

# Further Reflections on Shils and Polanyi

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*These brief reflections extend the discussion of Louis H. Swartz review essay "Reflections on Shils, Sacred and Civil Ties, and Universities." I note the influence Shils and Polanyi had upon one another and comment on issues related to Shils's thought which Swartz raises in connection with material in three recent, posthumously published volumes of Shils's writings.*

It is gratifying and appropriate that the work of Edward Shils should be appreciatively and thoughtfully reviewed in the pages of the journal of the Polanyi Society. Polanyi and Shils were in agreement on the existence of truth and the committed stance that it assumes; the nature of scientific investigation; liberty, tradition, and spontaneous order; the significance of conviviality; and much more. They stood shoulder to shoulder in their opposition to all forms of totalitarianism. Their friendship and, I think one can legitimately say, collaboration spanned four decades. There should be no doubt that, among those individuals whom Shils knew personally, three had a lasting influence on his thought: Robert Park, Frank Knight, and Michael Polanyi. There should also be no doubt that the thought of Edward Shils had an influence on that of Michael Polanyi, and not only in those areas that are fairly obvious such as intellectuals or the university. In the "Acknowledgments" section of *Personal Knowledge* (xv) Polanyi identifies Shils as one of the readers who read the whole manuscript before publication. There are pages of *Personal Knowledge* that, so it seems to me, indicate clearly the hand of Edward Shils, for example, pages 208,210-11. We know that around the time of Polanyi's Gifford Lectures, Shils had finished an eight hundred page-long draft of his unpublished *Love, Belief, and Civility* in which one can observe similarities in Shils's and Polanyi's understanding of a number of sociological problems.

I shall restrict the following, brief comments on Professor Swartz's review of these three posthumously published volumes of Edward Shils's writings to a few of those problems that Shils had not resolved to his own satisfaction before his death and which still confront those who wish to understand better the nature of human cognition and action.

As is well known, relatively early in his life Max Weber wrote about the *Entzauberung der Welt* in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. By the term *Entzauberung*, Weber literally meant the process of "demagicalization" of religion, the most notable example of which was the recognition by the Israelite prophets of a transcendental realm—the conceptions of the monotheistic deity and its laws—that was believed to be immune from human manipulation. Many scholars have subsequently interpreted Weber's analysis of *Entzauberung* to mean that human cognition and action have become entirely free from any reference to the sacred, the latter being a category (like "religiosity" or, indeed, "charisma", at least as developed by Weber and Shils) not free from the ambiguity arising from the phenomenological and sociological stance of Schleiermacher and his followers, including Rudolph Otto. As Swartz notes, Shils in his writings on charisma and its dispersion did not agree with these recent commentators and their attendant thesis of a ubiquitous secularization. Shils further thought, and I think rightly, that Weber's own views on the putative elimination of the religious orientation in human action in the modern world were productively ambiguous, indeed inconsistent. This ambiguity and inconsistency may be clearly observed in Weber's later and more mature writings on religion

and law: in religion, for example, the evidently persistent desire for redemption; in law, for example, the apparently inexpungeable antinomy between conceptions of formal and substantive justice.

The importance of this problem of the *Entzauberung der Welt*, and the latter's interpretation by the analysts of "modernity" to mean the secularization of a putatively homogeneous, modern world, for us today becomes manifest by shifting the locus of the discussion to whether or not human beings can live without "meaning". Edward Shils, as Swartz has also noted, did not think that human beings could do so. He thought that the mind's orientation to nonempirical, existential ideas about man's place in the universe was inexpungeable; it was what made a human being, human. This insistence on the mind's orientation to various nonempirical, existential meanings is the philosophical-anthropological significance of Shils's category of the center. To view Shils's famous distinction between center and periphery as merely ecological or sociological is to miss its significance. Shils, thus, thought that, in contrast to the currently fashionable philosophical naturalism, one element of the human psyche was necessarily metaphysical. It seems to me that, especially here, there is a convergence in the thought of Michael Polanyi and Edward Shils. I leave aside here such difficult philosophical problems as the epistemological status of the pluralistic orientations of the mind as understood by Shils<sup>1</sup>, other than to note that he shared Polanyi's rejection of reductionism.

The thoughtless interpretation of *Entzauberung* under today's fashionable rubrics of "modernity" and "secularization" is the result of the tyranny of a particular tradition. It is that theoretical tradition of the analysis of human cognition, action, and society that draws a sharp historical disjunction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, between, in the idiom of political philosophy, the so-called "ancients and moderns". Subsequent facts—above all, the persistence of religion, nationality, and ethnicity—have rendered this theoretical tradition obsolete. The categories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and the orientation of the mind and action that they imply, should be viewed as overlapping one another in various ways from one historical period to another, and from one civilization to another.

Professor Swartz has understandably raised the problem of whether or not there is a relativism implicit in Shils's analysis of charisma. This is an important problem deserving of further reflection and discussion. I have already alluded to a certain conceptual ambiguity of the category. Shils addressed this ambiguity by differentiating the qualitatively distinct objects of transcendence from transcendence per se. In this necessarily brief exchange, I limit myself to a few observations regarding Professor Swartz's concern. First, Shils agreed with Weber that scientific knowledge could not disclose the meaning of cosmic and earthly existence that was inescapable in human life, including even in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. He thought that this pursuit assumed a metaphysical stance and required, in Polanyi's terms, a fiduciary passion. Second, Shils thought that the orientations of the mind were pluralistic; that is, they could not be reduced to one. This philosophical-anthropological recognition of a pluralism of the *geistige* orientations of transcendence of the self is not necessarily to be equated with relativism. Nevertheless, these observations contribute to Swartz's concern, especially insofar as they may rightly be understood to imply qualitatively different loci of charismatic attribution. However, such loci, so it seems to me, are unavoidable consequences of the freedom of the mind.

Is it not also the case that this openness of the mind—call it what one wishes: freedom, creativity—is the presupposition of the civility, the capacity for disinterestedness, that is necessary for a pursuit of a common good and, in turn, for the existence of liberal democracy? One can, of course, be passionate about, take an interest in, being disinterested. It would be worthwhile to consider the different ways the assumptions of Shils's understanding of civility overlap with a number of assumptions held by Polanyi—a consideration

furthered by Professor Swartz's rightly reminding us to ponder the relation of the works of Polanyi and those of Shils.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Shils's essays "Personal, Primordial, Sacred and Civil Ties" and "Center and Periphery" in Shils (1975), and "Ideology and Civility" in Edward Shils (1997) *The Virtue of Civility: Selected Essays on Liberalism, Tradition, and Civil Society*. Edited by Steven Grosby. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.

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