

Karl Polanyi



A LIFE ON THE LEFT

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“In order to comprehend German fascism, we must
revert to Ricardian England.”

The oil industry: a “fantasy monster of modern capitalism. Like an iron worm, it’s impossible to injure; it’s a tank that crushes everything in its way.”
(‘Is there oil in Mosul?’ [‘Van-e Mosszulban petroleum?’])

“The shadow of economic development,” which
“silences rather than reassures us.”

Forms of thought in which “machine production” has become “a dogma,” one “that regards the unlimited expansion of material welfare as a natural law.”

“...one of the many moments when, in piecing together the jigsaw, some pieces don't seem to fit. Such puzzles and paradoxes provided the initial impetus for the writing of this biography, in part because to understand them requires a thinking through of Polanyi's life and times, but also because it is the tensions and contradictions in his personal commitments and his oeuvre that give them their engagingly maverick character. Polanyi was, for example, in love with a Bolshevik while spurning Bolshevism; he was a social democrat who disdained the social-democratic orthodoxy, and a liberal who charged classical liberalism with full responsibility for the collapse of its dreams. He was a humanist, in the sense that he held that anything that violates human dignity should be subjected to theoretical criticism and practical obstruction, and yet a steadfast defender of Stalin's regime in Russia. In his correspondence he can appear moralistic, not to say straitlaced, yet he was an eager reader of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and of his two most cherished Shakespeare poems, one was the uninhibitedly lustful Sonnet 129. He was a Christian who rarely if ever worshipped God, a modernist who immersed himself in study of the ancient world, and an ardent supporter of the peasant's cause who lived almost exclusively in sprawling conurbations.”

"One of the best biographies ever written of any intellectual emerging from the horrors of mid-twentieth-century Europe. It meticulously covers the whole ground—from the Jewish roots in Budapest through the First War, brilliantly reconstructs the milieu and debates of interwar Vienna, and adds enormously to our understanding of *The Great Transformation*. A compelling portrait, it is successful not just as an intellectual biography but as a personal one as well."

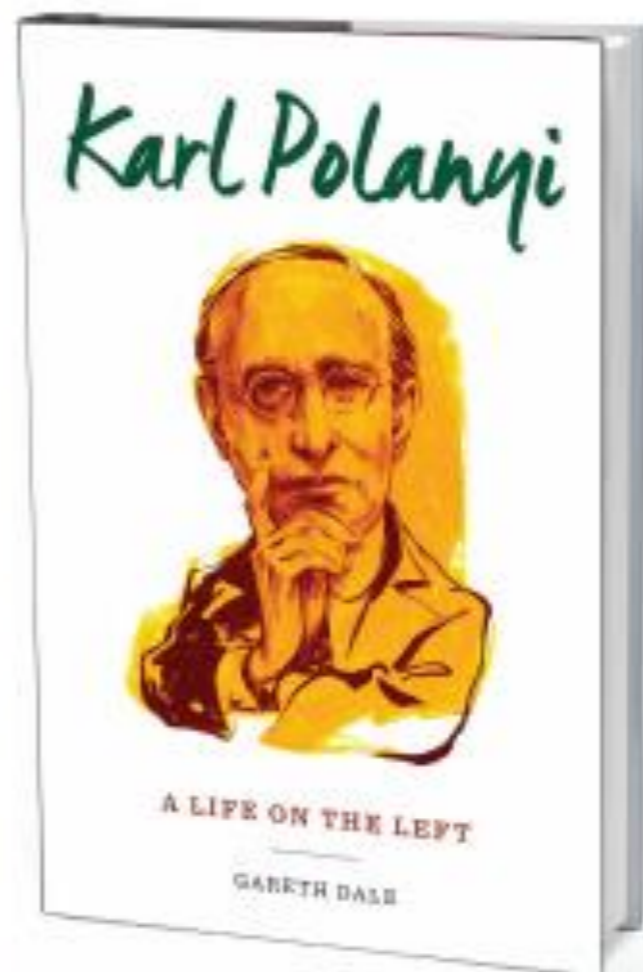
—John A. Hall, author of *Ernest Gellner: An Intellectual Biography*

"Here is the book the many admirers of Karl Polanyi have been waiting for: a vivid, thoroughly researched, and lucidly written intellectual biography that is worthy of its subject."

—Steven Lukes, author of *Power: A Radical View*

Karl Polanyi (1886–1964) was one of the twentieth century's most original interpreters of the market economy. His penetrating analysis of globalization's disruptions and the Great Depression's underlying causes still serves as an effective counterargument to free market fundamentalism. This biography shows how the major personal and historical events of his life transformed him from a bourgeois radical into a Christian socialist but also informed his ambivalent stance on social democracy, communism, the New Deal, and the shifting intellectual scene of postwar America.

The book begins with Polanyi's childhood in the Habsburg Empire and his involvement with the Great War and Hungary's postwar revolution. It connects Polanyi's idealistic radicalism to the political promise and intellectual ferment of Red Vienna and the horror of fascism. The narrative revisits Polanyi's oeuvre in English, German, and Hungarian, includes exhaustive research in five archives, and features interviews with Polanyi's daughter, students, and colleagues, clarifying the contradictory aspects of the thinker's work. These personal accounts also shed light on Polanyi's connections to scholars, Christians, atheists, journalists, hot and cold warriors, and socialists of all stripes. *Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left* engages with Polanyi's biography as a reflection and condensation of extraordinary times. It highlights the historical ruptures, tensions, and upheavals that the thinker sought to capture and comprehend and, in telling his story, engages with the intellectual and political history of a turbulent epoch.



GARETH DALE is senior lecturer in politics and international relations at Brunel University, London. His other books include *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market* (2010), *Karl Polanyi: The Hungarian Writings* (2016), and *Green Growth: Ideology, Political Economy, and the Alternatives* (2016).

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