

**HOW TO BECOME A POST-CRITICAL POLICY DEVELOPER
IN A CRITICAL RATIONALIST SOCIETY**

Both Michael Polanyi and Karl Popper play an important role in the 20th century philosophical and societal thought. Although their background and course of life (sufficiently affluent liberal thinkers from the Austro-Hungarian empire by descent, born in almost the same decade, having a keen interest in the philosophy of science and social issues, forced to leave their homeland as a totalitarian regime emerged, authoring ground-breaking works in the philosophy of science and social affairs etc.) was rather similar just like the core results of their works (criticism of positivism and dogmatism, advocating for an open and liberal society), they are hardly considered as “allies” in their pursuit for the same ends. Although commencing from almost similar and comparable premises with resulting in like-minded suggestions, the approaches (“critical rationalism” and “post-critical”) could almost be classified as contradicting each other. This is especially apparent in the epistemological context of how we acquire new knowledge and use it, in particular with the aim of shaping the societies we live in. The paper tries to analyze and compare the approaches advocated by Polanyi and Popper for evoking societal reforms (afterwards “policy making”) focusing at the question “what are the epistemological grounds for launching the initiative (reform) and how it should be implemented”.

Polanyi and Popper both acknowledge that institutions and social phenomena are by and large spontaneous orders that emerge as the result of a self-organization, for example “*only a minority of social institutions are consciously designed while the vast majority have just “grown”, as the undersigned results of human actions*” (viide) or “*... the activities of scientists are in fact coordinated ... We may call this a coordination by mutual adjustment of independent initiatives - of initiatives which are coordinated because each takes into account all the other initiatives operating within the same system*” (viide). The conception of self-organization – as the way of the world opposed to that of “organization” –has been noted already by the ancient philosophers (Heraclitus), developed later for the societal context (Bernard de Mandeville, Adam Smith, Austrian school of economics – especially Friedrich Hayek’s terms of “catallaxy” and “spontaneous orders etc) and also for the ϕ -sciences (viide?) (Ilya Prigogine, Gordon Pask etc). Perhaps the difference between organization and

self-organization is best expressed by the Estonian philosopher Leo Näpinen: “... *the term organization expresses the relationship between three inseparable terms: organizer (man, society or other external agent) – organizing (process directed by conscious activity or regulated by external factors) – organization (result). The term self-organization shows the relationship between the terms self-organizing (process that takes place either outside conscious activities or external ordering impact) – organization (result)*” (Näpinen 1993: 379-380) and graphically depicted as

Organizer -> Organizing → Organization

Self-organizing → Organization

An aspect that is often by-passed even while studying the various aspects of self-organization in the society is that of „time”. Without delving deep into the philosophical representations of the nature of time the theoretical „societal organizer” (i.e. policy maker) may try to disregard the time factor and start from – as he sees it - a blank sheet and aspire for complete aloofness of the policy from historical developments. In this case, the activities of the policy maker take usually place at two levels: developing a blue-print for the utter and complete restructuring of the society at once (we shall address this issue below) and vehemently disagreeing to be “standing on the shoulders of giants”. The latter notion is usually especially embarrassing for the “organizers” (add) and they condemn the past – or „tradition”, in the terms of Polanyi and Popper –and with that also the self-organizing nature of the world and societal institutional development.

Although Polanyi (as well as also Popper) was mainly concerned with the societal developments on the large scale and the oppressive and repressive (totalitarian) regimes that were forcefully put into practice in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. Writing in 19xx (On the Modern Mind, p20, viide) he happily praises the condemning of the Stalinist state in 1956 and the revolution in Hungary that “was fought to gain recognition for the reality of intangible things; of truth, of justice, of moral and artistic integrity”. He was, of course, right, but it seems that Polanyi thought the Soviet system to collapse quicker than it actually did and he did not consider the ability to the underlying ideas also to spread into Africa, Asia and

Southern and Latin America. This does not make his arguments less valid or valuable also for the contemporary democratic societies (where the “fear” of the unknown future has increased the volumes of doubt and skepticism expressed), but accounts for him not tackling the societal institutional development or policy making in the modern world.

So what is societal institutional development or policymaking? Public policy as defined by Larry N. Gerston is “*the combination of basic decisions commitments and actions made by those who hold or influence government positions of authority.*”¹ Generally speaking policy-making should, correspondingly, be a set of activities aimed at striving to achieve the policy aims in an organizing context. Any policy is either a conscious attempt to reshape the existing institution (that evolve in parallel also as self-organizing entities, consider, for example, the British parliament or the Union movement) or institutionalize those that have emerged spontaneously (phenomenon of sharing economy such as Uber or Air B’n’B). Although policies differ by range, scale or effect, the policy making mechanisms are almost similar. We shall not pay attention to issues such as how the policy making institutions work, role of Parliament and public, checks and balances etc, but concentrate on the arguments and justifications in the policy making context of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). It is a practical case of modern policy making where there is a need to bridge a gap between science and humanity and where our moral passion for betterment of the society conflicts with our scepticism (as Michael Polanyi puts it [...] ‘*in a pursuit of a moral purpose, namely of a relentless intellectual honesty*’²).

Throughout the centuries plants with the most desirable traits have been chosen for breeding the next generations of food and feed: to increase resistance to environmental pressures and diseases, to increase yield or even simply to enhance our aesthetic pleasures. The scientific observations and experimentations dating back to the beginning of 18th century have been made possible due to the naturally occurring variations in the genetic make-up of plants. Scientific progress has enabled to modify the genetic make-up of living cells and organisms using gene technology and today we find on the markets genetically

¹L. N. Gerston *Public Policy Making. Processes and Principles*. Third Edition Routledge. New York 2015 (p.7)

² *On the Modern Mind*

modified (GM) food or feed that consist of genetically modified organisms (GMO-s) or are produced from GMOs.

The discussions related to the production and use of GMOs is rather heated. In the policy making context (both in USA and European Union) the pro and con arguments are a combination of values and moral judgements backed up by scientific research. The utilitarian, deontological and value ethics based arguments that are presented in the policy making process clash or at least contradict with each other (e.g. *“the world famine can only vanquished with the help of GMO-crops”* (justice and positive welfare argument), *“the bio-diversity of the nature will be endangered by unknown consequences of GMO production”* (freedom / liberty argument), *“we do not know how use of GMO-s impacts our health”* (negative welfare argument)) etc. Scientific research is respectively fragmented and carried out along the lines of values and judgements (the results are valid and scientifically correct, but its focus varies at different issues).

According to Nico Krisch (2009, p 3)³ the most prominent conflicting approaches [for policy- and decision-makers] in the GMO policy making context are based on the deeply held and personal convictions about risk, nature, and scientific progress. Krisch has classified them as “permissive” and “precautionary”. The former – or liberal – approach (mainly advocated in USA) states that the restrictions on the production, sale, and use of foodstuffs are justified only when there are *scientifically* proven risks for human health, the environment, or other goods (viide, allikas). The latter – or conservative – approach (an official policy in the EU expressed in the 2013 Lisbon Treaty⁴ - states that: *“Union policy on the environment shall aim at a high level of protection taking into account the diversity of situations in the various regions of the Union. It shall be based on the precautionary principle and on the principles that preventive action should be taken, that environmental damage should as a priority be rectified at source and that the polluter should pay.”*

³Kirsch N, (2009) Pluralism in Global Risk Regulation: The Dispute over GMOs and Trade. LSE Law, Society and Economy Working Papers 17/2009 London School of Economics and Political Science, Law Department

⁴Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union OJ C 326, 26.10.2012 <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12012E%2FTXT>

The aim of this paper is not to investigate the two stances presented nor have we the scientific competence to do it. But what is important in the current context is how science-based disciplines (what genetics and biology definitely are) and their specific research problems (modifying organisms genetically) are in the policy making process supported or criticised by personal and value-based judgements. The European Commission has gone even further and launched a communication document on when and how to use the precautionary principle⁵. In other words it has prescribed certain values and respective behaviour for politicians and policy makers in the EU how to assess, appraise, manage and communicate risks that science is not yet able to evaluate fully. The use of the precautionary principle has evolved from being used in environmental policies to other areas and is now applied in all areas where human, animal or plant health and safety⁶ is concerned (for example the flight ban following the eruption of an Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010 was instituted by EU on the concern that it might endanger the passengers and as well aircrafts⁷).

All this leads to another interesting point, namely the formulation, prescription and imposing of collective values to the policy makers that are not universal (such as freedom or justice or truth). Leaving aside the ethical issues related, we shall view the process from a practical – or policy making perspective. The stance to pose common values and suggest respective course of action has not been successful - the attitudes in EU member states differ largely on growing and using GMOs in food and feed⁸. The policy making has also been hampered due to peculiar decision making in the EU that has resulted with “no opinion” by member states⁹ when changes to the legal framework have been initialised. The European Commission stepped back and suggested that member states will have a right to decide whether or not to allow cultivation of authorised GMOs in member state and that member states will have the possibility to restrict or prohibit the use of GMOs for food or feed in their territory and may opt out from allowing particular GMO to be used in their food chain. The parliamentary

⁵ European Commission (2000) ‘Communication from the Commission on the precautionary principle’, 2 February, Brussels, COM(2000)1.

⁶JaleTosun (2013) HOW THE EU HANDLES UNCERTAIN RISKS: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 20:10, 1517-1528, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2013.834549, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.834549>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸GMO Compass. Country Reports: GMOs in the EU Member States http://www.gmo-compass.org/eng/news/country_reports/

⁹European Commission 2015 Fact Sheet: Questions and Answers on EU's policies on GMOs. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-4778_en.htm

procedures that followed and only the partial acceptance of the proposals and their precise content are not in the scope of the paper. It suffices to say that in the process the European Commission has firmly held the position of ethical pluralist by declaring with its legal initiatives that all possible standpoints towards allowing, restricting or prohibiting cultivation and use of GMOs for food or feed are possible.

The case described above is a classical and practical case of policy making where the betterment of the society collides with relying on science and scientific skepticism. In practical terms this societal development attempt has by and large failed with no tangible outcome. This can be explained by the contradicting values and moral involved.

As a method for implementing “policy making” we have suggested and advocated project management that, if properly applied, would have its theoretical roots in the conception of “piecemeal social engineering” suggested by Popper and thus directly linked to the “critical rationalism” approach, combined with the overall self-organizing nature of the world and institutions involved. Any project (policy making initiative) is conscious attempt to change – or organize – the spontaneously evolving self-organizing system. The task of a project designer and respective manager is thus to bridge the gap between the two incommensurable conceptions of organization and self-organization (meie viited). The strategic (or planning) phase of the project will be inevitably carried out following the conception of organization by developing and imposing a project plan that is a mental construction arbitrarily isolated from the actual world with specific restrictions imposed. The implementation phase will be, on the contrary, carried out in the “*real life*”, i.e. frames of a self-organizing world. Thus the best way for implementing any project or policy making initiative is to use the stepwise piecemeal approach, during which the newly emerged reality will be studied after each next step (activity) has been taken. Persons responsible have to evaluate the newly emerged reality and to adjust the activities outlined in the project plan to the situation. Additionally, there ought to be as little as possible restrictions to the nature and scope of possible changes.

Contemporary project management has evolved from practice and lacks the relevant theoretical explanations *why* it is being implemented in the way it is done. The practitioners’

community is worried and confused, as large-scale projects tend to fail, i.e. there are severe deviations from the initial project plan that occur in the project implementation phase and that hinder the project to achieve planned results or initial objectives, or the budget is overrun or results are changed considerably. For example, Bent Flyvbjerg notes that the budget estimates for large transportation infrastructure projects differ [increase] by an average of 44.7% for rail, 33.8% for bridges and tunnels and 20.4% for roads (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p 6). Brent M. Hansen (Hansen, 2006:73-84) notes in his study that roughly half of the projects are finished later than initially planned, in all projects the implementation plan of the project was changed at least once and the scope of the project was altered in 1/3 of the cases.¹⁰ However, the common approach has insofar been to concentrate on fine-tuning and improving the existing and commonly used methods and tools within the corpus of project management approach and not to ponder whether something is amiss in the proposed logic of the discipline itself – like, perhaps, lacking of a theoretical foundation.

Despite that we still consider project management approach for implementing policies, if carried out in accordance with the piecemeal social engineering principles in the frames of critical rationalism to be an effective and efficient measure for achieving societal reforms. This approach could be objected at two levels: firstly, it disables Marxian / Utopian-style large-scale reforms and secondly, as a method it is “free of any attached values”.

The first objection could easily be disregarded as the implementation of such reforms (although claimed to be initialized for the benefit of all) destroys the whole fabric of the society. **Lahja mote, täiendada!**

The second objection is directly related to the current paper and which we like to address: is the policy maker / project manager an utterly detached Weberian bureaucrat or is he a human person with “*tradition*”? Hereby we adhere even in the latter context for the policy maker to have certain Weberian characteristics, such as competence, sound mind, being not corrupted etc.

¹⁰ The scope of Hansen’s study was to investigate the impact of possible cultural differences on project management. As a result, no remarkable differences were found, which corroborates the point of view presented in this article.

By *tradition* we do not mean the policy maker's possible experience in the field (recommended, of course, but not required), but consider it epistemologically in the policy making process. Both Polanyi and Popper stress the importance of tradition:

- Polanyi. *"A society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition"* (viide)
- Popper: *"... by far the most important source of our knowledge – apart from inborn knowledge – is tradition"* (viide)

Although the quotations posed as such are rather similar, they embrace incommensurable differences in the context. Indeed, they both stress that a human being has tacit / inborn knowledge (we suppose that in the current context they could be equalized), that knowledge is attached to its "owner" and that a human being is not a Cartesian machine. Curiously enough – bearing in mind the context – Popper falls into the trap of organization while Polanyi retains the humane self-organization approach.

The descriptive distinction between organization and self-organization also contains the relation of "object" and "subject". In the organizing concept the "organizer" (object) organizes subjects according to his will to achieve the desired state of play (objective of a policy making initiative / result of a project). In the self-organizing concept there is no "organizer" to achieve the spontaneous orders. Philosophically this is explained by Martin Heidegger's conception of *"In-der-Welt-sein"* but also by Polanyi's *"in-dwelling"* (or even more – the *I-Thou* relation). VIIDE This distinction also applies for tradition that Popper sees as something open to be given in: *"... every bit of our traditional knowledge (and even our inborn knowledge) is open to critical examination and may be overthrown"*. VIIDE Although Popper does not make explicit claims what the "traditional knowledge" to be overthrown consists of – nor does he distinguish between different types of knowledge that may, perhaps, be excluded from this purge – we may, in fact, still safely assume that morale or values are only hopefully the aspects of knowledge he would consider as part of the knowledge to be retained.

Tradition for Polanyi – as we see it – could be an "evolving target", but by and large it is a stable *"post-critical"* ground based on universal Reason, Freedom and Justice, where these morale-

based fundamental principles in their original meaning and understanding are not “overthrown”. *“Thou shalt not kill”* is and remains valid.