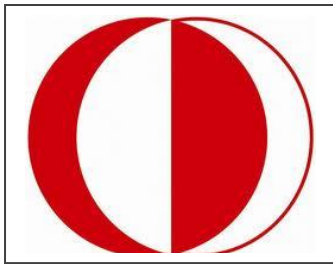
In Turkey, Polanyi's work has been most influential among economists and sociologists. We should note in passing that anthropologists have remained rather insignificant in numbers and influence, partly because very few departments of anthropology exist and on the whole the more reputable anthropologists occupy the fringes of sociology departments. On the other hand, until recently, several leading departments of economics have functioned as broad-based social science departments in orientation. Hence it should be no surprise that the influence of Polanyi over economists has been the greatest. Even sociologists whose thought and work bear the imprint of Polanyi's influence have been either one time members of departments of economics or their students.

Research Procedure

*To trace the effect of Polanyi's work in Turkey, we have adopted the following research strategy. We divided Polanyi's potential zone of influence into three circles. We conceptualize Polanyi's influence as progressing outwards from the center of these concentric circles with a snowball effect. The inmost circle occupies the two figures responsible for translating Polanyi into Turkish. The second circle occupies scholars whose work reflects direct influence of Polanyi. These are people who have directly written on Polanyi and/or pursued their research within a framework inspired by him. We rely mainly on approximately one-hour long one-to-one interviews with the greater number of people who occupy these two inner circles. Others we have reached by e-mail. First we approached two people who translated Polanyi into Turkish in the 1970's and 1980's and whose translations were actually published, thereby being widely available.² These are Etyen Mahcupyan and Ayşe Buğra, the translators of "The Economy as Instituted Process" and *The Great Transformation* respectively. They were both in academia when they made and published their translations. Buğra was then a member of faculty at the Department of Economics of Boğaziçi University (Istanbul) whereas Mahcupyan was pursuing a graduate degree in economics at the Faculty of Political Sciences of Ankara University. Later on, Mahcupyan gave up his academic aspirations and became a journalist while Buğra has remained a leading academic with an impressive publication record.*

*It should be noted here that neither of these are professional translators. In this sense, we are not speaking here of a Sian Reynolds who as a professional translator has specialized in and spent her life with translating Fernand Braudel from French into English. Even Reynolds' work bears important occasional errors despite this high level of specialization. Translating social sciences is no easy task. Both Mahcupyan and Buğra have done a great service by translating Polanyi into Turkish. In comparison with this, mistakes in translation bear little importance. As a matter of fact, we do not know even if the translator or the publisher is responsible for a gross error that was in the subtitle of the earlier edition of Buğra's *Büyük Dönüşüm*. Whereas Polanyi's own subtitle dwells upon the 'political and economic origins' of the *Great Transformation*, Buğra's version renders it as 'social and economic origins', an unforgivable alteration given the specific meanings Polanyi bestows upon the concepts of 'political', 'economic' and 'social' that are highly original and by no means interchangeable. In a similar vein, Tezel felt the urge to re-translate Polanyi's article because he thought it had numerous*

² *Yahya Sezai Tezel of the economics program of Faculty of Political Sciences of Ankara University also translated 'The Economy as Instituted Process' and had it printed as a booklet for instruction in 1982. This translation was used by thousands of his students until his retirement in July 2008. This translation exists as a downloadable copy in Tezel's official website.*



omissions and errors. Whereas from the viewpoint of assessing service done to making Polanyi's oeuvre available to the public at large as manifest in his total influence, the quality of translations may not be of great importance, as far as the conveyance of Polanyi's message is concerned, truth to the word and sense is of utmost importance. To this effect, we will dwell upon the quality of these translations and attempt to discern whether and to what degree shifts in meaning may be due to the personal and scholarly biases of the translators themselves. We will then try to see if defects of translation affected the overall Polanyi effect in the Turkish social science context.



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