



THE HUMAN FACE OF KNOWLEDGE: A RESPONSE TO JACOBS AND BLUM



Stephen Turner

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ABSTRACT

This is a brief response to comments by Struan Jacobs and Peter Blum on The Calling of Social Thought, Rediscovering the Work of Edward Shils, a recent collection of essays edited by Christopher Adair-Toteff and Stephen Turner. It identifies a distinctive contribution of Shils to the larger problem of the tacit.

Struan Jacobs is right to point out that there are several chapters that should and perhaps could have been included relating Shils to other thinkers, such as T.S. Eliot. The “should” in this case would be an editor’s wish; the “could” part, finding the right person to do it, is always the hard part. It would have also been nice to relate him to Frank Knight, who was a formative influence, and to Robert Park, whose sensibility he took a great deal from, and admired. Like Park, Shils had a personal interest in social worlds, in workers, and in ordinary people, and Chicago provided him with a rich variety of them. The workings of a family restaurant in Chinatown in Chicago fascinated him, and inspired his loyalty. So did a young priest from Europe who came to Chicago to take his classes, and whom he admired for his parish work. Academics, especially those who were too concerned with climbing the prestige ladder, were, for him, somewhat amusing. He loved academic gossip, however, and retailed it. It is too bad that this part of his character was not preserved.

A reviewer pointed out the failure to deal with India—something I would have also liked to do, as well as Africa, which interested him especially for the contrast between the post-Colonial intellectuals and leaders in the British and French Empires whom he saw as oriented to their respective centers—London and Paris. Our expected chapter on the relation to Parsons was sadly lost because of the tragic illness of the contributor, Uta Gehrhardt, which we learned of too late to replace her. *Minerva*, to which he devoted so much of his life and effort, deserved its own history: in this case there is at least an excellent article. Shils as a pedagogue and contributor to the Soc Sci sequence at Chicago deserved treatment. His relation to Saul Bellow has been told, from the point of view of Bellow’s biographers, but there are other relations to historians and writers that could have been explored. So could his relation with RAND. One hopes all these themes will get the treatment they deserve.

It would have been nice to deal with Popper and Aron, as well as Polanyi—these tremendously prolific writers were important to Shils. But Shils was not a philosopher by temperament, and although he taught Hegel and other such thinkers, he did not engage them as a philosopher would have. Similarly for science, which deserved more discussion: for Shils it was the scientists as a breed that intrigued, and he had plenty of experience with them, as individuals, and this informed his view of science. The philosophical ideas, such as Popper's late discovery of World III, interested him as persuasive observations, not as matters that he was interested in contesting or engaging with on philosophical grounds. In this respect, the comparison with Oakeshott is important. Shils certainly thought of him as intellectually similar, perhaps even as the most similar of all intellectuals. He had tried to recruit him to the Committee on Social Thought. He joked about the bad food at Caius College, where Oakeshott had been. There is something important in their shared interest in antinomies. But Shils sociologized this topic into the puzzle of intellectuals' rejection of their own societies—a rejection that now takes the form of “wokeness” and has become a challenge to civility in the name of civility. And this was characteristic: for Oakeshott it was the intellectual interdependence of the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism that was interesting; for Shils it was the same, and they saw the problems of liberalism as coming out of its internal ambiguities. But the differences also were apparent: for Shils, *who* was on each side mattered to understanding, and to the long history of these antinomic traditions. These loomed larger in Shils' later thinking: he always recognized dissensus, and studied it. But after the Nixon affair, he saw what he called the antinomies of liberalism as the key to the political conflicts of the present. And if anything these have become more important to our polarized politics. But the more fundamental relationship, as I at least think of it, is this: Shils, Oakeshott, and Polanyi as a kind of triangle of theorists of the tacit and tradition. They each deal with different aspects of it, but in a way that does not conflict.

Peter Blum raises the question of what it means to be a sociologist, and the distinctive contribution of Shils to these issues provides part of the answer to the question of what Shils added to this triangular relation. To be a sociologist, for Shils, was to put a human face on ideas, on notions of morality, tradition, and the like, to see what they mean in the lives of people living in the real world of attachments, face to face interaction, and practical affairs. The topic both Jacobs and Blum focus on, and Shils continually referred to, is this concern seen from the side of what Shils took to be, for understanding “society,” a particularly crucial “idea”: the mysterious and largely tacit “collective self-consciousness” which gets manifested in our mutual relations.

Shils knew that he would be subjected to the kind of reductive analysis Jacobs alludes to—as a Cold war ideologue, cheerleader for “development,” Parsons acolyte, and so forth. All of these caricatures are wrong. That his subtlety, sympathy for his subjects, and his ambivalence about the larger social processes at stake would be lost on hostile readers is something he would have expected, despite the fact that they are plain to see in his actual writings. This well-grounded expectation perhaps explains the embargo he placed on his papers, which are still not organized. In any case, subtlety, sympathy, and ambivalence are the first things lost when a thinker is reconstructed and pigeonholed, and also lost by the passage of time and the disappearance of the contexts in which works were composed. Shils often said that a great text was inexhaustible—that there was always more to be discovered. With all his flaws and failures, that is true for Shils as well as for Polanyi, and for some of the same reasons: they were thinkers who thought systematically but never finished the system. They left us with good things to think about.