

Tradition in the Work of Shils and Polanyi: A Few Comments

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of, and improvement upon, Toward a General Theory of Action, there is to be found a philosophical problem lurking in Polanyi's and Shils' writings on tradition: in what ways the principle of methodological individualism should be qualified so as better to understand human action.

Dick Moodey's article on Edward Shils' and Michael Polanyi's analyses of tradition is a worthy contribution, not only for the historical background provided for both Polanyi's and Shils' intellectual preoccupations and their shared development of those preoccupations but also, and more importantly, for Polanyi's and Shils' accomplishments in advancing our understanding of human action. To reduce the many details of their overlapping efforts in order better to understand the relation between various forms of knowledge, tradition, and society to only one literary expression of those efforts, it is well known that Shils read and commented upon (in what surely must have been in an extraordinarily detailed way, as Shils was wont to do) a draft of *Personal Knowledge*. It seems to me that one can see Shils' hand at various places throughout that underappreciated work, most obviously from pages 208-211. I think, for example, that the stylistically awkward "meanwhile" introducing the last paragraph on page 208 likely indicates Polanyi's incorporation of Shils' comments directly into the manuscript of *Personal Knowledge*.

Moodey rightly points us in the direction of investigating further the different ways that Polanyi and Shils productively complicated our understanding of human action. It is important that he has done so, for the understanding of human action today is all too often mired in an antiquated simplicity precisely because the various ways that Polanyi and Shils complicated and, by so doing, further developed that understanding have been largely ignored. Nonetheless, one ought to undertake that investigation without any hagiographic prejudice; for to do so would be alien to the character of both men and their dedication to the advance of knowledge. We, thus, examine their work critically so as to clarify further the problems before us.

It is clear from Talcott Parsons' and Edward Shils' *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951: 49) that one motivation for the formulation of the "Action Frame of Reference" and its "Pattern Variables" arose out of dissatisfaction with the "dichotomous classifications" of Ferdinand Tönnies' influential book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. The heuristic merit of Tönnies' categories "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) and "society" (*Gesellschaft*) and their respective forms of action of "essential will" (*Wesenwille*, an example of which is the tradition-bound action in a local village) and "arbitrary will" (*Kürwille*, an example of which is the calculation of self-interest in the market-place) is not called into question. However, Parsons and Shils rightly recognized that the contrasts between these categories were too elementary to describe human action adequately. They knew that the categories of social relation, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and their respective forms of action pervade, or intermingle with, one another, and that they do so, in varying degrees, throughout all periods of

history. Thus, they set out in *Toward a General Theory* to differentiate further those dichotomous categories. In so doing, Parsons and Shils continued the work of Max Weber (1978: 24-26, 215-16), whose types of social action (instrumentally rational, value-rational, affectual, and traditional) and legitimate domination (rational, traditional, and charismatic) also differentiated, thereby properly complicating, Tönnies' dichotomies.

Despite the manifestly clumsy apparatus and obfuscating formulations of *Toward a General Theory*, its attempt, through the formulation of the pattern variables, to complicate, and thereby move beyond, Tönnies' schema was a step forward in our understanding of human action, and it deserves praise. Nonetheless, the place of tradition in human action was not sufficiently addressed. Not doing so was a marked deficiency. All one has to do is to glance at the dichotomies of the pattern variables of *Toward a General Theory* (affectivity— affective neutrality, self-orientation—collectivity-orientation, universalism—particularism, ascription—achievement, and specificity—diffusiveness) and one can see that tradition and the various conceptual problems that tradition implies (about some of which, see below) hover analytically over each of the contrasting categories and the relation between them. Even so, it is not fair to *Toward a General Theory* to say that it altogether ignored tradition as a factor in human action, for it is implied in the analysis of culture (see its Chapter 3). It is, however, fair to say that the abstractness of its analytical framework (and likely more) were obstacles to incorporating properly the place of tradition in human affairs. It is here where Polanyi's and Shils' subsequent intellectual development made an advance.

When Polanyi analyzes the fiduciary (hence, moral) commitment of, for example, a scientist, and the place of (a changing, developing) tradition in that commitment, and when Shils (1975: 111-26) differentiates different types or orientations of human action as personal, primordial, sacred, and civil and then further investigates the bearing of (a changing, developing) tradition on each of them (1981), they, too, are properly complicating Tönnies' categories of action. But they do so in a way that fundamentally fragments the analytical and historicist dichotomy of Tönnies' categories because of the place of tradition in their analyses. For example, the individual's calculation of his or her own advantage in the *gesellschaftliche* market-place rests upon the *gemeinschaftliche* traditions of a usually territorially bounded rule of law and honoring one's contract which, in turn, make the realization of that calculation possible. It should be noted that Polanyi and Shils were not the first to recognize the importance of tradition for many of the activities and social relations in modern life. It is certainly to be found in Weber's *Economy and Society*, in particular in his investigation of the on-going antinomies in religion and law, as can be seen respectively in his insistence that charismatic domination was not only in the past but also appears historically in the most diverse combinations (1978: 1133) and in his observation of the continuation of substantive rationality (e.g., natural law) in law (1978: 865-71). However, while the recognition of the on-going significance of tradition for social relations and individual action is found in Weber's work, he did not generalize upon that recognition. Doing so was the accomplishment of Polanyi and Shils.¹

Now, it may be that students of Polanyi's works take the above mentioned advances in our understanding for granted. However, while doing so, they should also acknowledge that, by and large, the contributions of Polanyi and Shils are ignored today. One can see this avoidance in the fashionable enthrallment with the category "modernity" and more recently "globalization." The objection raised here to this fashionable enthusiasm is not to deny—to resort to one side of the dichotomy of the pattern variables—an increased emphasis in human action on "self-orientation," "universalism," and "achievement." Nonetheless, traditions of varying kinds persist; and one should add, given Polanyi's and Shils' contributions, necessarily so. The recognition of that necessity exposes the complications of properly understanding human action—complications addressed by

Polanyi and Shils. Even though they have advanced our understanding of the role of tradition in human affairs, much work still needs to be done in investigating its place in activities today. After all, one should remember that the classic, but today still compelling, anthropological example of spontaneous order is language and its acquisition. Thus, the task facing us today is to re-focus our attention on better understanding non-market spontaneous orders and the traditions from which they draw or that make them possible, one example of which is the “scientific community” as described so compellingly by Polanyi.

Languages and other spontaneous orders force us to consider again the long-standing philosophical and anthropological problems of understanding what “culture” is and its relation to individual action. Although Moodey does not refer to the problem of culture *per se*, other than references to the unsatisfactorily formulated “cultural systems” in *Toward a General Theory*, the problem is implied in his discussion of tradition in Shils’ later work, specifically Moodey’s mention of the “exteriority” of traditions and individuals as “participants” in tradition. Surely, for example, a language exists outside, exterior to, the mind of any particular individual. What does it mean for it to exist outside the mind of any single individual? We know that a language can be materially embodied in a book; and that, when so materially embodied, it can contribute to its standardization, as when Luther translated the Bible into High German. But obviously this material embodiment of language in a book does not account for the exteriority of language. A language continues, remains “alive” or “animated,” only insofar as it exists in the minds and speech of a number of individuals, that is, the individual participates in the (tradition of) the language; and when he or she does so likely modifies it, even if only imperceptibly. No doubt, language is an obvious example of symbolic “exteriority.” I raise it here so that we do not become diverted from the problems before us of understanding both what culture is and its relation to human action by distracting terms like “group mind.”

As I noted earlier, the problem of culture for human action had been taken up in Chapter 3 of *Toward a General Theory*, although encumbered there by both the vocabulary of the “systems of value-orientation” and a mistaken or, at least misleading, emphasis on “imitation” and “identification” as explanations. Nonetheless, continuities between the analysis of culture in *Toward a General Theory* and Shils’ later work on tradition can be observed. In the former (p.162), the essence of culture is described as the “interpersonal generalization” made possible by symbols (or “symbolization”), while in Shils’ later work, as Moodey notes, culture is described as the “inter-individual structure” of collective self-consciousness. One immediately observes the continuity. But that continuity of “interpersonal generalization” and “inter-individual structure” is not, as Moodey seems to argue, Shils’ attempt to hang on to a remnant of a “group mind.” Shils rightly maintained the principle of methodological individualism, namely, that a collective self-consciousness (a shared understanding of the self, such that there is a “we,” for example, the recognition, with attendant self-classification, that one speaks the same language as another) or, for our purposes here, culture exists only in the brains and activities of individuals. Human action is the action of an individual (although perhaps complicated by occasional “outbreaks” of “contagious enthusiasm” of various kinds, including panic). And yet, the actions of individuals can be and often are co-ordinated; that is, individuals often act, in varying degrees, in concert with one, or in response to, another. Can the latter be adequately accounted for by explanations that are overly atomistic, specifically, as if the orientations of the mind were limited to the individual’s pursuit of only his or her own advantage—a limitation presumably arising from the behavioral impulse to pleasure (Grosby 2009)? Isn’t it the case that when an individual acts in concert with or in response to another individual other considerations or “symbolic properties” are recognized by the actors as they enter into (or are already found within) a social relation, however episodic? How are we to understand those other considerations or “symbolic properties”? Certainly, “objectivations” (a term that Shils took from Hans Freyer’s *Theory of Objective Mind: An Introduction to the*

Philosophy of Culture) or symbols—often expressed through, or the focus of, institutional arrangements, for example, law for a legal system—exist external to the minds of individuals but to which, when recognized, however tacitly, the actions of those individuals are oriented (or even “drawn up into,” as when one looks at the “objectivated mind” of an artist in his or her work of art). One can see the place of both the mind of the individual and “objective mind,” that is, symbol (which may, as in our previous examples of a book or a work of art, or may not, as with custom, be materially embodied), and their relation to one another in human action discussed in *Toward a General Theory* (see p.160; some of the formulations there are likely drawn from Freyer’s *Theory*).

There are thorny methodological and philosophical problems here that are by no means adequately dealt with by recourse to the putative explanations of “imitation,” “identification,” or, as one finds today, “practices”—all of which seem to me to end up avoiding the problems. A more valuable attempt to address the problems can be found in Karl Popper’s *Objective Knowledge*, especially in chapter 3, “Epistemology without a Knowing Subject.” This is not the place to take up these problems, other than to note, as I have stated on other occasions, that it seems to me that while the principle of methodological individualism has to be maintained, it also must be qualified. It will have to suffice here for the problem to have been raised indirectly by Moodey and now explicitly by me. However, I add, as I hope that I have made clear, that it also seems to me that one way to understand the concern common to Polanyi and Shils—the place of tradition in human affairs—was precisely this problem.

I conclude my remarks on Moodey’s stimulating and good paper with two further, but minor observations. The first is that the problems on Shils’ mind that made him so receptive to the thought of Michael Polanyi can be seen in Shils’ earliest writings from the late 1930s on consensus and deference. The problems had also earlier been on Parsons’ mind, as can be seen in his 1938 article “The Role of Ideas in Social Action”; but he did not follow up on them as did Polanyi and Shils. Second, I doubt very much that, as Moodey notes quoting Pooley, the memory of Karl Mannheim remained a haunting presence in Shils’ thought. I never saw any evidence for it. Frank Knight had too much influence on Shils for that to be so; and it may be that Knight’s (1982) ruminations on freedom and liberty were factors that also predisposed Shils to the thought of Polanyi.

Endnote

¹Mention should also be made here of the worthwhile differentiation of Tönnies’ category of *Gemeinschaft* both by Herman Schmalenbach (1977) in his analysis of the *Bund* and by Helmuth Plessner (1999) in *The Limits of Community*.

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