Polanyi Twisted

A cinematic interpretation of Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* through the film *Oliver Twist*

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Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* has had a substantial impact in a variety of disciplines including particularly international relations, political economy and political science more broadly. The book contains a wealth of ideas and concepts, which help illuminate various themes and issues in contemporary political social, and economic life for scholars and students alike. In this article, we suggest an alternative approach to Polanyi’s work through the use of the film. Whilst there has been a growing interest in the interpretation through film of international relations more broadly, there has been much less addressed to literature and debate specifically in international political economy. Responding to that lacuna, we argue that the film *Oliver Twist* provides an innovative way to address Polanyi’s book, eschewing the common emphasis placed on the ‘double movement’ trope and instead drawing out the most subtle, but nevertheless foundational, aspects of his work. In particular, we argue that this approach provides new understanding of the distinction between embeddedness and disembeddedness and the relation that Polanyi posits between ‘habitation’ and ‘improvement’. We begin by presenting an intellectual case for foregrounding these aspects of Polanyi’s thought, moving on to interpret various scenes from the movie from a Polanyian perspective.

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Polanyi’s ideas have received a wide academic audience in recent years. With the ongoing rise of global market formations – couched in terms of ‘neoliberalism’, ‘globalisation’, ‘Washington consensus’ or other – his analysis of earlier periods in the development of capitalism has once again been deemed important, with particular attention being paid to his *magnum opus*, *The Great Transformation* (*TGT*). Within this revival, two particular sets of conceptual apparatuses have been central. Firstly, the notion of double movement. Here, Polanyi sought to refute the idealised economism of some of his contemporaries by demonstrating how the emergence and growth of market forms was always accompanied by the equal growth of forms of ‘social protection’, be that the development of the welfare state, regulation of labour standards, financial regulation or other. This has proved to be a powerful metaphor for international relations and international political economy (e.g. Adaman *et al.*, 2003; Birchfield, 1999; Gill, 1995; Harmes, 2001; Jones, 2003; Palaciao, 2001; Scharpf and Schmidt, 2000; Stiglitz, 2001) and, consequently, is often the first introduction that scholars and students of IPE and IR alike get to Polanyi’s thought. Secondly, the notion of embeddedness and disembeddedness. Here, Polanyi argued that, “man’s[sic.] economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships” (Polanyi, 1944/2001: 48), but that, with the genesis of market society, the economy actually becomes disembedded, free to follow its own internal, autonomous logic, with society conforming to economic norms rather than the other way round.⁠¹ Again, this idea has proved to be a powerful metaphor, being used extensively in economic sociology (Granovetter 1985; Fligstein 1996; Kali 2003) and, in Ruggie’s loosely related formulation of ‘embedded liberalism’ (Ruggie 1982), in IR and IPE too.

There has, in short, been a great deal of work that has transposed Polanyi’s conceptual ideas to issues of contemporary political economy and much insightful analysis has resulted. Polanyi has taken his place in the canon of political economic thought – including, amongst others, Smith, Marx, Keynes and Hayek – providing a generous box of conceptual tools which can be used to reveal aspects of the contemporary world from fresh perspectives. There is certainly nothing intrinsically wrong with ‘lifting’ and re-applying concepts in this way, but at the same time, it is reasonable to suggest that one route to deriving the maximum benefit from a text is to situate it in the context that it was written and to understand it in terms of the

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⁠¹This is a simplistic rendering of the idea, which has been subject to many criticisms (see Holmes 2012).
context that it addresses (cf. Skinner 1969). Gareth Dale, amongst others, has done much to work towards the former of these aims, examining the intellectual relationships that Polanyi sustained during the course of his life and career (e.g. Dale 2010) both before and after the writing of TGT. There has also been some, though less, work which casts an eye over various aspects of the history that Polanyi presents in TGT, some more supportive (e.g. Block and Somers 1984; 2003), some more critical (e.g. Hejeebu and McCloskey 1999).

Given all this, how ought we to approach Polanyi’s TGT? In this article, we want to pursue an approach that does not present Polanyi’s concepts as abstract, de-historicised conceptual tools but rather conveys them through engagement with the history that forms a central part of the book. And we pursue this aim by relating Polanyi’s thesis to excerpts of Polański’s movie version of the Charles Dickens novel Oliver Twist (OT). Not only does this provide a unique and interesting way to open the door to Polanyi’s ideas in general, particularly for the next generation of IPE scholars, it also foregrounds a contextual approach to his concepts and analytical devices. This approach does not emphasise the notion of double movement, but rather foregrounds a more humanised vision of the difference between embeddedness and disembeddedness. Furthermore, it brings out another core metaphor for the development of market society that Polanyi suggested: the clash between ‘improvement’ and ‘habitation’ – that is, the spectre of economic progress and its relationship to, or effect upon, the ordinary life of the poor living through it (Polanyi 1944: 35). This particular metaphor has received very little attention in the ‘applied Polanyian’ literature (for an important exception see Watson 2009 and 2009a) yet seems to us to be a key element within the book and one that can be understood in a very immediate way through the viewing and critical exploration of OT.

To use movies as a medium to explain political thought has become an increasingly established approach. For example, Ted Hopf underlines in his book “Social Construction of International Politics” (2002) how an understanding of a domestic identities is key to understanding state foreign-policy, and it is that notion that has been the starting point for innovative film-based research in international relations (IR), most notably by Michael Shapiro (Shapiro 1999; 2009). Elsewhere, subjects have been varied, including the cultural reproduction of war in film (Engelkamp and Offermann 2012) right through to speculation on what would result of Alien (Weber 2009) or Zombie (Drezner 2011) invasions. Key to the most sophisticated of these moves is the idea that film does not merely offer us a way to view
constructed beliefs about international politics, but rather it can actually offer us a chance to illustrate, explain and develop ideas or theories themselves (Nexon 2006: 11). In general, the power of visual media in tuition settings is also being increasingly recognised, and has been explored in particular depth in the discipline of IR (Combs 1993, Valeriano 2013; Weber 2006). Perhaps the most important contribution in this field has been Cynthia Weber’s book on international relations theory (2009), which offers an introduction to different theoretical approaches in IR with the help of various popular movies. In contrast, there have not been any attempts specifically to address International Political Economy (IPE) through film. This article begins to fill that gap by adopting Weber’s approach: we pair The Great Transformation with the movie Oliver Twist on the basis that the book and the movie discuss similar social and political problems, and that each can illuminate the other in more depth than either, taken separately, can deliver. Our hope is that more scholars will see the benefit of taking this approach in IPE in the future.

In the main section of this article, we discuss various scenes and excerpts from OT, relating them to the most important themes in TGT. We structure this section by dividing it into two sub-sections, one on the notion of embeddedness and one on the relationship between improvement and habitation. Before that, however, we must briefly introduce Polanyi’s book and Polański’s film.

(Dialogs from the movie Oliver Twist will be quoted by the acronym OT and the position of dialog will be indicated in minutes and seconds will be provided in brackets where relevant).

The Great Transformation

Many themes and ideas are discussed in TGT and the historical coverage is wide. As the subtitle details, the ultimate aim of the book is to explain no less than “the political and economic origins of our [that is, Polanyi’s] time” (Polanyi 1944/2001). To that end, the analysis is bookended by two sections (Part I and Part III) on issues primarily concerning the early twentieth century. But in order to explain this tumultuous period in history, Polanyi suggests that it is necessary to understand the earlier history of England. He makes the surprising claim that, “in order to comprehend German fascism, we must revert to Ricardian

\[2\] For a good literature overview and the debate on the value of movies for pedagogy see Swimelar 2012.

\[3\] In film analytic terms, the movie- and referents- reality are overlapping (Korte 2010: pp. 23).
England” (ibid: 32), arguing that this approach is necessary because of the decisive influence of the central institution of the age: the market. Referring to the Second World War, he outlines his thesis in a provocative manner: “the origins of the cataclysm lay in the utopian endeavor of economic liberalism to set up self-regulating market system” (ibid: 31).

In service of this aim, Polanyi provides independent, although interrelated, histories of the emergence of three ‘fictitious commodities’ – land, labour and money. Each aspect has been developed by contemporary scholars in a variety of different ways, but given Polanyi’s over-riding concern with the lived experience of capitalism by people (Baum 1996), it is reasonable to regard his discussion of labour as central to the exposition of his ideas. Here, Polanyi discusses the emergence of a labour market and the ensuing reconfiguration of the economy in general in England, during the 18th and 19th century. Along with other scholars in the historical canon of political economic thought (see Blaney and Inayatullah 2010: 3), he sought to puncture the notion of a smooth emergence of market society rooted in the innately market-like nature of humans – the abstract and de-historicised figure of *homo oeconomicus* – and instead emphasised the social damage that the process of ‘economic improvement’, as he called it, inflicted upon society and the people within it.

Within this broad gambit, Polanyi is keen to highlight how the consequences of this development looked contradictory to the people of the time:

“No wonder that contemporaries were appalled at the seeming contradiction of an almost miraculous increase in production accompanied by near starvation of the masses.” (1944/2001: 84-85)

This apparent contradiction is as relevant today as it ever was. As Blaney and Inayatullah argue, the persistence of poverty and its relationship with the generation of extremes of wealth, is an open ‘wound’ in the field of capitalist relations (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010). The growth of very high incomes and the persistence of very low incomes is an increasingly uniform experience in industrialised, developing and impoverished nations alike. This relevance is compounded by the fact that many countries are, today, going through processes of industrialisation similarly immense to the one that Polanyi documented.
Oliver Twist

Charles Dickens is rightly regarded as much of a social commentator as an author of fiction, and *Oliver Twist* was a prime example of both roles in action. The novel was first published as a newspaper serial between 1837 and 1839, ensuring a wide readership which, in turn, provoked much discussion of the situation of the poor in England. The novel starts with the death of Oliver’s mother, which happens whilst giving birth to him. Born in a workhouse, with no family and a name randomly chosen by the parish, Oliver’s social background is unclear and so he is treated as a poor man’s son. Roman Polański’s movie starts with the decision of ambassador of the parish to provide Oliver with “education” through manufactory work. After the well-known scene where Oliver asks for more supper, he is than given to a coffin maker for further “education”. But soon another apprentice becomes jealous and starts to bully Oliver. After an escalation of this dynamic, Oliver leaves for London. Here, the head of a gang of thieves named Fagin picks him up from the street and gives him shelter and food. In this environment, Oliver himself learns how to thieve and to prepare stolen products for selling. One day some of the boys of Fagin’s group take him on a pilferage. Even though he is not involved personally, he gets caught by the police and charged with theft. Finally the victim, Mr Brownlow, clarifies the situation and takes the now sick Oliver home with him. Fagin fears that Oliver could betray him and so he captures him whilst he is undertaking an errand for Mr Brownlow. Back at the hideout, Bill Sykes, an aggressive character, forces Oliver to assist him in breaking into Mr Brownlow’s home. In an exchange of fire in the house Oliver gets accidentally wounded. Back in the house of the thieves, the group become again concerned about the danger that Oliver might pose, leading to a plot to apprehend or kill him. Bill Sykes’ cohabitee Nancy wants to free Oliver from this situation and so gets in touch with Mr Brownlow. She informs Mr Brownlow about the threat to Oliver’s safety, but one of the young thieves spies on her on behalf of Sykes, who then batters her to death for betraying him. After this, Fagin and his young thieves look for shelter in an old warehouse and are eventually followed by Sykes. On his way, Sykes attempts to get rid of his eye-catching dog, but he fails and in the end the dog leads the police to the new hiding place of Fagin and his gang. In a showdown, Bill Sykes accidentally hangs himself and Fagin goes to prison. Oliver is taken in by Mr Brownlow and, after a piteous visit to the imprisoned Fagin, is free to lead the comfortable life that – after all his trials and tribulations – the audience is led to desire for him.
Roman Polański’s version of Charles Dickens’ book is arguably the most expansive such production. After broadcasting in theatres, critics pointed out the realism of the movie,⁴ which is the first, most straightforward reason for using the film as a tool to approach Polanyi: it provides a way to introduce students to the subject matter of Polanyi’s history of England. Film and fiction can convey an impression of a period of history in a way that is more difficult via text. This is especially the case in TGT as the relevant chapters, whilst central to Polanyi’s analysis in the book, are not the most exciting or readable, nor do they have the kind of cultural and social detail that makes Dickens’ work so vivid. Just as Marx’s reading of capitalism is brought to life by Engels’ description of Mancunian factory conditions, Oliver Twist can easily, and quickly, convey a sense of what it was actually like to live in the conditions that Polanyi documents. As discussed earlier, this is particularly important for non-English students, for whom this may be their first introduction to the period. Beyond this, however, there are numerous analytical aspects of interpretation that can be bought out. The following section moves to unpick some of them.

**Interpretation**

Polański’s movie does not start with the death of Oliver’s mother, like most other film versions of the book. This approach accentuates the unknown identity of Oliver. He enters the film as a *tabula rasa* upon which everyone he meets wants to imprint a particular set of ideas, whether it be the chimney sweep, the magistrate, Fagin or Mr Brownlow. In this sense, Oliver is presented to the story as a ‘disembedded’ character, shorn of the social and political context which might have defined his existence had he a clearly defined parentage. As Polanyi discusses, industrialisation and the rationalisation of agriculture had the effect of “uproot[ing] the labourer and underm[ing] his social security” (1944/2001: 96).⁵ In *TGT*, one gets an overriding sense of the poor people of England coping as best they can with enormous social changes – industrialisation, urbanisation, wealth creation, population growth etc. – which

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⁵ Of course it is questionable how desirable the kind of security of social meaning offered by cottage labour and traditional agriculture actually was, but in as far as this normative one-sidedness is a weakness, it is one that the film and the book both share, and so it is a worthy point for reflection.
were entirely out of their control. The traditional identity of rural labourers was lost to a sudden, violent burst progress, yet their new identity was not yet fully established. Oliver thus himself functions as a metaphor for the poor, rural classes and their lack of identity in the regime of economic improvement, a metaphor accentuated somewhat in the alternative title Dickens gave to the book: *The Parish Boy’s Progress*. Oliver’s disembedded character makes him highly susceptible to influence by each set of characters that he meets, who all try to slot him into their own way of life; just as the rural poor’s lives were transformed by economic forces, so Oliver’s existence appears to be entirely in the control of the powerful people around him.

*Dis/embeddedness: Learning the emergent labour market*

Perhaps the most significant analytical point about Oliver’s journey is that, right up to the moment that he finds his peace at the Brownlow residence, Oliver’s ability to inhabit the subjectivities that those around him force upon him is shaped by prevailing socio-economic conditions. For example, on his way to London near the start of the film, Oliver runs out of energy and collapses close to the house of an old woman, who picks him up from the street and shares her supper with him (OT 25´17). Compared to his ill treatment in the towns of the midlands, and the dim view of London that the old lady clearly evinces, the viewer would be forgiven for being surprised at his desire to move on to the capital as quickly as possible. Later, following the remainder of his walk to London, Oliver is picked up by Artful Dodger who takes him to Fagin’s abode. The first morning at Fagin’s house in London is in stark contrast to that at the old woman’s house. Fagin runs a thievery outfit with a number of ‘bagger boys’ whilst hiding his stolen goods in a treasure chest (OT 33´02). Yet, despite the nefarious nature of Fagin’s existence, it is here where Oliver feels able to settle, if only for a time.

For Polanyi, this was the other side of disembeddedness. It was not simply that people were disembedded from their community and social coding which had previously defined them, but also that they came to respond, quickly, to the new labour market incentives that were taking shape around them.
“The transformation implies a change in motive of action on the part of the members of society; for the motive of subsistence that of gain must be substituted” (Polanyi 1944/2001: 43-44)

As has long been recognised in the Polanyian literature, being disembedded by market society always implicitly entails being re-embedded within the incentive structures of the market system (Lie 1991: 219; Stanfield 1986: 110; Zelizer 1988). As Polanyi himself put it in an essay, the self-regulating market idea rested on the idea that people are ‘motivated in the past resort by two simple incentives, fear of hunger and hope of gain’ (1977: 47).

Oliver himself perfectly captures this new regime of incentives: the first half of the film is little more than a battle against hunger which can only be alleviated through engaging in terrible working conditions. But his interest is not in the form of traditional subsistence that the old woman affords, rather, he carries on to London in ‘hope of gain’, eventually finding some harmonisation within the context of Fagin’s criminal scheme. But Fagin’s labour system is not a fully-fledged capitalist operation. The first “work” Oliver learns at Fagin’s house is to get the name-stitchery out of the stolen handkerchiefs; a form of house labour, which was characteristic of the period. This retains elements of Aristotle’s conception of householding as a form of economic integration, which Polanyi discusses:

“‘Aristotle insists on production for use as against production for gain as the essence of householding proper; [...] the sale of the surpluses need not destroy the basis of householding.’ (Polanyi 1944/2001: 56)

Crucially, Polanyi puts this picture of mixed motives, uneven marketisation and haphazard social development in stark contrast to a new set of ideas about the nature of human beings which emerged around the same time. He notes how, in contrast to earlier thinkers including Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, who had a more guarded, socially circumscribed notion of the human desire for gain, a complete, ontological belief in the avaricious nature of all humans emerged, epitomised by Joseph Townsend’s late eighteenth century pamphlet which declared that the only way to control the poor – moreover any person – was through the twin motives of hunger and gain:

“‘By approaching human community from the animal side, Townsend bypassed the supposedly unavoidable question as to the foundations of government; and in doing so...”
introduced a new concept of law into human affairs; that of the laws of Nature. … Hobbes had argued the need for a despot because men were like beasts; Townsend insisted that they were actually beasts and that, precisely for that reason, only a minimum of government was required.” (ibid: 119)

In *Oliver Twist*, this type of view is expressed repeatedly by powerful figures. During the earlier parts of the film, people are constantly remarking that the only way to coax any meaningful contribution to society out of Oliver, or indeed any boy or impoverished worker, is through the imposition of hunger. The workhouse appears to keep its boys on the edge of starvation in the belief that it will instil discipline, which is why Oliver’s famous request for ‘more’ is seen as so subversive. In another comical example, Mr Bumble remarks that the reason that Oliver got caught up in a scuffle whilst working at the coffin-makers is because he was fed too much meat, making the following remark that ‘if you’d kept this boy on gruel, this would never have happened’ (20’34). Mrs Sowberry, the undertaker’s wife, responds by saying ‘dear dear, this comes of being liberal’.

But the film as a whole demonstrates clearly that hunger is not natural to Oliver’s condition. Indeed, Oliver only reaches his true potential – at Mr Brownlow’s residence – once freed from that structure of incentives. The twin motives of hunger and gain were rather a creature of the emergent political economy of the period, called forth through the coercive nature of social conditions – ‘poverty was nature surviving in society’ as Polanyi put it (1944).

*Improvement versus habitation: wealth and poverty*

On one hand, the sets of characters that Oliver meets are very different – the pain and drudgery of the workhouse, the ethic of hard work evinced by the coffin makers, the thievery of Fagin’s lot and the educated civility of Mr Brownlow’s residence – the film’s texture is indeed dependent the contrast between these groups. Some groups represent the seedy underside of the emerging industrial economy – particularly the workhouse, which Polanyi also comments on (1944/2001: 86) – whilst others, particularly Mr Brownlow’s residence, represent the most sophisticated outposts of the new bourgeois world. Polański contrasts these two sides of the emerging economy through his much-celebrated use of light. Scenes featuring Fagin’s tenement and the workhouse are painted in a dull blue-grey whilst Mr
Brownlow’s residence is bathed in a bright, warm glow, connoting figurative and literal enlightenment. Oliver is downtrodden and abused in the former whilst ultimately finding happiness in the latter at the very end of the movie.

The ‘happy ending’ is a common target of criticism on the basis that life does not often afford them in such a straightforward way, and the isolation of Oliver’s tale obviously leaves the question open as to how the thousands of other boys in the workhouse fared without their own respective Mr Brownlows. But, viewed through the Polanyian lens, this general criticism becomes a specific critique based on the analytical possibility that, as Inayatullah and Blaney put it ‘wealth and poverty are indissolubly fused’ (2010: 249). Polanyi captured the two-sided nature of this new economic system by quoting a parliamentary document from the House of Lords dated 1607:

“The poor man shall be satisfied in his end: habitation; and the gentleman not hindered in his desire: Improvement” (Polanyi 1944/2001: 36)

The pauper was to subsist and to survive whilst the gentleman prospers and civilises, but both are a part of the same dynamic. At the nastiest end of this dynamic, Polanyi notes how workhouse owners, who assumed that they were helping to ‘improve’ – or ‘educate’ as Dickens puts it – the poor, were actually ‘oiling the wheels of the labour mill’ (ibid: 86). Elsewhere, Polanyi argues that the genuine benevolence of the generous landlord or the legislators at Speenhamland who sought to provide aid-in-wages so as to alleviate the condition of the poor, actually worsened the situation, since these interventions conflicted with the new incentives of the labour market which, in turn, drove wages and productivity down (ibid: 81-87). The contrast between the rigid incentives of the emergent labour market and the ideas, morals and sensibilities of those in power within it figures heavily yet, on the face of it, OT would appear to skip over these kinds of macro-social questions.

But despite the ‘struggle-towards-happy-ending’ narrative that frames the story as a whole, this relationship between habitation and improvement is subtly alluded to by Dickens and is bought out by Polański in various sections of the film. For example, in the exposition of the movie, Oliver is introduced by Mr Bumble who is working for the parish. Mr Bumble leads Oliver into a room full of high standing men sitting around a table. Mr Limbkinsi sits at the head of the table and seems to be in charge (OT 2´58):
Mr Bumble reading from a sheet of paper: “This is the boy. Born here in the workhouse. Moved to the parish farm. Nine years old today. Time to be moved back here.”

Mr Limbkinsi: “What’s your name, boy?

Oliver tries to answer and than is struck by Mr Bumble: “Oliver Twist“

Mr Limbkinsi: “What was that?”

Man in front of the table: “What a fool!“

Mr Limbkinsi: “Boy, listen to me. You know you’re an orphan, I suppose?”

Oliver: “What’s that?”

Man in front of the table: “The boy is a fool – I thought he was.”

Mr Limbkinsi: “You know you’ve got no father or mother, and that you were brought up by the parish, don’t you?”

Oliver: “Yes, sir.”

Man in front of the table: “What are you crying for?”

Other man from the table: “I hope you say your prayers every night, and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you – like a Christian.”

Oliver: “Yes, sir.“

Mr Limbkinsi: “Well! You have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade.”

The asymmetric power relation is visible in this opening scene: Oliver is standing in front of the men, reflecting a social order where the values are determined from above. Oliver’s ‘education’ is to amount to little more than being plugged in to the labour market. But, from the perspective of those at the table, the relation is not one of power, but one of benevolent assistance. Dickens and Polański display their scepticism towards this notion by portraying those at the table as ostentatiously wealthy and, in several instances, as obese, implying greed when compared to Oliver’s emaciated frame. If anything, Polanyi is more charitable that Dickens, seeing the false-benevolence of legislators and landlords as genuinely misguided, rather than as malicious in intent.
The next scene shows many children sitting crowded together in a big hall. Boys and girls a separated from each other but all are undertaking basic manual labor. In front of this large group of children stands a sharply dressed man watching them. The man advises Oliver to take a seat between the other boys a throws a peace of hawser on his lap (OT 4’16):

   Man: “Learn from the boy next to you.“
   Oliver: “What am I to learn, sir?”
   Man: “Learn to pick out the oakum.”
   Oliver: “What's oakum, sir?”
   Man: “Stop asking so many questions. Oakum's the fibers you unpick from the old rope. Then it's used again for the ships of Her Majesty's navy. You're serving your country.”

In this case, the relationship between the mere persistence of the workhouse boys – their habitation – and the furtherance of their social betters – improvement – is all too direct.

The habitation/improvement relation is also portrayed on the positive side of the economy as embodied in Mr Brownlow and his environs. In the movie, Brownlow is a character of great generosity and liberal attitude, which gives him the possibility to see the goodness in Oliver’s character. Yet, he is still a part of the same ideology of improvement and habitation. Two dialogs are of interests in reflecting the attitude of Mr Brownlow: his discussion with Oliver in his private library and with his chess companion Mr Grimwig.

After Oliver is feeling better, he finds himself in Mr Brownlow work and reading room. Surrounded by many books, the two discuss a possible future for Oliver (OT 54’52):

   Mr Brownlow: “There are a great many books, are there not, my boy?”
   Oliver: “A great number, sir. Never saw so many.”
   Mr Brownlow: “How would you like to grow up a clever man, and write books?”
   Oliver: “I think I'd rather read them, sir.”
   Mr Brownlow: “Wouldn't you like to be a book writer?”
   Oliver: “I think it'd be a better thing to be a bookseller, sir.”
Mr Brownlow: “You have said a very good thing. Well, well. We won't make an author of you while there's an honest trade to be learned, or brickmaking to turn to.”

The discussion starts with a straightforward bourgeois ideal: a fascination about books and a concern with being well-read. Mr Brownlow wants Oliver to be interested in his lifestyle of knowledge and fine arts. But Oliver’s response is striking; he thinks a job in selling and dealing things is the best he can do, and at this point Mr Brownlow has to agree with him.

The second point of importance in the relationship between Mr Brownlow and Oliver is that Mr Brownlow realizes the goodness in Oliver’s character. To show this to his chess companion Mr Grimwig, Mr Brownlow gives Oliver money and borrowed books to bring them back to the store (OT 58’23):

Mr Brownlow : “How long do you think it'll take him?”

Mr Grimwig: “You really expect him to come back?”

Mr Brownlow : “You don't?”

Mr Grimwig: “With a 5 pound note in his pocket? No, I do not. If ever that boy returns to this house. I'll eat my own head, sir. And yours.”

Mr Brownlow at this stage has already acknowledged the kindness of Oliver’s character from which he knows that the boy belongs to his social class and deserves a good education. To explain this idea, Polanyi points out that there is belief about human beings shared by classical national economy and liberal theorist as well, that there is an ontological order within the society (Polanyi 1944/2001: pp. 128). Mr Brownlow realizes that in Oliver’s case, the boy was thrown into the wrong class and he is by his character better than the other children from the street and deserves there for a better living and a good education. Yet, Polański does not quite present a wholly unalloyed happy ending. At the very end of the movie, Oliver decides to visit Fagin at the town jail and cries for mercy for this character who has clearly lost what sanity he previously had. The sadness of the divergence of their situation is evident in Oliver’s eyes and it might not be too much to infer a kind of guilt on his part rooted in the good fortune he has experienced. As with the rest of the movie, the relationship between poor and rich, and between habitation and improvement, looms.
Concluding thoughts

It is important to keep in mind that any interpretation of film or text is just that: an interpretation. Thus, there is no single legitimate interpretation of *Oliver Twist* nor an absolutely correct or incorrect reading of Polanyi’s *TGT* either. Indeed, our own suggestions in this article have been cognisant of the fact that the differences between Dickens’ and Polanyi’s narratives may be as interesting as the similarities. Moreover, Polanyi’s *TGT* is a broad, sweeping book with many different periods, places and themes discussed. *OT* will only ever get at a few of these aspects, but we have at least provided justification for why those aspects should be considered to be of value to understanding the book as a whole. The core benefit of analysis through film is not that it provides a ready-made route to understanding, but that it can help to establish a rich terrain for debate. Hopefully, as we suggested at the outset of this piece, our example demonstrates the potential for this approach within IPE as much as others have demonstrated its value in IR more generally.
References


