Transitional Temporality

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Abstract:

Sewell (1996) identified three temporalities which underlie many social scientific accounts. This paper identifies a fourth: transitional temporality. This approach is inspired by Polanyi's (1944) comparative analysis of the rate of change of economic transformation surrounding the respective commodification of land and labor. Following Polanyi, transitional temporality focuses not on the endpoints of social transformation (as in teleological approaches), nor on moments of transformation (as in eventful approaches), but on the potentially lengthy transitions between structures. While eventful temporality equates agency with the choices made by individuals during relatively rare events, transitional temporality identifies the capacity for agents to alter the rate of change and, in so doing, to prevent or bring about events. This approach recovers Polanyi's oft-ignored analysis of the state's role in modulating the rate of change and foregrounds the social costs of disruption and dislocation resulting from abrupt transitions.

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Introduction

It is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to say that William Sewell's 1996 essay "Three Temporalities" is the most important agenda-setting piece in historical sociology. While earlier eras of historical sociology were characterized in part by their attention to particular kinds of historical events - especially revolutions and state formation (Clemens 2007) - after Sewell, historical sociology came to be identified with a particular understanding of time. Simply put, good historical sociology is *eventful* (Clemens 2015). Sewell defined his eventful approach in contrast with two earlier, and quite widespread, understandings of temporality: teleological and experimental.

In this short article, I revisit Sewell's foundational essay and identify a fourth potential approach to time that I call *transitional temporality*. Transitional temporality is concerned with how fast societies move from one set of structures to another. The two motivating questions for transitional temporality studies are: why did a transition occur as fast (or as slow) as it did? And what are the consequences of a given transition occurring through a fast vs. slow process? Research employing transitional temporality may or may not espouse a strong deterministic stance towards the eventual outcome, but either way, this research provisionally brackets the question of why a particular new set of structures came to dominate in order to investigate the speed and process of transition. This emphasis on speed and process contrasts with teleological temporality; transitional temporality takes seriously the *rate* of change, and treats the rate of change as itself the outcome of agentic contestation. While eventful temporality equates agency with the choices made by individuals during relatively rare events, transitional temporality identifies the capacity for agents to alter the rate of change *between* events, and even to prevent or bring about events by speeding up or slowing down transitions. For scholars pursuing research under the banner of transitional

temporality, the journey thus remains important even if the destination is unchanged.

My interest in transitional temporality comes out of my experience reading, citing, and teaching Karl Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) *The Great Transformation*. Interest in Polanyi has increased in the past 15 years, including publication of major secondary works (Dale 2010) and the rise of a school of Polanyian economic sociology (see Krippner and Alvarez 2007) following three decades of groundwork laid by Fred Block and Margaret Somers (compiled in Block and Somers 2014). Polanyi's work has inspired new approaches to understanding the politics of the welfare state, the role of finance, and the return of market fundamentalism. Despite this resurgence of interest Polanyi's work, and especially in *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi's own understanding of temporality has not been explored. Polanyi, I will argue, did *not* adopt an eventful approach - at least not entirely. Rather, I will show that Polanyi analyzed history, in part, through the lens of transitional temporality.

To make this point, I focus on Polanyi's comparison of the 150 year process of enclosure versus the quick process of Poor Law Reform. Polanyi argues that both processes were, in a particular sense discussed further below, determined by larger economic and technological forces. Yet Polanyi also argues that the two processes played out quite differently because of how powerful actors reacted to that inevitability. Polanyi argues that the enclosure movement could have been destructive to the fabric of society but, due to the actions of the state, the process of enclosure was slowed down enough to permit society to adapt. In contrast, the transition from Speenhamland to the New Poor Law was frighteningly quick and workers did not have time to adapt to the new regime.

Without taking a strong stance on the historical accuracy of Polanyi's interpretation of enclosures and poor laws, I conclude by arguing that Polanyi's emphasis on the rate of change

would be worth revisiting in the light of modern struggles over technological change and environmental catastrophe. Much as Schumpeter (1942) both lauded and condemned large corporations for simultaneously producing the “perennial gales of creative destruction” *and* for protecting individuals from those gales by providing stable shelters, Polanyi’s understanding of the temporality of social change reminds us to keep an eye on *how fast* such transformations occur and especially whether or not large scale transformation happens much faster than an individual’s lifespan - and society’s collective capacity to adapt.

Sewell’s Three Temporalities

In this section, I briefly revisit Sewell’s analysis of experimental, teleological, and eventful temporalities. I show how Sewell argues that the first two approaches obscure the possibility of, respectively, significant historical transformations and the role of agents in producing such changes, and theorizes eventful temporality as an alternative that emphasizes these two possibilities. I then identify a fourth temporality which similarly acknowledges both historical transformation and the role of agency, but which emphasizes agency between rather than during events. In each case, I follow Sewell’s example in presenting an “un-nuanced” (cf. Healy 2017) reading of theorists whose work exemplify these temporalities. These un-nuanced readings are at times uncharitable, and do not do justice to the full richness of each author’s historical explanations. Rather, I aim to draw out the underlying logic of part of each argument to illustrate the associated approach to temporality.

Experimental Temporality

Experimental temporality involves treating the past as outcomes of a (mostly) unchanging process whose features we are determined to uncover by making inferences from observed data

understood as akin to a random sample.¹ This metaphor is not perfect; even historical sociology in the experimental temporality mode tends to pay at least some attention to process and mechanisms. But, as Sewell (1996: 258) shows in his analysis of Theda Skocpol's (1979) *States and Social Revolutions*, the deep logic roughly follows this approach. Sewell argues that Skocpol's attempt to hew closely to Mills' method for comparing cases leads her to ignore, among other things, how revolutions interact over time, how the fact of the French Revolution changes the discourses and possibilities for the Russian Revolution which in turn influences the Chinese Revolution and so on. For Skocpol, at least in her most programmatic mode, each case is separate, and helps to illustrate the necessary and sufficient features of social revolution, which is itself imagined as a stable sort of process that sometimes happens when the right features happen to line up.

For Sewell, then, experimental temporality rests on several, interrelated, faulty assumptions: that different moments in history are equivalent, that these moments are independent, and that there is a "a uniformity of causal laws across time and a causal independence of every sequence of occurrences from previous and subsequent occurrences" (Sewell 1996: 262). Experimental temporality therefore involves an assumption that structures are fundamentally ahistorical, that the "causal laws" governing the possibility of, say "social revolutions" are fixed and unchanging. This presumption of the fixity of causal laws also effectively eliminates the possibility of any version of agency defined by the capacity of actors to "significantly reconfigure the very structures that constituted them" (Sewell 1992: 5).

Teleological Temporality

In some ways, teleological temporality is the polar opposite of experimental temporality. While experimental temporality assumes that the structures underlying the world (the data generating

¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting more precise language here.

processes) are fixed, teleological temporality assumes not only that these structures change, but they are progressing (or occasionally regressing) towards some fixed endpoint. Change is not only possible but inevitable.

Sewell argues that much of the classical sociological canon exhibits elements of teleological thinking, from Durkheim to Tonnies to, perhaps most prominently, Marx. While a nuanced reading of Marx's larger body of work showcases the complexities of his understanding of technological and economic determinism (e.g. MacKenzie 1984), strong teleological claims do appear prominently in some of his most iconic writings, especially *The Communist Manifesto*.² Capitalism follows Feudalism, and works according to a very different logic. In turn, Socialism will follow Capitalism. The Revolution is coming, and once it occurs, the entire system will work differently. The structures of capitalism will fall by the wayside, replaced by a new set of structures.

Mid-20th century historical sociology was rarely quite so deterministic as this simplified reading of Marx, but Sewell argues that teleological temporality does enter into projects as distinct as Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) World-Systems Analysis and Charles Tilly's work on the French Revolution (e.g. Tilly 1964). For example, Sewell argues that Wallerstein reads history backwards: arguing from the end state of capitalism back to what must have happened at the founding moment/collapse of feudalism. And in particular, although Wallerstein's account is "full of contingencies" in the specifics, "in Wallerstein's analysis, the contingencies, choices, and consequences are foreordained by the necessity" built into the system from the beginning that made it possible for capitalism to emerge (Sewell 1996: 250). The contingencies are *irrelevant*.

² MacKenzie (1984: 474) distinguishes a strong and a weak form of technological determinism and argues that Marx exhibits the first but not the second. Specifically, MacKenzie reads Marx as arguing for the claim that "machines make history" but not for "the autonomy of technical change." This position is quite similar to the one I will argue characterizes Polanyi's understanding of determinism, and thus the inspiration for transitional temporality. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this connection.

More generally, the whole notion of “modernity” tends to lead us to think teleologically. Some aspects of the world are throwbacks, holdovers, or fetters; others are progressive, forward-looking, on the path towards the next thing (for better or for worse). The same problems occur in the sociology of race; Seamster and Ray (2018) show how the assumption of racial progress underlies most contemporary research in the sociology of race, often leading to a misreading of evidence about the extent to which racial inequality persists or even deepens.

In sum, teleological temporality errs by assuming too fixed an endpoint for history, and thus reads history through the lens of a perceived inevitable finale, much as demographers “read history sideways” (Thornton 2001) when they treat poor countries as if they were inevitably going to follow the path that rich countries took with just a few centuries' delay. While experimental temporality assumes that contingencies are irrelevant because the causal structure of history is unchanging, teleological temporality assumes that contingencies are irrelevant because transformations in those causal structures are pre-ordained. And thus while experimental temporality rules out agency by virtue of the lack of change, teleological temporality rules out agency on account of the predetermined character of the important changes. Without meaningful contingencies, there's simply nothing for agents to be agentic about.

Eventful Temporality

The final mode that Sewell elaborates is eventful temporality. This mode elaborates on prior work emphasizing the importance of theorizing events, and especially the possibility for eventful historical accounts to overcome tensions between action and structure (Abrams 1983: 192). Sewell's definition is worth quoting at length:

Eventful temporality recognizes the power of events in history. Social life may be conceptualized as being composed of countless happenings or encounters in which

persons and groups of persons engage in social action. Their actions are constrained and enabled by the constitutive structures of their societies. Most happenings reproduce social and cultural structures without significant changes... Events may be defined as that relatively rare subclass of happenings that significantly transform structures. An eventful conception of temporality, therefore, is one that takes into account the transformation of structures by events. (Sewell 1996: 262)

Sewell contrasts eventful temporality with both experimental and teleological temporality. While experimental temporality emphasizes uniformity of causal laws and independence of events, eventful temporality focuses on the heterogeneity of causal laws (things work differently at different points in time) and interdependence (events at time two are partly a function of what happens at time one). Similarly, while teleological temporality denies the importance of contingency and assumes a fixed endpoint, eventful temporality allows for radical contingency.

In a teleological mode, no individual decision can alter the course of history; in eventful temporality, it very much can, if the decision happens to be made during an event. Sewell's (1996b) own analysis of the storming of the Bastille in the French Revolution is probably the most famous "eventful" argument. In this account, while structural forces may have partially determined that a revolution of some sort would occur, the particular, contingent choices made during important events shaped exactly what the revolution would mean, and how it would transform the structures of French society. During an event, the rules of the game are up for grabs. Agency happens during events – the particular, contingent decisions actors make establish new rules of the game for the next period of relative stability. Contingency and agency go hand in hand.

This model has come under significant criticism (e.g. Steinmetz 2008, Martin 2018). Here, I focus on just two questions that the model leaves unaddressed: why do events happen when they do? And what might agency look like *between* events? Answering these questions points to a fourth potential approach to time: transitional temporality. Here, I turn to the work of Karl Polanyi for inspiration.

Polanyi and Transitional Temporality

I argue that Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation* offers an intertwined pair of answers to the question of the timing of events and the character of agency between events. Polanyi's comparative analysis of the enclosure movement and Poor Law reform illustrates what I will call *transitional temporality*. Like teleological temporality, transitional temporality assumes a fixed outcome to some process of historical change. Unlike teleological temporality, this outcome need not be toward some ultimate or final end, but may instead take the form of the unfolding of some local process which was in turn set in place by some prior contingent process. In other words, transitional temporality is at least roughly compatible with eventful temporality, but it focuses on the periods *between* events rather than the events themselves.³ Polanyi's version particularly emphasized how the rise of large-scale machinery called forth particular changes; in this sense, Polanyi offers at least a weak form of technological determinism in which "machines make history" (MacKenzie 1984: 474). Yet Polanyi *also* embraces contingency and agency. Polanyi resolves this contradiction by focusing on how actors can affect the *rate of change* and in so doing potentially bring about or prevent events, in Sewell's sense.

To make this case, I will focus especially on Polanyi's (largely ignored) analysis of the enclosure movement. I should note that I am not arguing that Polanyi's analysis of this movement is *correct* - I am not a historian of early modern England, and do not wade into the extensive secondary literature on this period (see Christophers 2018 for a recent review). Rather, my point

³ In the postscript to the 2005 reprint of "Three Temporalities", Sewell (2005) himself notes that his original argument failed to sufficiently showcase how eventful temporality handles questions of directionality and macrohistorical dynamics. As a first step in addressing these questions, he offers a reading of Mann's work on the emergence of civilization as an eventful alternative to Wallerstein, one combines an emphasis on contingency and eventfulness in initial conditions with directed tendencies, e.g. "for power resources to increase" (Sewell 2005: 123). In this sense, then, my argument is intended as more of an extension and less of a critique of Sewell, one that highlights different forms of contingency and agency and draws out certain possibilities from meshing together a version of directionality in social history with Sewell's attention to agency. I thank a reviewer for this point.

here is to unpack the logic of the argument, and in so doing, hopefully recover something of use no matter what we make of Polanyi's empirics. Similarly, I am not arguing that Polanyi *exclusively* employs a transitional temporality approach, but rather that this approach best characterizes his historical account of enclosure and his comparison between enclosure and Poor Law reform.

Very briefly, Polanyi argues that the 19th century saw the rise of a "market system", including an intendedly (but not actually) self-regulating economic sphere where action was motivated by hunger and gain. Polanyi shows that such a self-regulating sphere was novel and *utopian* (Block and Somers 2014). This market system required that all major factors of production be commodities, that is, be produced for sale on the market, and thus capable of being regulated by the market system itself. Paradoxically, the three most important factors of production - land, labor, and money - were not produced for sale on the market and they were thus, at best, fictitious commodities. Polanyi argues that the attempt to let the market regulate all three eventually led to the collapse of the 19th century market system in the early to mid-20th century. Although the Gold Standard (and more broadly, finance) plays a central role in this narrative of collapse, Polanyi spends most of his historical discussion on the enclosure movement (which tried to commodify land) and Poor Law reform (which tried to commodify labor).

Polanyi argues that both enclosure and Poor Law reform were, in some sense, inevitable. Polanyi's argument reads similarly to MacKenzie's (1984) interpretation of Marx as a kind of soft technological determinist, one who emphasized how technology can transform social relations without necessarily arguing that technology itself developed autonomously from social forces. Specifically, Polanyi argued that machinery required a market system, and the market system in turn required commodities:

Since elaborate machines are expensive, they do not pay unless large amounts of goods are produced. They can be worked without a loss only if the vent of the goods

is reasonably assured and if production need not be interrupted for want of the primary goods necessary to feed the machines. For the merchant this means that all factors involved must be on sale, that is, they must be available in the needed quantities to anybody who is prepared to pay for them. (Polanyi 2001: 43)

Collectively-held land and support for the unemployed were direct threats to the commodification of land and labor and thus had to be eliminated. And yet, Polanyi argues that only one of these movements caused society-imperiling chaos. Although the enclosure movement involved dislocation and a change in the structure of agriculture and markets for land, the movement played out slowly. The enclosure movement was not characterized by one or a small number of events, but rather by a continual tug-of-war resulting in a gradual transition.

Polanyi argues that this slow rate of change allowed society to adapt to enclosures - and that, in particular, the state played a beneficial role precisely by modulating this rate of change. Polanyi describes how the Kings of England fought for 150 years to slow the rate of enclosure, first against lesser nobles, and then against merchants:

The fabric of society was being disrupted; desolate villages and the ruins of human dwellings testified to the fierceness with which the revolution raged, endangering the defences of the country, wasting its towns, decimating its population, turning its overburdened soil into dust, harassing its people and turning them from decent husbandmen into a mob of beggars and thieves. Though this happened only in patches, the black spots threatened to melt into a uniform catastrophe. The King and his Council, the Chancellors, and the Bishops were defending the welfare of the community and, indeed, the human and natural substance of society against this scourge. With hardly any intermittence, for a century and a half-from the 1490s, at the latest, to the 1640s they struggled against depopulation. (Polanyi 2001: 37)

By struggling - successfully! - to slow the rate of change, the Kings of England prevented an event from occurring, that is, they prevented sudden and dramatic changes of the sort associated with the repeal of the Poor Laws:

Yet, but for the consistently maintained policy of the Tudor and early Stuart statesmen, the rate of that progress might have been ruinous... For upon this rate, mainly, depended whether the dispossessed could adjust themselves to changed

conditions without fatally damaging their substance, human and economic, physical and moral; whether they would find new employment in the fields of opportunity indirectly connected with the change; and whether the effects of increased imports induced by increased exports would enable those who lost their employment through the change to find new sources of sustenance. (Polanyi 2001: 39)

In contrast, Polanyi argues that Poor Law Reform was a disaster, in part because the transformation was so sudden:

Improvements, we said, are, as a rule, bought at the price of social dislocation. If the rate of dislocation is too great, the community must succumb in the process. The Tudors and early Stuarts saved England from the fate of Spain by regulating the course of change so that it became bearable and its effects could be canalized into less destructive avenues. But nothing saved the common people of England from the impact of the Industrial Revolution. (Polanyi 2001: 79)

Polanyi's analysis of the Speenhamland system - which we now believe to be quite flawed (see Block & Somers 2003 for a loving but critical discussion) - argued that the system was unstable and immiserating. Its repeal was thus inevitable and not wholly bad. But the way that repeal happened was neither inevitable nor desirable. The Poor Laws were not just ended, they were ended abruptly. And therein lay the problem: "the abruptness with which an institution of old standing was uprooted and a radical transformation rushed into effect." (Polanyi 2001: 86) There was, for example, no time for workers to organize and acquire a class consciousness, to match the organization and consciousness of the employers. The problem was not just that the market economy required labor to be sold as if a commodity, but that the transition to it happened so quickly because it began when the Liberal Creed (what Block and Somers [2014] call "market fundamentalism") had taken over, and so there were no Tudor-like rulers left to slow things down.

In sum, I see in Polanyi's comparison of enclosures and Poor Law reform four features which we might usefully identify as constituting the transitional temporality approach. First, history sometimes has a direction (if not an ultimate end), and structural transformations occur as we head

in that direction. Second, the rate of change with which those transformations take place is not itself inevitable. Third, the rate of change can be controlled and actively contested. Agency consists of actions taken to speed up or slow down an ongoing transformation and in so doing may bring about or prevent a set of occurrences perceived of as an event. Transitional temporality bears similarities to Pierson's (2004) account of long-term processes, but while Pierson tends to assume that some processes are inherently long-term (such as demographic trends), transitional temporality asks precisely how and why a process become long (or short) term.⁴ In Polanyi's narrative, the state played a particularly important role, slowing down enclosures into a gradual transition while bringing about an event with the sudden elimination of the Poor Laws. Fourth, and finally, the social consequences of those (contingent, agentic) decisions to alter the rate of change are potentially dramatic.

Discussion & Conclusion

In the above sections, I identified a fourth mode of temporality, *transitional temporality*, that offers one approach to understanding agency outside of the context of events and how that agency may help explain the timing of events. Through a reading of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, I identified four features of that mode: locally deterministic directionality, contingent rate of change, the potential for agency to affect the rate of change, and the social importance of the rate of change. For a transitional temporality approach, the relevant questions include: How fast does change occur? What actors and institutions affect that rate of change - increasing or decreasing it? How do individuals and societies grapple with that rate of change? When does gradual change erupt into an event?

Although I derived my understanding transitional temporality from a close reading of Polanyi's

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the relevance of Pierson's work on long-term processes.

historical narrative, I believe we can identify elements of this approach in a diverse range of literatures and empirical settings which have not previously been linked together. I offer four brief examples. First, scholars of contemporary Korea have described its historical development as undergoing "compressed modernity" (e.g. Kyung-Sup 1999), moving through a predefined sequence of transformations at a faster pace than comparable countries.⁵ Second, we can see similar dynamics in debates over demographic transition theory and fertility dynamics in China following the one child policy, which transformed a predicted gradual decline in fertility into a sharp political event (e.g. Feng 2011). Third, research on deindustrialization (understood as a decline in manufacturing employment) showcases heterogeneity in the speed and extent of job losses in different countries and regions, even as the fact of automation-induced declines in employment is presumed as largely overdetermined (e.g. Rea and Hirschman 2019). Fourth, and finally, discussions of climate change assume that a transition away from fossil fuels is inevitable, but that the rate at which such a transition occurs is the product of intense agentic contestation which will determine the extent and distribution of loss (Elliott 2018). Identifying shared aspects of these conversations may suggest further elaborations of transitional temporality and, in turn, may offer new insights into the particulars of each case.

Beyond its potential utility in analyzing other cases, there are at least three lessons we can derive from Polanyi's particular vision of transitional temporality. First, to the extent we find Polanyi's account compelling, we should revisit Sewell's (1996: 263) dismissal of "surface" contingencies. Sewell writes:

For example, a teleological Marxian account might argue that the particular situation in which a conflict between workers and bourgeois occurs may affect the outcome of their struggle and may even result in a local victory for a retrograde form of social organization, say, for handicraft over factory production. But no

⁵ I thank Paul Chang for this suggestion.

combination of such local victories can "turn back the clock" definitively. The built-in directionality of underlying causal forces guarantees that local variations are mere surface perturbations with no long-term effect on the course of history. (Sewell 1996: 263-264)

One of the main differences between transitional and teleological temporality lies in that word *mere*. Put another way: For Polanyi and those approaching history through the lens of transitional temporality, a social transformation that takes a century to transpire is fundamentally different from that "same" transformation occurring in a decade. Contingencies that alter the rate of change fundamentally alter the character of that change. Yes, at the end of the enclosure movement, land was (partially) commodified, and sold on the market. But society had generations to adapt to that transformation. As a result, the enclosures were not a disaster (in Polanyi's reading). In contrast, the immediacy of Poor Law Reform yielded (again, in Polanyi's eye) immense human misery that could have been avoided with a slower transition to commodified labor. As Polanyi himself argued:

Why should the ultimate victory of a trend be taken as a proof of the ineffectiveness of the efforts to slow down its progress? ... That which is ineffectual in stopping a line of development altogether is not, on that account, altogether ineffectual. The rate of change is often of no less importance than the direction of the change itself; but while the latter frequently does not depend upon our volition, it is the rate at which we allow change to take place which well may depend upon us. (Polanyi 2001: 39)

Inspired by Polanyi and by MacKenzie's (1984) more nuanced reading of Marx's determinism, it may well be worth asking if Marx himself could be reconsidered through the lens of transitional temporality. Perhaps Marx, at least in some writings, projects the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism. But perhaps he also believes that motivated actors – philosophers, revolutionaries – can precisely alter that rate of change, and in so doing the lives of generations that might have otherwise continued to suffer under capitalism.

Second, and related, transitional forms of argument are useful for thinking about the role of

the state and contemporary technological and ecological developments. Agency may be found precisely in the delay of the inevitable. Historically, and perhaps in the future, the state is the most likely candidate for that form of agency (though one could also imagine revisiting the Luddites as a source of inspiration, see e.g. Anderson 2017). Debates surrounding the “Precautionary Principle” (which cautions against rapidly introducing technological innovations that have the potential to be irreversible) might be usefully understood as part of the politics of transitional temporality. Again, back to Polanyi:

A belief in spontaneous progress must make us blind to the role of government in economic life. This role consists often in altering the rate of change, speeding it up or slowing it down as the case may be; if we believe that rate to be unalterable - or even worse, if we deem it a sacrilege to interfere with it - then, of course, no room is left for intervention. (Polanyi 2001: 39)

Finally, Polanyi offers a model for resignation matched with action that may be uniquely valuable in our contemporary moment characterized by the omnipresence of loss (Elliott 2018). The last chapter of *The Great Transformation* takes on the question of “Freedom in a Complex Society.” Polanyi argues that we must resign ourselves to the existence of power and thus limits to human freedom as classically construed. And yet, having resigning ourselves to power does not mean abandoning action:

Resignation was ever the fount of man's strength and new hope. ... He resigns himself, in our time, to the reality of society which means the end of that freedom. But, again, life springs from ultimate resignation. Uncomplaining acceptance of the reality of society gives man indomitable courage and strength to remove all removable injustice and unfreedom. (Polanyi 2001: 268)

I read this passage both as a narrow call for a social democracy or welfare state of the sort that obtained in much of Europe and the United States in the mid-20th century and also as a broad reminder that one can accept a deterministic trend and yet still fight to “remove all removable

injustice and unfreedom” in how that trend manifests.⁶ The next century will see massive climate change, and also massive economic disruption rooted in technological change. Both of these trends feel inevitable. But what cannot be avoided can be delayed, smoothed out, and made to serve society over generations rather than destroying it in short bursts.

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⁶ The political implications of Polanyi’s understanding of freedom and the reality of society are controversial among scholars. For alternative readings of these passages, and the politics of the Great Transformation more generally, see Thomasberger (2005), Block and Somers (2014), and Lacher (2019).

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