

'Marketless Trading in Hammurabi's Time': A re-appraisal

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Abstract:

In this article I revisit Karl Polanyi's writings on ancient Mesopotamia. I begin by situating them in the context of his general approach to trade, markets and money in the ancient world. Next, I reconstruct his major theses on Mesopotamia, drawing upon his published works as well as unpublished documents in the Karl Polanyi and Michael Polanyi archives. Finally, I provide a critical assessment of the merits and demerits of his contribution, with reference to Assyriological research published in the decades that have elapsed since his death in 1964.

Karl Polanyi is known for three major contributions to the social sciences. Of these, the best known is his seminal thesis on the origins and evolution of the modern 'market system', which he expounded in *The Great Transformation*. His 'substantivist' economic anthropology also critical acclaim and excited considerable debate, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. His third contribution, on the comparative economic history of ancient and 'archaic' economies – pre-colonial Dahomey, ancient Athens and Mesopotamia – is less well known, except among the cognoscenti. And yet it has been influential, providing inspiration to the work of numerous classical historians and archaeologists, of which Moses Finley, Colin Renfrew, Carlo Zaccagnini, Michael Hudson, Johannes Renger and Mario Liverani are among the most distinguished.

In this article I revisit Polanyi's writings on Mesopotamia. I begin by situating them in the context of his general approach to trade, markets and money in the ancient world. Next, I reconstruct his major theses on Mesopotamia, drawing upon his published works as well as unpublished documents in the Karl Polanyi and Michael Polanyi archives, at Concordia University and the University of Chicago respectively. Finally, I provide a critical assessment of the merits and demerits of his contribution, with reference to a range of Assyriological literature published in the decades that have intervened since his death in 1964.

'Archaic' trade, markets and money

Between the publication of *The Great Transformation* and his death in 1964, Karl Polanyi devoted his energies to developing a comparative and non-ethnocentric 'general economic history,' a framework capable of making sense of modes of economic organisation even where systems of interconnected price-making markets are absent. The principal findings appeared in three volumes, two of which were published posthumously (Polanyi's single-authored *Dahomey and the Slave Trade; An Analysis of an Archaic Economy and The Livelihood of Man*) while the third, *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires*, was published in 1957 and comprised essays by Polanyi and his collaborators, including Leo Oppenheim.

The research programme that Polanyi and his colleagues at Columbia University developed in the 1950s singled out three institutions: trade, markets and money. These, they held, are the basic economic

institutions but also the most misunderstood. Because in modern times the three had merged into a single interlocking market system, historians tend to assume that the same triadic nexus applied in earlier epochs, and to assume markets to have been the generative and coordinating instance, with trade conceived of as a movement of goods through markets, facilitated by money as a means of exchange.¹ But rather than as a seamless whole, Polanyi suggests, trade, markets and money are best understood as discrete elements that are institutionalised independently of one another.²

Trade, for Polanyi, is defined broadly as “a method of acquiring goods which are not available on the spot.”³ Unlike piracy or plunder, what distinguishes it is its two-sidedness, and this is linked to its peaceful character. In market economies its prevalent form is ‘market trade.’ Because geared towards making a profit, it requires monetised accountancy. In low-surplus economies, by contrast, the typical form is gift trade. Organised ceremonially and often involving treasure, gift trade links partners in reciprocal relationships. The exchange is construed as an organic part of a wider web of reciprocal relations. In archaic trade, by contrast, trade is predominantly administered by states, or by semi-political bodies such as chartered companies. Prices and other terms are negotiated, but once a treaty is signed all bargaining ceases.⁴ Because the import interest is dominant, i.e. trade is principally concerned with the acquisition abroad of goods that are not obtainable at home, administered archaic trade is less influenced by cost differentials than is competitive trade in the modern world economy. Money was not necessarily involved at all – as witnessed in the imports into ancient empires of tribute in kind. Where it was, prices “were fixed largely by custom, statute, or proclamation, and perhaps should not generally be called prices at all”⁵ – as an alternative, Polanyi suggests ‘equivalents,’ a term that denotes agreed rates at which goods and services are exchanged but without implying either an exchange of equal values or the causality of autonomous forces of supply and demand.

Polanyi’s approach to money centres on a dichotomy between its traits in modern market societies, on one hand, and in ‘primitive’ and ‘archaic’ times on the other. In market societies money resembles writing and language in that it is “organized in an elaborate code of rules concerning the correct way of employing the symbols” – money-objects in the one case, sounds and letters in the other. Circulating throughout the economy it fulfils exchange, payment and other functions: it is ‘all-purpose’. The various money uses in *archaic and ‘primitive’* societies, by contrast, may be supplied by different money objects, “each of which may serve as money in a different way.”⁶ Such ‘special-purpose money’ measures and compares only a restricted assortment of goods and services on a common scale; it is not interchangeable and circulates in only part of the economy – accordingly, archaic economies tend to be multicentric, with two or more ‘spheres of exchange.’⁷ Primitive and archaic money, thus, may be described as ‘heterogeneous,’ in that its use in one role need not extend to another. Money in the form of prestige goods (e.g. valuables and ceremonial objects) may for example be deployed as a means of paying tribute but not as a means of exchange.

As regards Polanyi’s typology of markets, it too rests on an axial distinction: between *the* market economy – a self-adjusting system of markets that comes into being with the ‘fictional commodification’ of labour and land – and all others. In the latter, markets may exist, they may even be ‘integrated’ (rather than isolated), but they are not the decisive coordinating mechanism. Applying these methodological strictures to the historical record, Polanyi finds that although market places may have existed as early as the Neolithic, the *price-making market system* did not make its appearance until the first millennium BCE, in

¹ 56-13, 1963; 31-16/17, 1953, p.2.

² 22-3, 1947-57, ‘Notes – Economic anthropology.’

³ 31-16/17, 1953, p.12.

⁴ Polanyi 1968, p.105; Polanyi, 1977, p.276.

⁵ Polanyi, 1966, p.xix.

⁶ Polanyi 1968, p.178.

⁷ Polanyi, 1977, p.109.

Greece, and even then was swiftly supplanted by other forms of integration.

In archaic societies, those who depended for their livelihoods upon incomes generated through buying and selling on markets were greatly outnumbered by peasants whose access to a plot of land, or communal rights thereto, insulated them from any meaningful market dependence. Because their subsistence was not market reliant they were under scant compulsion to conform to market norms. They could take their surplus produce to offload on local markets but this is a different matter to producing for the market: they were likely to accept virtually any price for their wares, there being no advantage in keeping the surplus at home. Deliveries of goods would on occasion respond to demand but this would typically entail shortages attracting existing goods to a specific spot rather than anticipated demand determining their production. In Polanyi's terms, it would be misleading to suggest that a supply-demand-price mechanism functioned in archaic societies: no 'price-making market system' existed.

In making sense of Polanyi's account, a sharp eye on the various uses of the term 'market' is indispensable. The word can mean simply a market *place* – the location where people meet for the purpose of transferring goods. It is sometimes used broadly to indicate economic exchange motivated by individual gain. But its other meanings also include an aggregation of such sites into a system, involving repeated exchanges of commodities; and a mechanism that determines the production and distribution of resources through supply-demand feedback. (Polanyi refers to the latter as 'a price-making market system'). To confuse the presence of a market place with the existence of a competitive mechanism of the supply-demand type, he argues, is to make a categorical error. Whereas the former can be unearthed by the archaeologist,

a market mechanism is beyond the most nimble spade. While it may be comparatively easy to locate an open space where, sometime in the past, crowds were wont to meet and exchange goods, it is much less easy to ascertain whether, as a result of their behaviour, exchange rates were fluctuating and, if so, whether the supply of goods offered was changing in response to the ... up or down movement of those rates.⁸

Economic historians, he adds, should beware of deducing the presence of markets from cultural traits such as meticulous accountancy, mention of gainful motives, or vigorous competition. Their presence is no proof of the existence of functioning markets.⁹

Such, then, is Polanyi's general account of trade, markets and money in non-market societies, presented at a general level and without analysis of its strengths and weaknesses. In the rest of this article I examine its application to Ancient Mesopotamia, exploring the originality of Polanyi's project and assessing the criticisms that have been levelled against it.

Ancient Mesopotamia: Polanyi's account

The nature of economic life in the states and empires of Ancient Mesopotamia was long debated as one arena within the long-running *oikos* controversy. From the modernist perspective, which Polanyi regarded as a consensus, second millennium Babylon was, in his paraphrase, "a capitalistically-minded business community, in which king and god alike engaged in profiteering, making the best of their chances in lending money at usury and imbuing a whole civilization with the spirit of money-making over millennia."¹⁰ In partial contradiction to this, Max Weber's approach had centred on the theorem that the irrigation systems upon which Near Eastern agriculture relied required continuous supervision, a condition

⁸ Polanyi, 1977, p.124.

⁹ Polanyi, 32-6 (1953-55) 'On Forms of Trade in the Ancient Near East.'

¹⁰ Polanyi, 1957a, p.16.

that selected in favour of large, complex and unified bureaucratic structures capable of commanding forced labour on a grand scale – despotic states that tended to dominate economic life. Weber recognised, however, that the age of Hammurabi in particular witnessed a remarkable development of private trade, and he conceded that Babylonian society was from the outset “shaped by economic institutions propitious to capitalism.”¹¹

Following Weber, a number of Assyriologists in the interwar period – including Anton Deimel, with whose work Polanyi was familiar – advanced interpretations of the southern Mesopotamian states and empires that placed emphasis upon economic centralisation in the hands of super-*oikoi*: the temples and palaces. Although never quite becoming a new consensus, it was a revision that enjoyed its heyday in the mid-twentieth century, when Polanyi and Leo Oppenheim were researching their contributions to *Trade and Markets*. It was also extended, in a rather different direction, by Polanyi’s colleague, Karl Wittfogel. Borrowing Weber’s theorem on “hydraulic-bureaucratic official-states” he proposed that a dichotomy be drawn between Occidental freedom and Oriental despotism, a fissure that could be viewed as having carved its way throughout subsequent history. With this proposition, Wittfogel initiated the Cold-War polemic that elevated the ‘West’ as heir to Hellenic private economy and democracy in opposition to the stagnant, despotic and dirigiste empires of the ‘East.’¹²

Roughly speaking, this was the state of the debate when Polanyi commenced his studies of Mesopotamia. What was distinctive about his position is that it reconciles the evidence of a monetised trading culture with the primitivist model, thereby refuting the consensus supposition that the birth of civilization must have been coeval with the birth of market exchange. In the process he also repudiates the thesis that the redistributive systems of Mesopotamia were overseen by bureaucratic tyrannies. Although concurring with Wittfogel that the dawn of ‘the market’ was in Greece and not Babylonia, he points to the constitutional limitations on the exercise of power enjoyed in the latter, and adds that

the absence, or at least the very subordinate role, of markets did not imply ponderous administrative methods tightly held in the hands of a central bureaucracy. On the contrary, gainless transactions and regulated dispositions, as legitimised by law, opened up a sphere of personal freedom formerly unknown in the economic life of man.¹³

In opposition to modernist readings, Polanyi proposes three main theses, on trade, money and markets in Mesopotamia. The first, on trade, is specific to the Assyrian city of Assur and its trading colonies during the Old Babylonian period, evidence concerning which had recently to light in the form of the Kültepe archive. The new data thrilled Polanyi, for they appeared to reveal extensive trading activity on a nonmarket basis, with equivalencies established not through market competition but by custom or treaty. Embedded within a redistributive system, this differed “in all essentials” from market trade. Whereas the latter, considered in its elementary form, involves two actors and results in a negotiated contract, the early Assyrian trader operated “dispositionally,” by which Polanyi means that the defining element in his behaviour was “a sequence of one-sided declarations of will, to which definite effects were attached under *rules of law* which governed the administrative organization of the treaty trade he was engaged in.” Much Assyrian trade was state-controlled and where it was not it was strictly regulated, but this did not mean that it was bureaucratically administered or unfree. In Old Assyria, Polanyi explained, economic behaviour was regulated by law, which meant that there was

no bureaucracy, no administration, no command, no shifting of responsibility: instead the organization of trade is free, spontaneous, undirected *but* within an institutional frame which leaves it to the individual to act at will

¹¹ Weber, 1976, pp.157, 85, 104-5.

¹² Gress, 1998.

¹³ 42-14, n.d.; 49-4, 1955, Letter to John, 5 January; Polanyi, 1977, p.74

as long as he keeps to the law.

The Old Assyrian trader, in this interpretation, was a variant of the Akkadian *tamkārūm*: a salaried quasi-public individual acting on behalf of a state organisation and tasked with engaging in commercial exchange or, on occasion, with financing it. The *tamkārūm*, although a free agent, operated within the framework of the palace hierarchy, and engaged in risk-free trade – quite unlike market-oriented merchants who profit (or incur losses) in the competitive process of buying and selling.¹⁴

Polanyi's second set of arguments concern money and banking. Money in Mesopotamia, he suggested, was of a 'special-purpose' kind, with silver serving as a standard of value, barley for the payment of wages, rent or taxes, and barley, silver and wool as means of exchange. Banking centred upon the 'staple finance' practices of large estate managements, and included provision of harvest credit. Dealing with staples on a large scale involved inventories and accounting, for the purpose of budgeting, balancing, controlling, transfers and clearing in kind. These operations deployed money in the 'special-purpose' sense, with one staple selected as the standard of value. The essential point for Polanyi is that Mesopotamian banking developed not as an expedient in an exchange economy but as the means by which to make redistribution more effective – and as such, a chasm separates it from its modern counterparts.¹⁵

The third thesis, on markets, is presented in two quite different variants. In one, which I shall designate the 'qualified' version, Polanyi maintains that "Babylonian trade and business activities were not *originally* market activities."¹⁶ The other, which I shall identify as 'absolute,' goes much further, with the contention that from the Old Babylonian period right up until the fifth century BCE, Babylon "possessed neither market places nor a functioning market system of any description."¹⁷

Polanyi based his 'absolute' claim upon the researches of Ronald Sweet and Leo Oppenheim. In a letter to his brother Michael, he reports that Sweet had read 7,000 documents from the Old Babylonian period "but no case of profit made on price differentials has turned up yet."¹⁸ As to Oppenheim, his essay published in *Trade and Markets* focuses upon Southern Mesopotamian cities, which he characterises not as a 'redistributive' system centred on temple and palace, as Polanyi was wont to do, but, rather tentatively, as a binary system built upon the symbiosis between the communally organised city and of redistributive temple/palace institutions. Although Oppenheim was well aware that large-scale private merchant ventures were ubiquitous and that towns would typically possess a *kar* (or *karu*; 'harbour' or 'port'), a special extramural district in which merchants would gather to engage in long-distance trade, he also remarked upon the lack of a central market place, in contrast to the cities of medieval Europe.¹⁹ It is this observation that struck Polanyi. In a letter to a friend, he noted that Oppenheim was of the opinion that "archaeological evidence speaks against the existence of 'market-places' within the cities of the ancient Near East."²⁰ In correspondence with another friend, Walter Neale, he advances the substantially stronger claim that Oppenheim "recognized that no markets were present in Babylonia and that no word for 'market' existed."²¹ There is abundant evidence in the Polanyi archive that he saw this 'absolute' claim ('marketless Babylon') as a breakthrough discovery. For example, an editor at Routledge & Kegan Paul commented, in a letter replying to Polanyi, "I am delighted to hear of your good news about absence of

¹⁴ Polanyi, 1957a, pp.19, 22; 49-4, 1955.

¹⁵ Polanyi 1968, p.324; Polanyi, 1977, pp.116-7, 141.

¹⁶ Polanyi, 1957a, p.25. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Polanyi, 1977, p.59.

¹⁸ KP to Misi, May 1958, Chicago, Box 17 Folder 11.

¹⁹ Oppenheim (1957) 'A Bird's-Eye View of Mesopotamian Economic History,'. See also Oppenheim (1967) 'A New Look at the Structure of Mesopotamian Society,'; Oppenheim (1967) 'Essay on Overland Trade in the First Millennium B.C.,'

²⁰ Polanyi to 'Bill', 49-1

²¹ 52-3 To Walter n.d. The letter continues, "Leemans agrees. However, the latter insists that the *kar* was the market, i.e. locus where prices were formed and merchants met."

markets in Babylonia.”²²

Somewhat confusingly, although Old and Neo-Babylonia were essentially “marketless,” Polanyi admits of the possibility that “capitalist activities” were widespread. Following Weber, he defines these as activities “which, in a relatively peaceful way, employ economic means” to achieve “gain made in relationship to prices,” as contrasted with capitalist *economies*, which are defined by the presence of institutions dependent upon markets and by exchange as the dominant mechanism of integration.²³ Both Old Babylonia a century or two before Hammurabi and New Babylonia in the middle of the first millennium can be said to have hosted the first ever “successful periods of private business activity” organised along capitalist lines. That said, “capitalistic” could only be used to refer to Old and Neo-Babylonia in a qualified sense, “since the equivalencies from which profits sprang did not originate in *markets*.”²⁴

Assessment and critique (i): trade, money and credit

How well have Polanyi’s analyses of ancient Mesopotamian economies stood up in the light of subsequent scholarship? The short answer is, less successfully than his other forays into comparative economic history. Indeed, there is no doubt that two of his theses were at best overstated, if not downright false.

One of these, the ‘absolute’ formulation on ‘marketless Babylon,’ was contested from the start – even by Polanyi’s own research assistant, Moses Finley, who accused him of confecting the idea that new evidence had shown markets to have been absent. These supposedly new insights, he wrote Polanyi, “are exclusively your own, unknown to nearly all Assyriologists and shared by none” – apart from Oppenheim, and his view on the subject was tentative and off the record.²⁵ ‘Marketless Babylon’ is a thesis that can be swiftly despatched – although, as I discuss below, the same cannot be said of Polanyi’s more ‘qualified’ formulations on Mesopotamian markets.

Polanyi’s thesis on Old Assyrian trade – that it was conducted by *tamkārums* along non-market lines – has also proved susceptible to critique. Since his death, more of the Kanesh/Kültepe tablets have become available, and these appear to show that a very substantial portion of Assyrian commerce was conducted by merchants on their own account and for personal gain.²⁶ The fact that markets existed in Assyria where goods could be sold with profit, Klaas Veenhof proposed, “does not fit well into Polanyi’s system.”²⁷ For the Old Babylonian period as a whole, Polanyi’s conceptualisation of the *tamkārums* does not apply, argued John Gledhill and Mogens Larsen, for it is doubtful whether the trader in Mesopotamia was ever an official, in the sense of a person who, as a member of a bureaucratic organisation, acts on behalf of the state, drawing a salary and/or land.²⁸ The Assyrian *tamkārums*, they add, acted principally in response to changes in supply and demand. Polanyi’s suggestion that, given negotiated prices, trade was essentially risk-free is refuted by the numerous documented references to losses sustained – not to mention the letters from the wives of the Assyrian merchants at Kanesh which complain that their spouses were only interested in money.²⁹ What profit and wealth *meant* to the merchants and their wives is another matter. Mogens Larsen maintains that ‘filthy lucre’ was the merchants’ motivation, but was it conceived of as an end in

²² 50-1 8.3.57 letter from Norman Franklin to KP.

²³ Polanyi, 1977, p.59; Polanyi, 1957a, p.16; 31-11, 1955, ‘The Institutionalization of the Economic Process,’ 23-2, 1953, Notes on capitalism in antiquity.

²⁴ 31-11, 1955; 23-2, Notes on capitalism in antiquity, 1953; Polanyi, 1957a, p.17. See also Oppenheim, 1957, p.32.

²⁵ Finley, 1954, to Polanyi 07 June. I am grateful to Daniel Tompkins for providing me with a copy of this letter.

²⁶ Veenhof, 1977, p.117; Veenhof, 1995.

²⁷ Veenhof (1972) *Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade*, p.356.

²⁸ Gledhill and Larsen (1982) ‘The Polanyi Paradigm and a Dynamic Analysis of Archaic States’, p.205.

²⁹ Larsen (1982) ‘Caravans and Trade in Ancient Mesopotamia and Asia Minor’ p.893ff.

itself, a means for social advancement, or a guarantee of a secure and comfortable life?³⁰

What can be safely stated is that in Old Assyria the boundaries between public and private were rarely clear cut, and the *tamkārūm* was not a rigidly defined position.³¹ He could be a trader who travels with his merchandise, or a functionary whose task it was to facilitate trade – as banker or as merchant, or a moneylender who gives out commercial loans.³² That the role is best summarised as that of an independent merchant within a market system cannot be taken as given, for alternative readings are available. Mario Liverani, in particular, has argued that Assurian trade was administered, and that it is best understood as embedded within a redistributive economy. According to him, the Kanesh/Kültepe data reveal that trading operations were subdivided into three processes: the initial relationship between a temple or palace and its merchants, their activities after leaving their home base, and, finally, the settling of accounts between merchants and central agencies at the end of the process. In the intermediary stage merchants could indeed freely trade, and would play on price differentials to augment their individual gains. In the first and third parts, however, an administered relationship, using fixed values, obtained, with merchants receiving silver and processed materials from the central agency and returning after six or twelve months with the equivalent in finished goods or raw materials.³³

If one casts the net wider – in space or in time – other, more ‘Polanyian’, trading relationships have been recorded. Take for example the merchants at Nuzi discussed by Carlo Zaccagnini, who demonstrated a significant degree of independence but in the context of a professional and subordinate relationship to the palace.³⁴ Or the *dam.gār* of Ur III. Discussing Marvin Powell’s contention that these traders were independent and profit-oriented, Robert Englund has suggested that while this may conceivably apply in the case of Nippur, if so, it represented an outlier. In towns such as Girsu and Umma, by contrast, *dam.gār* were unambiguously employees of the state, and their capital was state property.³⁵ If we skip forward fourteen centuries or so we come to the Neo-Babylonian *tamkārūm*: a “slightly enigmatic” figure but one who, in Jursa’s considered judgment, tended to be state-sponsored³⁶ Finally, consider the Neo-Assyrian *tamkārūm* studied by Karen Radner. She presents these as royal agents, legitimated by the king and equipped with quasi-diplomatic status, who travel both near and far to furnish the monarch with items required for the orderly running of state affairs. Typically, they would belong to the household of a member of the king’s family or to that of a high official, and would likely be linked to the armed forces – some even commanded military personnel. Radner compares them to the likes of Francis Drake or Hernando Cortez, who enjoyed military and diplomatic competences granted by an imperial ruler, and were tasked to seek out and acquire the gold and other luxury items that their monarch required -- although the typical *tamkārūm*, unlike Drake or Cortez, could hardly be described a freebooter.³⁷

As regards Polanyi’s third thesis, I shall consider it in two parts: money, then banking. On money, it is clear that from around 2500 BCE in Babylonia (and several centuries later in Assyria) silver began to resemble Polanyi’s ‘all-purpose’ money in certain respects. But in which respects, and how rapidly, is open to debate. Some Assyriologists claim that silver, as far back as the third millennium, assumed the mantle of the principal definition of economic value, and that it was regularly exchanged for other commodities -- and not only in long-distance or high-value trade.³⁸ Others maintain that its ‘all-purpose’ nature only manifested

³⁰ Larsen (1982) ‘Caravans and Trade in Ancient Mesopotamia and Asia Minor’, p.42; Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.295.

³¹ Dercksen (2004) *Old Assyrian Institutions*, p.231.

³² Dercksen (1999) ‘On the financing of the Old Assyrian merchants’, p.86; Veenhof and Eidem (2008) *Mesopotamia: The Old Assyrian Period*, p.91.

³³ Liverani, 2005, p.53.

³⁴ Zaccagnini (1977) ‘The Merchant at Nuzi’,

³⁵ Englund (1990) *Organisation und Verwaltung der Ur III-Fischerei*, pp.16-17

³⁶ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.580.

³⁷ Radner (1999) ‘Traders in the Neo-Assyrian period,’ pp.101-3.

³⁸ Powell (1999) ‘Wir müssen unsere Nische nutzen: Monies, Motives, and Methods in Babylonian Economics,’ p.5. See also Charpin *et al.*, (2004)

itself within certain economic spheres. For much of the third millennium, they argue, economic exchange in southern Mesopotamia was mediated by a variety of forms of money in the 'redistributive' ration systems of temple and palace, and by various monies but also, and importantly, by small-scale barter at the local level.³⁹ A substantial part of rural rents, taxes and agricultural exchanges were paid with 'special-purpose' currencies (such as barley or dates) or in labour services, while hired labour was remunerated in fixed rations (of grain, oil or wool). Silver was employed for pensatory payments (payments by weight) and in the incurrence and discharge of debts, but was never coined, and in important areas – from village exchange to the prebendal system – it was marginal.⁴⁰ In Oppenheim's judgment, payments for real estate, slaves, goods and services during the Old Babylonian period appear to have been only rarely made in silver, even though prices were generally quoted according to that standard.⁴¹ Along similar lines, Mitchell Rothman maintains that tablets that record actual transactions almost never mention silver changing hands, unless silver itself was the object of exchange. Nor, he continues, "is there a standard of account in ancient Mesopotamia. ... In short, silver did not function as real money."⁴²

If monetisation was minimal until the beginning of the first millennium, between the eighth and sixth century BCE, that changed dramatically. Babylonia was now at the heart of an empire that drew large amounts of silver, by trade or by compulsion ("the spoils from Assyria, the tribute from Syria") from the entire Near East.⁴³ The enhanced surplus available to the Neo-Babylonian monarchy accelerated both monetisation and the spread of markets. Although the economy could arguably still be described as binary, the demarcation was no longer clear, at least not by the sixth century.⁴⁴ While some activities associated with the use of silver were exclusively conducted in that metal, it now played a role in all sectors, even the core areas of the redistributive institutional households. These were increasingly dependent on hired labour, their external economic exchanges were conducted chiefly in silver (most of it acquired via cash crop production), as were around a sixth or seventh of internal temple transactions.⁴⁵ In comparison with Old Babylonians, their sixth-century descendants were considerably more likely to use silver, with its greater use in market exchange (and no longer essentially of high-value items), in dowries, and with significant numbers receiving it as at least a component of their wage.⁴⁶ And yet, as A.C.V.M. Bongenaar has observed, it would be far-fetched to describe even Neo-Babylonian silver as 'all-purpose money', for, "contrary to present-day money, [it] was never a universally acceptable currency."⁴⁷

Turning to banking and credit, here too, Polanyi's propositions find some qualified support among contemporary Assyriologists. There is no doubt that he underestimated the role of private money-lending. Nonetheless, his contention that temple and palace institutions in the second and third millennia were the principal providers of harvest credit is not implausible. There is, moreover, little evidence either of productive loans to industrial entrepreneurs for achieving gain through the accrual of interest or of "a loan-market where supply and demand would have influenced the conditions for loans (e.g., interest rates, etc.)."⁴⁸ The rate of interest on silver loans was set by royal decree and remained fixed for over a thousand years, from Hammurabi through to Neo-Babylonia. Although in reality there was some fluctuation in interest on silver loans, and more on barley loans, across the centuries the rate was essentially static. Interest

Mesopotamien: Die altbabylonische Zeit, pp.900-909; Bongenaar (1999) 'Money in the Neo-Babylonian institutions,' p.162; Veenhof (1972) *Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade*, p.350.

³⁹ Milevski (2011) *Early Bronze Age Goods Exchange in the Southern Levant*

⁴⁰ van Driel (2002) *Evasive Silver*, p.328; Goldsmith, 1987, pp.10, 13, 145.

⁴¹ Oppenheim 1977

⁴² Rothman (2000) 'The Commoditization of Goods and the Rise of the State in Ancient Mesopotamia,' p.174.

⁴³ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, pp.777-9.

⁴⁴ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.500.

⁴⁵ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, pp.564, 570.

⁴⁶ Oppenheim (1977) p.87; Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, pp.668, 787, 810.

⁴⁷ Bongenaar (1999) 'Money in the Neo-Babylonian institutions,' p.174.

⁴⁸ Steinkeller, 2002, p.113; Hudson, 2002, p.18.

rates, Jursa points out, “were potentially subject to negotiation between the parties concerned, but custom and in part also interference by cities or the crown strongly promoted a standard rate.”⁴⁹ Financial instruments were largely limited to evidences of debt (i.e. claims and liabilities), while deposit banking and organised capital markets were noticeable either by their absence or by their rudimentary nature. Debts were non-transferable, banks did not engage in credit creation, and money was not potential credit but simply the means of denominating debts in terms of weighed pieces of metal to which a value was assigned. Even in first-millennium Babylonia, according to Jursa, only a modest proportion of private and institutional wealth was reinvested in the business economy -- ten or fifteen per cent is his estimate. Much institutional wealth passed through the commodity markets, but only rarely was it “fed directly into business ventures of any kind.”⁵⁰ And while credit for productive purposes was available, “the mechanisms which brought investors and businessmen together were as likely to have been social as strictly economic.”⁵¹

Assessment and critique (ii): markets

Having earlier swept aside Polanyi’s rash thesis on ‘marketless Babylon’, we may now turn to his ‘qualified’ claim – that markets, at least for long periods, were marginal to Mesopotamian economic life. The generality of this thesis means that it can accommodate the identification of specific markets, so long as they are minor relative to economic life overall. For example, Carl Lamberg-Karlovsky’s influential paper on the “market networks” that characterised the soapstone trade, although explicitly rebutting Polanyi’s ‘absolute’ claim, is not a clear-cut repudiation of his ‘qualified’ one. For, Lamberg-Karlovsky defines ‘market networks’ using such broad brushstrokes -- “institutionalized transactions of commodities and services channelled from an area of high supply to one of high demand”⁵² – that the same characterisation could apply perfectly well to non-market societies (for example, the Soviet Union). Even Polanyi’s ‘qualified’ claim, however, is contradicted by some economic historians, most famously, perhaps, by Morris Silver who contended that ancient Mesopotamia played host to “ubiquitous multinational firms” and “experienced lengthy and significant periods of *unfettered market activity*.”⁵³

Polanyians today would have to concede that Assyriological research in recent decades has revealed Mesopotamian economic processes and relations that would have surprised Polanyi (even when in ‘qualified’ mood), including sharp volatility of price fluctuations and – above all in the first millennium BCE -- a substantial degree of market activity, including by independent gain-oriented merchants, private land ownership and the free alienation of land, as well as the hiring of free labour on a significant large scale.⁵⁴

That said, talk of “unfettered markets” should be treated with caution. It appears to bear the imprint of the ‘economistic fallacy’ (also known as the catallactic fallacy), a concept that Polanyi introduces to account for the failure of contemporary scholarship to grasp the novelty of modern ‘market society.’ The fallacy consists in the assumption that the presence of a complex division of labour betokens market exchange, typically with the riders that humans are by nature market-oriented beings and that economic behaviour should be universally modelled as if it were market-oriented individual action. By way of example, consider the evidence Silver offers for free markets. After noting that Assur shipped around 1.6

⁴⁹ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.791.

⁵⁰ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.798.

⁵¹ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.791.

⁵² Lamberg-Karlovsky, 1975, p.345.

⁵³ Silver (1983) ‘Karl Polanyi and Markets in the Ancient Near East,’ p.795; Renger (1994) ‘On Economic Structures in Ancient Mesopotamia,’ Emphasis added.

⁵⁴ Zagarell (1986) ‘Trade, Women, Class, and Society in Ancient Western Asia,’

tons of tin each year – a volume which would require, to produce bronze, over 14 tons of copper – he ventures: “can we imagine that tin and copper in such quantities would have been mined in the absence of a market orientation?”⁵⁵

Assyriologists and Anthropologists sympathetic to Polanyi suggest that the answer to Silver’s question is ‘yes, of course!’ They draw attention to his tendency to infer institutionalised market behaviour from the sketchiest of data. Assyrian tin and copper could unquestionably have been mined in the absence of a ‘market mentality,’ and that Silver is unable to recognise this attests to nothing more than the power of “economic solipsism.”⁵⁶ What one misses in Silver’s arguments, observes Johannes Renger,

is a clear account or explanation of the criteria which could serve as proof for the existence of markets. The assumption that a simple reference to something sold or bought, to a hiring contract or a loan given is sufficient evidence for markets in credit, labor, land or commodities, respectively, is a completely unacceptable method of historical research.⁵⁷

Crucially, Silver fails to demonstrate that a market existed for the fundamental means of production: agricultural land. Much of the southern alluvium in the third and early second millennia was dominated by *oikos* economies, colossal bureaucratic temple and palace complexes that controlled not only distribution, but production too – with their own land, herds, and workshops.⁵⁸ While some sort of private landownership (if not necessarily of arable land), seems to have existed it was of marginal importance when compared with the two principal sectors of the economy, the institutional (temple and palace), and the (village-based) domestic and communal.⁵⁹

Even if one allows for the inevitable documentary bias towards the institutions that kept records, at least under the Ur III dynasty they controlled most productive land and it was not subject to free sale.⁶⁰ This was moreover, Renger has suggested, a regime that continued into the Old Babylonian period, “since in the territory of the kingdom of Larsa ... only a handful of field sales are attested from the period until records from this area cease to exist around 1720 BCE.”⁶¹ Although a different regime of land tenure existed in northern Babylonia, with greater scope for land rental contracts between private individuals, there is no definite evidence supporting the existence of a genuine land market with price-clearing markets at standardised prices set by supply and demand.⁶² The sale and purchase of land was rarely, if at all, a ‘modern’ market phenomenon involving buyers and sellers calculating income streams, capitalising them at the going rate of interest and deriving a fair price. Land sales did not occur ‘on the market’ at a price set by supply and demand within an institution of regular exchange. Instead they were occasional, and were often made under duress (for example, military attack or drought) or to relatives.⁶³

Of course, by the first millennium the picture had changed markedly -- as with money (discussed above). Babylonian fields and gardens in private hands could be freely bought and sold, and by the time of Nabonidus most of the temple’s arable land was farmed by sharecroppers and no longer by its own labour

⁵⁵ Silver (1983) ‘Karl Polanyi and Markets in the Ancient Near East,’ pp.810-11.

⁵⁶ Mayhew *et al.*, 1983. See also Robertson (1993) “On profit-seeking, market orientations, and mentality in the ‘Ancient Near East’”.

⁵⁷ Renger (1994) ‘On Economic Structures in Ancient Mesopotamia,’

⁵⁸ Pollock (1999) *Ancient Mesopotamia: The Eden That Never Was*, p.147; Dandamayev (1996) ‘An Age of Privatization in Ancient Mesopotamia,’ p.197.

⁵⁹ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.19.

⁶⁰ Lamberg-Karlovsky (1976) ‘The Economic World of Sumer,’; van de Mieroop (2002) ‘A History of Near Eastern Debt?’, p.66; Liverani (2005) ‘The Near East: The Bronze Age,’; Steinkeller (2002) ‘Money-Lending Practices in Ur III Babylonia’; Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.19.

⁶¹ Renger (1994) ‘On Economic Structures in Ancient Mesopotamia,’

⁶² Zaccagnini (1999) ‘Economic Aspects of Land Ownership and Land Use in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria from the Late Third Millennium to the Neo-Assyrian Period,’ p.342.

⁶³ Hudson (1999) ‘Methodology Discussion,’ p.457.

force.⁶⁴ Yet even now, Jursa has argued, the land market was not fully synchronised with commodity markets – it was subject to factors that did not affect them (and which remain poorly understood); and it was set within an essentially subsistence-gear economy in which, according to P. Vargyas, “only a fraction” of the product was brought to market.⁶⁵

In the light of the contributions over the last twenty years by Renger, Englund, Hudson, Liverani, Zaccagnini, and others, it appears that, the discrediting of Polanyi’s ‘marketless Babylon’ thesis notwithstanding, many of his ‘qualified’ formulations on markets were close to the mark. The economies of ancient Mesopotamia were geared primarily to subsistence production, in which the incentive to produce above one’s own consumption needs was weak, and this left relatively little surplus available for exchange purposes. Towns there were but their denizens typically owned plots of land outside, resulting in a snail’s pace expansion of town-village economic exchange.⁶⁶ Bulk trade there was, and standardised prices, but these did not respond to supply and demand in ways that reflected costs and consumer utility. Markets there were, but they were restricted mainly to goods (and in some cases slaves), rather than land or labour-power, and were not the primary determinants of the distribution of wealth in society. Manufacturers generally produced for known buyers in known quantities rather than competing on an uncertain market, and if their decisions were affected by price fluctuations the feedback mechanism did not operate with anything approaching the alacrity of its modern counterpart.⁶⁷ For much of Mesopotamian history, bureaucratic organisations kept a grip on arable land and water. In certain periods, corvée labour was in widespread use, for agricultural labour, brick making, and constructing canals and defensive installations.⁶⁸

An economic structure of this type underpinned cultural and ethical dispositions that were quite unlike those that prevail in market societies. A societal ethic of individual gain-seeking, Michael Hudson has argued, did not come into being, and personal wealth accumulation was widely distrusted. In archaic societies, including Bronze Age Mesopotamia, such tendencies were:

perceived to sow the seeds for economic polarization, and hence social discord and decay. ... Wealth was seen to make its possessors drunk with arrogance ..., addicting them to seeking riches without limit in predatory ways.

It was to avoid this form of egoism, he adds, “that social pressures led citizens to consume surpluses conspicuously in public feasts, gift-giving, funerals, and similar rites of passage.” In so far as market forces did make themselves felt they were, in the interests of social cohesion, repeatedly overridden by states on matters as diverse as credit, private wealth-seeking, and the prevention of creditors foreclosing on the land of insolvent debtors. In Hudson’s conclusion – a striking contrast to Wittfogel’s, but chiming with Polanyi’s – it was “the palace that played the role that most economists today assign to the private sector: preserving economic freedom for its citizens, a liberty that subsequently was lost in ‘the West,’ that is, in classical Greece and Rome.”⁶⁹

Babylonian privatisation and the uniquely modern market

Arguably, the weakest aspect of Polanyi’s approach to archaic societies is not his specific theses, some of which have been discussed above, but his general tendency to downplay their internal contradictions

⁶⁴ Jursa (1995) *Die Landwirtschaft in Sippar in neubabylonischer Zeit*,

⁶⁵ Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, pp.27, 32, 791, 798.

⁶⁶ Renger, 1994; Bedford, 2005, p.62.

⁶⁷ Rothman (2000) ‘The Commoditization of Goods and the Rise of the State in Ancient Mesopotamia,’ p.174.

⁶⁸ van Driel (2002) *Elusive Silver*, p.260; Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.660.

⁶⁹ Hudson 1996b, p.52; Hudson 2005/6.

which, as numerous critics have pointed out, leaves his framework ill-equipped to explaining socioeconomic change.⁷⁰ Polanyi's explanations of institutional change tend to rely too heavily upon comparative statics and *ad hoc* arguments, while, at a deeper level, unanalyzed concepts such as 'moral order' or 'custom' are smuggled into scheme, opening it up to the charge of functionalism.⁷¹ His schema, the historian of Antiquity Mohammad Nafissi has argued, conceives of patterns of pre-capitalist socio-economic integration "as harmonious entities immune to historical change," even, indeed, as manifestations of the 'unchanging essence of man as a social being.'⁷² As such, in Nafissi's rather polemical view, Polanyi's model is "pre-sociological" -- it expresses an essentially religious conception of humanity. The exception is the market system but it proves the rule, for in Polanyi's optic it does have historicity but this is regarded precisely as its flaw -- its dynamism is figured as destructive.

The same criticism, however, cannot be levelled against either Oppenheim or those more recent scholars, such as Hudson, Renger, and Liverani, who have contributed to a rehabilitation of Polanyian concepts within Assyriology. Oppenheim presents Mesopotamian history as anything but static -- he emphasises, for example, changes in the relative economic weight of temple and palace, in slave and serf production vis-à-vis hired labour, and in sales of land. He also draws attention to New Babylonian privatisation processes centred on the palace bureaucracy.⁷³ Hudson also examines the privatisation dynamic, but pushes it further back in time. Rather than constructing a dichotomy of 'redistribution' and 'market exchange,' he focuses upon the evolution of the latter from the former. By distributing goods at standard prices the Sumerian temples created conditions propitious to the emergence of independent merchants and market exchange.⁷⁴ Whereas Polanyi presumed that markets first emerged among military camp followers, foreign merchants and money lenders, Hudson argues that they arose on the fringes of the temple and palace complexes in Sumer and Babylon.⁷⁵ Rulers and their bureaucracies behaved simultaneously in public and private ways: their 'public' position could readily be transmuted into private advantage, with temple and palace officials exploiting their powers for personal material gain.⁷⁶ Endemic corruption underpinned a privatisation process that was initiated and propelled by ruling families, warlords and other powerful individuals at the apex of the social pyramid. 'Private' enterprise thus emerged from out of the 'public' sector: it developed at the top of society, as self-seeking proliferated among *tamkāru* who, in their official roles, belonged to the public bureaucracy.⁷⁷

Hudson's argument has been criticised, most assertively perhaps by David Warburton, who takes Hudson to task for assuming that property gradually moved from communal possession into royal hands, only then to be privatised. Warburton's case rests on three claims.⁷⁸ One is that records of purchase and ownership of agricultural land from Emar and Mari "would imply that the palaces of the second millennium BCE were purchasing private property which had been recognised as such." Secondly, data from those same towns "would imply that the ownership of grain lands may only have become a royal affair during the second millennium." Thirdly, "any large scale purchases of grain land during the third millennium" implies the existence of private ownership at that time,

and any purchases of grain imply private sales ... which would again imply private possession (even if as legally 'shared ownership') of land during the third millennium, and thus from the time of the earliest records.

⁷⁰ North, 1977, p. 715; Block and Somers, 1984; Nafissi, 2005; Cartledge, 1983.

⁷¹ Gledhill and Larsen, 1982, p.199.

⁷² Nafissi, 2005, p.165.

⁷³ Oppenheim (1964) *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, pp.85-6.

⁷⁴ Hudson, 1996c, pp.295-6. See also Zagarell, 1986.

⁷⁵ Hudson, 2000, p.317.

⁷⁶ Hudson, 2000, p.317.

⁷⁷ Hudson, 1996a, p.9.

⁷⁸ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.133.

The first two points are rather speculative and in any case do not seem to refute Hudson's. As to the third, Hudson would presumably reply that even though land during the Early Bronze Age could be sold, this was rare, and would typically have taken the form of a sale to a single buyer by multiple sellers who owned it in common.⁷⁹

Warburton's critique of Hudson is but one small sortie within a veritable campaign against Polanyi and all who have drunk at his (and Marx's) poisoned well. His critique demands a response. But it occupies a major portion of his tome, and space does not permit a full engagement. Instead, I shall restrict my critical comments to one concerning his scholarship, and one concerning the substance of his argument.

As regards the first, Warburton's *Macroeconomics from the Beginning* is imposing in its historical and disciplinary scope, and unquestionably erudite, yet one cannot but come away with the impression that he has not taken sufficient care in reading the Polanyi texts that he is subjecting to critique. Too many of his arguments move at once from summary exposition to outright dismissal, leapfrogging the sort of reflective engagement with the author's case that is the stuff of serious argument. For example, after introducing Liverani's thesis that the end of the Bronze Age witnessed "a transformation from palace-centered to commercial trading," he offers but a brace of facts -- "the princes at Dor, Byblos and Tyre still controlled trade during the early Iron Age, while private commercial activity was known during the Bronze Age" -- before proceeding to his sweeping conclusion: "there was therefore no transformation, on that level."⁸⁰ Warburton's *Macroeconomics* abounds with slippery argumentation and peremptory conclusion of this sort, and is peppered, moreover, with a series of claims that are egregiously false. For example, it asserts, with unabashed bluntness, that Polanyi not only erred in his interpretation of the data from Kanesh but based his "entire theory" upon this misinterpretation.⁸¹ A few pages later it claims that Polanyi held that the presence of non-market "forms of economic activity in antiquity demonstrated that markets did not exist," and that this was based on Polanyi's assumption "that the existence of the market would effectively eliminate" all other such forms.⁸² Warburton seems not to have grasped that Polanyi's 'mechanisms of integration' are ideal types, and that in actually-existing societies they coexist. Nor does he appear to understand the conceptual distinctions that Polanyi makes between 'market places,' 'price-making markets' and the 'market system.' (And that is despite the fact that Warburton himself feels the need to draw his own terminological distinctions -- such as that between "markets" and "market forces." The former "appear to be the only known means of distribution documented in human history" while the latter do not make their historical entrance until circa 1900 BCE.⁸³)

Moving on to substantive issues, I begin by noting a narrow patch of common ground between Warburton and Polanyi, *viz.*, that both delineate a very sharp disjuncture between contemporary market society and all that went before. On this, Warburton even gives Polanyi a collegial pat on the back: he, "and Finley, were clearly correct in noting that the ancient market failed to function as the market has in recent centuries." Insofar as it drew attention to this, "Polanyi's system served a useful purpose."⁸⁴ Where, for Warburton, are the differences between ancient and modern to be located, and how are they to be explained? One obvious difference is that whereas economic growth has been rapid in recent centuries, for the previous "5000 years [it] would appear to have been a barely recognizable fact of life, and generally exceptional for most of that time."⁸⁵ A principal cause thereof is the modern orientation to productive labour. "The ancients," writes Warburton, "did not hesitate to invest their surplus in 'unproductive assets'" (such as pyramids) whereas in the modern world "investment must be invested in 'productive assets'"

⁷⁹ See e.g. van der Meer (2004) *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC*

⁸⁰ Warburton (n.d.) 'Before the IMF: The Economic Implications of Unintentional Structural Adjustment in Ancient Egypt,'

⁸¹ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.177.

⁸² Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.181.

⁸³ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, pp.294, 355.

⁸⁴ Warburton (n.d.) 'Before the IMF: The Economic Implications of Unintentional Structural Adjustment in Ancient Egypt,'

⁸⁵ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.265.

(such as railways). The period since the Industrial Revolution is utterly unique in this regard. It is “the only period in the last half million years when it was assumed that all ‘work’ should be ‘productive’.”⁸⁶

But why should ‘moderns’ so assiduously invest in productive assets? The brunt of Warburton’s explanation for this focuses upon the decreasing cost of borrowing from that Europe enjoyed from the sixteenth century onwards. In that century the flow of bullion pressed interest rates downward, and this “meant that for the first time in world history it was possible to invest in manufacturing using borrowed money.”⁸⁷ Although Warburton attributes the Industrial Revolution to “the heroic success of European Genius in uniting the powers of the market and technology” the decisive factor, for him, is neither market expansion nor technological innovation but the low rate of interest, combined with investment banking.⁸⁸ The *sine qua non* of the economic growth and prosperity of recent centuries is not “the market.” It, after all, has existed since time immemorial. Rather, it is low interest rates and investment banking. Why low interest rates and ‘European Genius’ led to a productive orientation in the Netherlands and England but not, say, Spain he does not reveal.

Here is not the place to offer a critique of Warburton’s explanation of the great socio-economic rupture that originated in sixteenth century Europe. But space does permit me to draw attention to a brief aside that he makes. When discussing the comparative absence of productive (or “gainful”) employment in antiquity he notes that this was in part “because access to agricultural resources was available to a large proportion of the population.”⁸⁹ This is salient to the argument because it forms part of the explanation in Polanyi’s account of the uniqueness of the modern market economy. For him, the preconditions of a market economy are the commodification of labour and land and money.⁹⁰ Turning labour into a commodity transfers control over people’s livelihoods to “artificial” and volatile market forces.⁹¹ For the Marxist tradition, the question of access to agricultural resources is more central still. As Robert Brenner has (famously) argued, because the direct producers in pre-capitalist agrarian societies held direct access to their means of subsistence “the members of the class of exploiters (if one existed) were obliged to reproduce themselves through appropriating a part of the produce of the direct producers by means of extra-economic coercion.” In allowing both exploiters and producers direct access to their means of reproduction,

pre-capitalist property forms ... freed both exploiters and producers from the *necessity to buy* on the market what they needed to reproduce, thus of the necessity to produce for exchange, thus of the necessity to sell their output competitively on the market, and thus of the necessity to produce at the socially necessary rate.⁹²

In consequence, both groups were relieved of the imperative to cut costs so as to maintain themselves, and therefore of the pressure to continuously raise productivity.

The key to the emergence of capitalist society in C16-17, in this account, was not the ubiquity of merchant activity but the generalised commodification of land and labour, pioneered in the Netherlands and England, a process that brought into being, *en masse*, ‘free’ workers stripped of and from productive property and, to an increasing extent, deprived of access to the goods created by the interaction of social labour and nature.⁹³ From this angle it appears that the root cause of the difference between the conditions obtaining in modern market society and in the ancient Near East *does* lie in the nature of “markets,” rather than interest rates (or investment banking). In one case, the commodification of labour and land was peripheral. For the mass of producers, basic subsistence was underwritten by direct access to their own plot

⁸⁶ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.262.

⁸⁷ Warburton (n.d.) ‘Before the IMF: The Economic Implications of Unintentional Structural Adjustment in Ancient Egypt,’

⁸⁸ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.282.

⁸⁹ Warburton (2003) *Macroeconomics from the Beginning*, p.299.

⁹⁰ Polanyi 11-8 MotFS

⁹¹ Polanyi (1957b) *The Great Transformation*

⁹² Brenner, quoted in Callinicos (1987) *Making History* p.61.

⁹³ Zagarell (1986) ‘Reply,’ p.426.

or via communal rights to land. In the other, owners and labourers have no means of reproducing themselves other than by selling and buying. Money, generally acquired through the sale of labour-power, provides the necessities of life, and usurps nature as the essential immediate condition of human existence. For Polanyi, the uniqueness of modern market society is evident, above all, in the manner in which customs and values are so powerfully shaped by the imperatives that pulse from a distinct market sphere. Relieved of higher restraint, the market tends to influence everyday life in a much more assertive and overt manner than do the economic institutions of pre-modern societies.

Conclusion

As one would expect, new evidence and interpretations have substantially altered the Assyriological field that Polanyi was ploughing during the two postwar decades. How well does his contribution stand up in the light of the research that has appeared since his 'Marketless Trading in Hammurabi's Time'? As we have seen, there is a near-consensus that Polanyi understates the degree of market development, the presence of the profit motive, and the extent of private enterprise in Mesopotamia -- with the caveat that, as noted above, in unpublished notes he was prepared to describe Old Babylonia as a "period of private business activity" imbued with a capitalistic ethos.⁹⁴ His insistence that outside market economies "no supply-demand-price mechanism can be effective" requires careful qualification, and, in delineating too stark a divide between administered and market trade, and relatedly, between public and private power, his framework is not ideally suited to conceptualising processes of privatisation and the emergence of markets within the 'public' sector.⁹⁵ More generally, his account of archaic societies downplays their internal contradictions and is, as a result, inadequately equipped to explaining socioeconomic transformations.

The exaggerations and errors in Polanyi's account notwithstanding, there is much to be said for his contribution. His observations on banking, finance and administered price equivalencies, continue to be quarried for insight by scholars working in the field today. His discussion of the role of markets in Mesopotamia remains relevant, as does the evidence that casts doubt on the existence of market places in certain periods. (Oppenheim was not wrong to speak of the marginal nature of market places in the southern cities).⁹⁶ Clearly, markets played an important role in certain sectors during epochs and yet, given the subsistence-orientation of most producers, a market system could not come into being: Mesopotamia knew neither a "market economy" in the Polanyian sense nor capitalism in the Marxian sense.⁹⁷

But Polanyi's significance to ancient historiography is rather greater than the above 'empirical scorecard' would suggest. Although his 'mechanisms of distribution' are not unproblematic, they remain influential heuristic models.⁹⁸ His work reminds historians that rationally defensible explanatory narratives can only be advanced when the phenomena concerned are grasped in such a way "as to recognise that agent and participant understanding of social and economic activity is integral to and partially constitutive of the characteristics of such activities," as Alasdair MacIntyre once put it.⁹⁹ In particular, Polanyi's work provides a salutary warning of the hazards of the 'economistic fallacy' -- the assumption that concepts developed within modern market societies can be unproblematically adapted to earlier social formations. That his methodological strictures were influenced by his quest for alternatives to capitalism is frowned upon by some scholars. Yet this can also be seen in a positive light. It provided the spark, and the social

⁹⁴ 23-2, 1953.

⁹⁵ 35-7, 1946, 'Marxist Economic Thought.'

⁹⁶ See also Gledhill and Larsen (1982) 'The Polanyi Paradigm and a Dynamic Analysis of Archaic States', pp.203-4; Renger (2005) 'Karl Polanyi and the Economy of Ancient Mesopotamia'.

⁹⁷ van Driel (2002) *Evasive Silver*.

⁹⁸ See e.g. Jursa (2010) *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC*, p.21.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Knowles and Owen (2008) 'Karl Polanyi for Historians: An Alternative Economic Narrative,' p.181.

imagination, that enabled him to bring together his distinctive combination of painstaking empirical research, transhistorical comparison and theoretical engagement. If the current travails of global capitalism continue, one could expect historians *engagés* to make an entrance, and it might be no bad thing.

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