



## EDWARD SHILS AS STRANGER, SOCIAL THOUGHT AS VOCATION



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### ABSTRACT

*This essay is a response to Struan Jacobs, “Recovering the Thought of Edward Shils,” which is an extended review of Adair-Totef and Turner’s *The Calling of Social Thought*. It considers Edward Shils as a “stranger,” in the sense defined by Georg Simmel, relative to contemporary sociology. Christian Smith’s claim that American sociology is implicitly pursuing a “sacred project” is invoked, in contrast with Shils’ vision for consensual sociology. The expansion by CST to “*Social Thought*” as a calling (vocation), and its ties to science as understood by Polanyi, are strongly affirmed.*

“Edward Shils is often referred to as a sociologist. This description of Shils and his work can be misleading because of what sociology has become” (Adair-Totef & Turner 2019, 32). There is a deep sense of familiarity, for me, in reading these words by Steven Grosby and in seeing the many ways in which *The Calling of Social Thought* (hereafter *CST*) reminds us of Edward Shils’ status as a *stranger* vis-à-vis contemporary sociology. Having as a basis Struan Jacobs’ thorough and stimulating review essay on the book, instead of presenting an alternative review as such, I will offer some brief reflections, from the point of view of someone who is also “often referred to as a sociologist,” on this sense of familiarity.

What does it mean to be a sociologist? I hope that the reader might hear how this question resonates rather differently from the related question, “What is sociology?” It is what is popularly called an “existential” question for me, as I have traveled a somewhat non-standard route to becoming one.<sup>1</sup> I am often inclined to think that the only thing that makes me one is that I earned a PhD in sociology. But when I am somewhat confident of my identity in this regard, it is most often because I identify with sociological thinkers who are strangers not only in society, but also (to some degree) to sociology as an institutionalized discipline. I feel, in other words, like the passionate lover of religion who is never quite at home with “organized” religion. I use the term ‘stranger’ (*Fremde*) in the sense given to it by the German thinker, Georg Simmel (1908). Simmel understood, because he was a stranger himself.

Edward Shils also understood, and he is one of a few figures in sociology that have long populated my awareness as, in one way or another, fellow strangers. The more decisive “stranger” figure for me as a student was Peter L. Berger. Stumbling into an introductory sociology course in the early nineteen eighties, I soon found Berger’s treatment of sociology as “an individual pastime,” and as “a form of consciousness” (Berger 1963) with a phenomenological and sociology of knowledge bent, and was smitten. But it was not long before I also encountered the respectful antipathy (if I may use that phrase) that was widely aimed at Berger among sociologists informally, as his admittedly conservative sensibilities had become more widely perceived. I know (though the memory is vague) that I also encountered Shils in the early eighties, in relation to interests in the sacred and charisma. It was probably at this point that I first became aware of Shils’ essay, “The Calling of Sociology.” Even then, I connected the word ‘calling’ with the German word *Beruf* (calling or vocation) in Weber, both in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and in “Science as a Vocation.” Sociology as a calling would be seen as a vocation in a weighty sense, a discipline implying a sort of asceticism.

To contextualize this more fully for *TAD* readers, it would have been near this time when I also first encountered Michael Polanyi, in a course on the sociology of science. The professor was a self-identified relativist, who was most interested in Thomas Kuhn and laboratory ethnographies, but he also had us read *The Tacit Dimension*. A book from those days by Jerry Gill (1981) helped me to connect Polanyi with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein (both formative thinkers for me). At some point before graduate school, I learned that Polanyi was a friend of Shils, so the two were already tenuously joined in my consciousness when I later became more fully aware of the deep significance of their relationship (admirably documented by Phil Mullins in *CST*). It is thus no surprise that my return to consideration of Polanyi in recent years has also brought Shils back into my consciousness. I now think, in retrospect, that it was no accident that both Shils and Polanyi struck a chord to my ear, since both are strangers in Simmel’s sense (to sociology and philosophy, respectively). But we must recall that Simmel’s sense of strangeness centrally involves the possibility of a kind of objectivity, not simply as detachment, but as “a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement” (Simmel 1971, emphasis added).

As Grosby’s contribution to *CST* reminds us, Shils’ vision for sociology as a vocation is a vision for a consensual sociology pursued in service of a consensual society:

Modern society is, despite all its conflicts and disorders, more of a consensual society than its predecessors were. It is also a society in which personal attachments, for better or for worse, play a greater part than in most societies in the past, one in which the individual person is appreciated, in which there is a concern for his well-being—not just in a veterinary sense but as a moral personality (Shils 1980, 13).

As Shils typified it, consensual sociology (as opposed to technological or oppositional sociology) is one in which the sociologist is alive, in a particular way, to the social relationship that exists between herself and the *persons* (deliberately using this word) that she studies. Shils clearly sees this implied in the idea of *Verstehen*, associated with Weber, but it is also clear that he intends much more than a “technique of research” (as *Verstehen* has so often been presented). The connection is shared fundamental identity, a *moral* connection of “moral personalities,” where the word “moral” has the profound weight that it still carried, for example, in Durkheim’s thought:

A sociologist who takes seriously his own intellectual undertaking, who thinks himself capable of appreciating and of acting in accordance with criteria of cognitive validity but who thinks that the persons who are his subject-matter are incapable, at least minimally, of doing the same, is committing himself to error (Shils 1980, 87).

With regard to the institutionalized discipline of sociology, the final paragraphs of “The Calling of Sociology” resonate now at least as profoundly as they would have forty years ago. Both the technological and oppositional visions help to make sociology more attractive and apparently relevant to those outside the discipline. The consensual vision is inescapably modest in the strength of its claims; it “can at best add a tincture to opinion” (Shils 1980, 92), always requiring interpretation and free judgment rather than packing decisively demonstrative punch or authoritative ideological weight. While technological vision is by no means dead, oppositional vision has arguably gained significant ground. Sociologist of religion Christian Smith has recently penned an especially striking characterization of this (Smith 2014), arguing that American sociology has developed a “sacred project,” with the word ‘sacred’ deliberately chosen in light of its Durkheimian articulation. Significant in relation to our concerns here is that Smith also refers to the project as “visionary.” The project, according to Smith, is

*realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation<sup>[2]</sup> of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures* (Smith 2014, 7-8, emphasis his).

Those familiar with Smith’s other work will already know that he finds fault with various elements of the project, as summarized here, but he insists that the primary aim of his book is not so much to negate it as to call attention to it, to make it manifest. His contention is that the project is treated as sacred (with implications for the character of transgressions), but that it also remains mostly latent in its operation, covered up by a manifest façade of commitment to an ideal of objective science. The point is to make the project an explicit theme of discussion, and to raise openly the question: Is this what we sociologists actually want to be committed to? At the very least, in Smith’s view, such commitment should not be covered up by false claims that he finds in popular introductory textbooks.

Smith’s argument is a controversial one in sociology, and it is not my intent here simply to endorse it *in toto*, though I am very sympathetic. My point here, rather, is that Smith strikingly articulates hesitations regarding current institutionalized sociology that are informally echoed widely, at least in broad outline, by many contemporary sociologists as well as by external critics. Tellingly, in comparison with the modesty and lack of luster of Shils’ consensual vision, Smith writes: “Without this Durkheimian sacred project powerfully animating the soul of American sociology, the discipline would be a far smaller, drabber, less significant endeavor—perhaps it would not even have survived as an academic venture to this day” (Smith 2014, 8).

But this brings us back, not only to how academic sociology may be far from Shils’ idea of its calling, but also to the fact that the collection of essays now under discussion is titled *The Calling of Social Thought*, where ‘social thought’ is inherently and emphatically interdisciplinary, drawing in (as Chicago’s famous program has) not only sociology and the other “social sciences,” but the humanities and the natural sciences as well. One might hope, in reassessing the work of Shils, that his consensual vision is perhaps very much

alive, a vital faith that is not readily contained in a particular organized church, yet rooted in a tradition of moral inquiry that, while not limited to it, is by no means a stranger to empirical science. And to be clear, my sense is that Shils' friend Michael Polanyi has provided an especially compelling thematization of what "empirical science" would/should amount to.

If we think about this hope (this *faith*) in light of Shils, and of the efforts presented in *CST* to rediscover it, then the problem of understanding "collective self-consciousness," which Jacobs considers an "important but nebulous idea," is indeed crucial. It is not terribly surprising that the idea would seem nebulous to Jacobs, given his apparent assumption that one must decide whether society is a "whole" (*Gestalt*) or a "heap." I take it that Durkheim, Simmel, Berger, and Shils (among others), though they have been read as choosing either an individualist or a collectivist understanding of social order, have been at great pains to work against this as a dichotomy (though perhaps with varying degrees of success). I suspect that it is possible to read them in a way that emphasizes this effort rather than allowing the typologies we use to introduce them to solidify into something like *a priori* categories. Fighting that tendency, and also fighting the insidious remainder of solipsism inherited from Cartesian thought, seem much more likely elements of the difficulty in question than failure to decide on which part of the phrase ("collective" or "self") bears greater emphasis.

Yet none of this is to say that Shils provides us with all of the answers to questions that arise in this regard. There is much more to do. Still, if the phrase "social thought" continues to have resonance, as I believe it does, I would tend to assume that "collective self-consciousness" is caught up in that ongoing resonance as well. It is the great merit of *CST* to call our attention both to Shils' vision, and to the possibility of seeing this vision not just in terms of sociology in the sense of sociology departments in academic settings. Shils and others have heeded the calling of *social thought*, and pursued a consensual vision, and I hope that it is still possible for us to do so. It is certainly no less difficult.

I conclude with Shils' own concluding words regarding consensual sociology (read social thought), which are thoroughly Polanyian in spirit:

It leaves to the human beings to whom it is addressed the freedom of interpretation and judgment which is needed in the public life of a reasonably decent society. It recognizes its own limitations and the limitations in human powers more generally. These are important virtues in an age which is tempted by scientific aspirations and beliefs in the total transformation of societies (Shils 1980, 92).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The story is much longer than needs to be told here. The summary I often give is that, as an undergraduate, I completed an "interdisciplinary" major in philosophy, religion, and sociology. I completed graduate degrees in both philosophy and sociology (and took a bit of graduate-level theology), but I have never really been able to make the scope of my major concerns any narrower than it was when I completed that undergraduate major. I am very fortunate to be employed at a school that values this inability.

<sup>2</sup>It is important in this context to note the rather different sense carried by the word "moral" in the phrase "moral affirmation," from that carried by the phrase "moral connection" above. In Smith's summary, it means something like "approving acceptance," and is consistent with the assumption of autonomy in the sense of giving the law (norm) to oneself.

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