

Edward Shils

1910-1995

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Michael Polanyi and Edward Shils shared a great many views, and in their long mutual relationship influenced one another. This memorial note examines the relationship and some of the respects in which Shils presented a Polanyian social theory organized around the notion of tradition.

Edward Shils, Professor of Sociology and Social Thought at the University of Chicago and longtime fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge died in January of 1995 at the age of 84. Shils was one of the grand intellectual figures of his generation, and he had close personal relations with several of the other grand intellectual figures of his generation, including Michael Polanyi. In what follows, I will concentrate on his relation to Polanyi, which in many ways was formative for his sociological thought. Indeed there is a strong sense in which Shils' mature thought represents the extension of the central Polanyian themes of the role of faith at the basis of intellectual traditions, the importance of the direct personal initiation of an individual into a tradition, and the idea that "tradition" was a term wrongly appropriated by the Enlightenment to describe superstition and irrationality. Shils also devoted much of his time in his later years to the editing of the journal *Minerva*, a journal devoted to matters of policy with respect to learning, science, and higher education. *Minerva* focused on precisely those themes that had been formative for Polanyi himself in the crucible of the struggle against the social relations of science movement in the thirties and forties. Shils' involvement with these issues and with the Polanyian theme of tradition dates from this period as well.

The thought of Polanyi on science itself was deeply engraved in the whole of the massive editorial effort which Shils gave to *Minerva*. *Minerva*, founded in 1964, soon became a journal read and admired by a small but influential number of prominent academic and scientific administrators; several such figures were frequently represented on its pages, as were scholars in many areas related to the problem of the history and significance of the present organization of intellectual life, such as historians of philanthropic efforts in support of science and scholarship. Typical themes from Polanyi's writings in opposition to Bernal and the social relations of science movement, such as the distinction between science and technology, were frequent topics in *Minerva*. Polanyi wrote an essay in the first issue of *Minerva*, which in many respects set out the principal themes of the journal over the next twenty years. The essay was one of Polanyi's best: "The Republic of Science." It synthesized and updated his writings on science and its governance and, in several ways, strikingly anticipated later work in "science of technology studies" particularly with respect to the networks which check and sustain scientists' beliefs in their own results.

Shils shared these ideas and concerns. But I think that there is a much deeper and more encompassing relationship or engagement with Polanyian themes to be found in Shils, and in what follows I will briefly examine its character, and its historical origins. The atmosphere among intellectuals and especially scientists in the thirties and forties has been written about endlessly. The era was dominated by the highly visible fact of the long economic depression of the thirties which gave new life to the hope of a rational regulation of economic life and encouraged the idea that communism represented the best chance for bringing this about. "Progressive" forces were identified with the Soviet Union and its policies, and the status and merits of the Soviet model, which focused on heavy industry, were widely discussed. J. D. Bernal, the product of a famous British scientific family and member of the intellectual

establishment, led a scientists' movement to create a socially responsible science, organized collectively to serve collective purposes. Only a transformation of science, Bernal argued, could overcome the irrationalities of the present form of organization of society and only a transformed society could fully utilize the benefits that properly organized and productively oriented science could produce. The term of art which was used in progressive circles to describe the rational organization of society was "planning." Bernal advocated the "planning" of science and the planning of society. Polanyi, of course, opposed both, and his turn toward philosophy arose from this opposition.

The notion of planning has not yet found its historian. It was a notion which found favor (both as a way of describing the political tendencies of the day as well as a way of proceeding politically among a wide variety of political viewpoints). Many American observers, for example, saw the rise of Nazism, Fascism, Bolshevism, and European Labor Socialism as embodiments of the political idea of planning, and indeed the Nazis, Fascists, and Bolsheviks all engaged ostentatiously in planning and for large projects of various kinds. For some socialists, such as Hendrik de Man, planning became a term which defined the movements themselves, and de Man accordingly changed his allegiances from socialism to fascism, which he reasoned would be more able to initiate planning.

This movement produced its own countermovement. The war against Hitler produced a great deal of soul searching about what precisely differentiated the enemies of Hitler from Hitler, a problem given a certain specificity by the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, which suggested that the difference between Bolshevism and Nazism was primarily tactical and their relation contingent. A great outpouring of writing took place on the common heritage of democracy, drawn in part on a long quiescent body of 19th century ideas about the ancient Germanic roots of Anglo-Saxon freedom and constitutionalism. T.S. Eliot sought to reconsider the Christian roots of culture at the same period, and his writings influenced Shils as well.

Sociologists contributed something to this literature, which itself reflected sociological themes of an earlier generation. But during the late forties there was a change in sociology, much of which was the result of a high level of optimism that the field was on the verge of becoming a true science. Shils had a hand in this effort, and indeed for many academic sociologists he is best known for the brief period of his collaboration with the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons. But Shils was soon disenchanted with the quest for a scientific sociology. And because he was more attuned to the problem of tradition than his contemporaries, it fell to Shils to say something of importance about it. What he said drew on many sources.

Shils became involved with the British war effort and with the interviewing of German soldiers who had been captured, and through this route arrived at conclusions that pointed toward some important insights into the way in which traditions and central values figure in social life. He came to understand that what sociologists call the primary group, the people with whom one has face to face relationships, was the basis of the solidarity of the fighting group. The mutual loyalty of the members of the unit, rather than devotion to Nazi ideology, was the basis of the effectiveness of the unit. Nevertheless, Nazi ideology had a role. Some member of the primary group was, typically, oriented to the ideology and provided the link of solidarity and commitments which connected devotion to the regime to the devotion of members of the fighting group ([1948] 1975, pp.351-352). Shils came to see that this model applied to tradition generally. Some people are, as he put it, oriented to the center, that is to say, oriented to the core embodiments of a tradition, and these people constitute, so to speak, the spine of society to which others are connected through their face to face relations as ribs are connected, that is to say the spine supports the body with the help of the ribs just as tradition holds together society but largely through the mediation of face to face relationships of loyalty and the like and personal bonds

rather than directly through the influence of the tradition on each individual.

Shils greatly elaborated this insight about the center of traditions, and similar ideas were developed by such contemporaries as Robert Redfield, anthropologist at the University of Chicago, in his own studies of Mexican villages. But although Shils thought systematically about these topics, he did not write systematically about them, or at least did not write a systematic treatise in which the relation between all of his central ideas were precisely defined. Shils became fascinated with the many ways in which the center of the tradition and indeed various special traditions and local traditions of society were presented and experienced symbolically. In one of his most famous essays, "The Meaning of the Coronation," Shils and Michael Young examined the ceremony of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth and the complex ways in which the English responded to it. His point was that the symbolic representation of the central political and religious institutions of the society as represented in the coronation ritual itself evokes a response even from those who oppose these institutions which choose the remarkable extent to which they recognize and respect this centrality ([1956] 1975, pp. 135-152). Shils saw also that the antinomianism and antiestablishment attitudes of intellectuals derived from an even more complex relation to central institutions: they treated the ideals of the center, to which they were especially attuned, as standards against which they could hold the actual conduct of the central institutions and their representatives, and found them wanting (1972, especially pp. 3-22).

For an audience familiar with Polanyi, I need hardly point out the connections with Polanyi's own thought. The image Polanyi had of science as a tradition parallel to the Church, defined by a distinctive kind of common faith, is like Shils' image of society as a whole, society oriented to a common spiritual center. And Shils, like Polanyi, had a great respect not only for religion but for the traditions of the special professions, such as the law. He certainly took from Polanyi the emphasis on the personal transmission of these traditions, and the idea that it was especially difficult to establish a living tradition. The problems of creating a scientific tradition in the countries of the third world, for example, signalled to Shils something basic about the character of traditions in general, as well as the dependence of science on its "traditional" and personal character.

If we were to go through Shils' various concerns one by one, we would find Polanyian connections, strong or weak, in almost every one of them. It is clear that Shils' relationship to Polanyi was intensely instructive to Shils and amounted in a way to a kind of dialectical partnership that stimulated Shils' thought and Polanyi's as well. Polanyi's relationship to social scientists and psychologists is as yet unchronicled, but the relationships were often quite formative for those who came into contact with him. Donald Campbell, for example, has told me of his own discussions with Polanyi in the fifties and the value they had in his own development -- but one would be hard pressed to simply catalog "influences" of Polanyi on Campbell. I think it is significant that Polanyi stimulated the people he came into personal contact with in ways that cannot be reduced to a model of "influence." The ways in which Polanyi himself drew from these relationships is difficult to chart, but it is clear that the range of Polanyi's later thought, and its quality, depended on these personal relationships and the discussions that he participated in. In *Personal Knowledge*, I think, there is evidence of Polanyi's absorption of these concerns, especially in the chapters on skills (1958:53-65) and even more so in the chapter on conviviality (1958:203-245).

Shils, I think, reflected on Polanyi and Polanyi's experiences long after Polanyi's death, and they had an important role in his own thought. Polanyi represented for him a kind of model of the great scientists. I knew Shils in the last 14 years of his life, and I am struck in retrospect by the number of times he quoted Polanyi or relayed information about Polanyi in the course of making points about matters that had nothing to do directly with Polanyi. At one point,

for example, we were discussing the history of sociology, a subject we both shared an intense but somewhat ironic interest in, as well as the history of the University of Chicago. He often quoted Polanyi as saying that science has an apostolic succession, and he used this to make a point about the university and its great sociologists as well. Robert E. Park was his own teacher, or rather the great figure in the Sociology Department whose aura and style had suffused it and created the Chicago School of Sociology, which was beginning to break up when Shils came to Chicago and Park retired. Park, Shils thought, was one of those rare individuals that make a university great by their presence. Shils believed that even at a great institution like the University of Chicago there were only four or five such individuals at any time who were truly great and who sustained the greatness of the university.

Shils believed that Polanyi had this kind of greatness as well, so it is perhaps no surprise that Shils was so receptive to the kind of dialogue or dialectical relationship with Polanyi that I have hinted at. What Shils in the end made of this relationship will perhaps be seen in his large project to be posthumously published, *The Movements of Knowledge*. I would expect to find Polyanian themes throughout, but his own themes developed and were transformed through contact with a new range of topics and new ideas from various sources, not least from Shils himself.

Shils observed, at the Kent State Conference, that Polanyi had been a brilliant eulogist, and commented that it was hardly worth dying nowadays, without Polanyi to give one's eulogy. In Shils' last years, he wrote a number of biographical essays on scholars he had known and outlived. These essays were in a sense Shils' own work as a eulogist. The titles of the essays are often somewhat deceptive. Stories about one scholar often appear in articles about another scholar. Polanyi figures in several of these, in some cases in large ways, as in Shils' paper on Robert Hutchins, in which he relates his efforts to bring Polanyi to the University of Chicago and the Committee on Social Thought (1991, 191-192). In other essays, Polanyi makes a cameo appearance, as in Shils' posthumously published recollection of Karl Mannheim:

In the early evening of January 7, 1947, I was in a taxi accompanying Michael Polanyi to King's Cross Station for his return journey to Manchester, where he was still a professor of physical chemistry. Polanyi was a little older than Mannheim, but they were both members of the Galileo Society. They had known each other in Budapest. Although he was working in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for the study of man-made fibers, Polanyi was an intellectual highbrow, especially interested in social affairs. He was a liberal and a severe critic of social planning. He had very little sympathy with Mannheim--to the point of indifference--while Mannheim was very sensitive to "Michi's" lack of sympathy. When I said to Polanyi, as we were nearing the station, that Karl Mannheim had died, Polanyi made no reply at all. He was probably thinking one of his philosophical conundrums and there was no clear category in his mind for Mannheim. (1995, 234)

I think this also conveys something about Polanyi's ability to make hard intellectual judgments and live with them. Shils had this ability as well. Like Polanyi, Shils was sensitive to the element of the sacred in human activities, and respected it when it was genuinely present. But Shils was entirely unsentimental about individuals, and did not hide his judgements of them. Shils not infrequently expressed these judgements in a kind of sardonic humor that was never quite cynical, but was sometimes quite, to use a Victorian word, shocking, both in its directness and tone. Yet Shils was also an astonishingly helpful person, who went out of his way for others whose motives and efforts he respected, and especially for students. He would say "pull your socks up, Mr. So and So," but he would also spend precious time in helping Mr. So and So to produce something constructive and valuable, and he had a sharp eye for the valuable. Much of his editorial work at *Minerva* consisted in the transformation of poorly developed texts into useful

contributions -- a process in which the author sometimes became a bemused bystander.

Shils was a great scholar. His scholarship was deeply influenced by the times in which he lived. He was an active participant for the causes that Polanyi was also an active participant in, and shared Polanyi's sympathies, for example for religion. Time will tell what survives these concerns and what reflected narrow circumstances that have changed. The generation to which Shils belonged was Polanyi's generation. Shils had an affinity for older men and women and made discerning judgements about them. But he also respected their achievements. His preservation of his reflections on them was a great service and an act of Polanyian respect for intellectual greatness. When Shils said at Kent State that there was no one any more who could give a good eulogy, as Polanyi had done, it was a comment that reflected the passing of this generation. We are still far too close in time to this generation to sit in judgement of them, as I have suggested. But we are not so close as to be unable to select from the vast outpouring of academic writings of this century the bright lights whose memory we need to preserve and whose thought we need to continue to reflect on. Shils, like Polanyi, belongs in this category.

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