

The Significance of Shils*

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Edward Shils was a widely recognized but misunderstood thinker. The original contexts of his thought are not well understood and greatly distorted by associating him with the concerns of Parsons. Shils provides a fully comparable alternative to the thought of Habermas and Foucault, with essentially similar roots: practice theory, the dissolution of Marxism in the twenties, and Carl Schmitt. Though Shils was indebted to the American sociological tradition, with respect to these issues his sources were outside it: in Hendrik de Man, T. S. Eliot, and Michael Polanyi. It is shown how Shils responded to Schmitt's argument about the inherent conflict between democracy and liberalism in terms of an account of civility and tradition, and how this argument results in a critique of Foucault, Habermas, and collectivistic liberalism.

Edward Shils, who died in 1995, was a widely recognized figure in social theory. He received many honors, among them the Balzan award, a Nobel-like award for fields without Nobels, and the Jefferson Lectureship, perhaps the highest form of recognition in the humanities in the United States. Truly transatlantic, he divided his time between Cambridge and Chicago. He left a strong mark on the intellectual life of Britain, where he played the major role in introducing both Weber and American-style empirical sociology during the postwar years. The journal he founded and edited, *Minerva* (1996), published a memorial issue that included tributes from students and associates, especially in England, and a memorial appeared in the proceedings of the American Philosophical Society (Eisenstadt 1997). His work was the subject of a festschrift to which many of the most prominent figures of the social sciences contributed (Ben-David and Clark 1977), and of another edited volume, based on a 1985 Symposium, on his notion of center and periphery (Greenfield and Martin, 1988). A volume of his work appears in the University of Chicago Press Heritage of Sociology series (Shils [1972] 1982). His students, such as S. N. Eisenstadt and Joseph Ben-David, became world-class scholars in their own right. Toward the end of his life he was an active member of the Castelgandolfo Colloquia and an officer of its sponsor, the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*. This brought him into personal and mutually respectful contact with the Pope. Memorial services were given for him both in Chicago and Cambridge, and a memorial symposium in Vienna.

Many of Shils's writings have been influential, and several are minor classics. "The Cohesion and Disintegration of the *Wehrmacht* in World War II," written with Morris Janowitz, is the classic account of military unit solidarity and the role of ideology in

*This article was presented in a different form at the Theory Section minisymposium on the Vocation of Social Theory in Toronto, 1997. It was revised while I was a fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, whose support is gratefully acknowledged. I am also pleased to acknowledge the advice of three anonymous reviewers for *Sociological Theory*, one of whom suggested that, given my references to what Shils said, I explain my personal relationship to him. I was in contact with him with some frequency after 1982, when I was a member of his NEH Seminar on the Sociology of Intellectuals and attended a seminar on Weber and Tocqueville. We usually met when we were both in Chicago, every year or two, and on a few other occasions. We always spoke about science, but the discussions digressed in many directions, notably toward the history of social thought, universities, and sociology. Shils did not regard me as a disciple, and in the course of his I attended while in the seminar he would ironically note my disagreements with his interpretations of Weber. Please address correspondence to the author at the Dept. of Philosophy, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620. Turner@chuma.cas.usf.edu

relation to it. His paper on "The Meaning of the Coronation," with Michael Young (1956), in which the idea of the charismatic character of central institutions appears in developed form, has often been reprinted. Works more familiar to present fashion, notably Clifford Geertz's *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (1980) are its direct descendants. The series of papers that followed "Center and Periphery" established this as a sociological concept, and as his most used concept. His short book, *The Torment of Secrecy*, written in the McCarthy era, is still read and was recently reissued ([1956] 1996). It stands out as an example of Shils's ability to penetrate beneath the level of ideological dispute to recognize the intrinsic problems of social life that political conflicts embody, in this case the problems of trust that arise in connection with science, bureaucratic secrecy, democracy, and "populism," and the difficulty of resolving them from within the framework of liberal democracy. *Tradition* was published in 1981. His translation of Weber's methodological writings, now fifty years old, is still standard. New collections have appeared of his writings on higher education (1997d, 1997b). It is perhaps an important sign that his longstanding concern with civility, a topic whose importance is now clear, was the focus of at least one obituary (Boyd 1998) and one of the collections of his papers, beautifully edited by his student Steven Grosby, that have appeared after his death (1997b).

To speak of Shils as a lost figure would thus be somewhat peculiar. But there are good reasons for doing so, especially in connection with American sociology and more broadly with social theory. Shils never received the kind of recognition that his contemporaries Robert K. Merton and Talcott Parsons did, and in particular was never recognized for his "theory of society," though in fact Shils was one of the few writers on social theory in this century whose primary concern was the nature of society, and one of the much smaller number to say anything distinctive on the subject.

The reasons Shils never was taken up as a leading "social theorist" are various. One is that he never presented this "theory" in final form; indeed, for reasons that will become clear later, there is a category problem with Shils's thought that does not arise for Parsons and Merton, who are straightforwardly "sociological" thinkers. Another reason is that his thought appears not to hang together. The list of concerns and topics given above, for example, seems incoherent, and the list is not complete. Yet this incoherence is perhaps illusory: as it is sometimes said of Veblen, he thought systematically, that is to say in terms of the overarching relations between his themes, but did not write systematic works. The topics fit closely with his main theoretical concerns, and through this, with one another, and each of his apparently unrelated interests led him to modify his general picture of society.

Yet another reason is this: his concerns were insufficiently recognizable to the kind of thinking that came to dominate social theory after the seventies, and all too recognizable as part of a fifties obsession with consensus, shared values, and the rest of the now unfashionable Parsonsian problematic. This, I will show, was a profound misperception. While still in his early forties, Shils collaborated with Talcott Parsons on *Toward a General Theory of Action* (1951), and consequently he stuck in the consciousness of many sociologists as a junior partner to Parsons. But Shils was never as narrow as this relationship might have suggested, and in any case he soon moved on with respect to the central concerns he shared with Parsons, and moved in a direction that has proven to be more durable and significant than the failed effort of the early fifties to create a scientific theoretical sociology around a scheme of definitions. Nevertheless the association lingered, and there were indeed many commonalities between Parsons's concerns and his own. Shils never publically repudiated Parsons, and respected him personally. The discrediting of Parsons in the early seventies, justified or unjustified, tainted the concerns they had in common.

The misreading is understandable. Shils was read in terms of the familiar, the Parsonsian, and the other dimensions of his thinking were ignored. One moral to this article will

be that what obscured his thought for American sociologists and social theorists is closely connected to the deficiencies of American social theory, and especially of sociological theory. The problem may be put in the following way: If anyone rose above the usual deficiencies of American sociological theory—its monolingualism, limited general literacy, ignorance of history and philosophy, obsession with local disciplinary status hierarchies, faddishness, political naivete, intellectual subservience to European thinkers, reductive thinking in terms of brand-name “perspectives,” and its self-abasing craving for respect from quantitative sociologists—it was Shils. Yet precisely in the respects in which he rose above all this, it seems, his work ceased to be recognized as relevant, in large part because the context of his thought was simply unknown to his American readers. There is a sense that if he had been a European he would have been taken more seriously by American audiences, but this is not the same as being taken seriously on the original terms of reference of his thought.¹

It is not the intention of this small article to rectify all of the misunderstandings of Shils, or even to provide an overview of Shils’s thought, and indeed I will say little about the texts themselves, almost all of which are readily accessible. The article is an attempt to understand the larger intellectual context of Shils’s thought. He read, as Thomas Kuhn said of him, everything (1979:vii). It would be hopeless to “derive” the thought of such an omnivorous reader from a set of textual “influences.” But I will attempt to indicate, through the genealogy of several particular but crucial themes in Shils’s work, *how* he read, and how what he read was absorbed in his own thought, or used like the grain of sand in an oyster, as a kind of continual irritant to produce a valuable response, and how this improvement or transformation by slow accretion interacted with other, contemporary developments, such as the great political issues of the moment, which he in turn placed into a larger framework. This form of theorizing, or style of work, deserves to be understood on its own terms, and, indeed, emulated. But before it can be emulated it must be made visible. Relatively little of what Shils wrote was commentary, but the way he worked resembled writers such as Leo Strauss, who primarily expressed their own thought through commentary. And to understand either of them one must know what they are commenting on.

The payoff for this effort is surprising. Shils’s theoretical concerns can be located within twentieth-century thought in a way that we can see their historical kinship with the concerns of Habermas and Foucault, the twin Gods of present-day social theory. Understood in the right context, the context of European social and political thought, Shils is the representative—and perhaps the sole representative, with the possible exception of Ernest Gellner—of a fully developed social theoretical defense of liberal democracy, a defense that is comparable to the critiques of liberal democracy found in Foucault and Habermas. But grasping Shils’s significance without understanding the context is impossible. And to do this we must begin with the dissolution of Marxism in the twenties, when the paths that lead to Shils and to Habermas and Foucault diverge.

DE MAN AND THE CRISIS OF SOCIALISM

Shils made many autobiographical comments about his reading and his responses to texts, both in conversation and in print ([1972] 1982, 1997a). He often mentioned the books that had greatly influenced him, among them works that have now passed into the recesses of the collective memory of sociology, some of them works that were never part of the canon of sociology. One of these books was Hendrik de Man’s *The Psychology of Socialism*

¹I am reminded of the comment by the great historian of the Maghrib, Abdallah Laroui, who remarks in the introduction to the English translation of his great work, that “American scholars . . . tend to overestimate everything written in French, and this is true of not just an isolated few” (1977:4). And not just, one might add, the French.

([1928] 1974; cf. Shils 1972:vii), a book about class and ideology. De Man, one of the most prominent socialist thinkers of the time, is best remembered today because of his nephew, Paul, the late deconstructionist and self-proclaimed “cheerful nihilist,” and for his own political journey from the left to the extreme right, or rather from the left-wing thirties notion of planning to the barely distinguishable fascist notion of planning, and from this, in one brief but defining episode, to collaboration with the Nazis (which led to his trial for collaboration and a sentence of death *in absentia*). De Man justified this step by suggesting that if there was to be a state strong enough to carry out planning on behalf of the working class, the state first had to be strengthened, and only fascism provided a means by which this could be done (Dodge 1979:326–27; Pels 1991, 1998a; Sternhell 1994).

Shils’s attachment to the de Man book, which he reiterated many years after he first read it, is deeply revealing, for a number of reasons. One is that the book itself was written for a European audience, in the political context that was formative for the major contributions to European social theory. It was a work of what Kolakowski calls the dissolution of Marxism, another product of which is the more influential work of the Frankfurt School and Lukács. It addressed the same puzzle that motivated the Frankfurt School, namely the question of why the proletariat had failed to live up to the revolutionary expectations that Marxist theory had placed on it, but answered it earlier and differently. With it, we can locate Shils in the space of this discussion, which is in many respects the core conversation of twentieth-century social theory. The second reason is this: in this book we see several of the characteristic Shilsian themes stated both very explicitly and, moreover, together in the same overarching argument. It would be an error, of course, to try to derive his career from his response to one now-forgotten text. But the text is particularly revealing of what separated him from American academic sociology and from thinkers of a different kind, like Parsons, for whom this question never arose, except in the confused and politically jejune form of the convergence thesis.

De Man wrote as a socialist who rejects, as empirically and psychologically erroneous, the Marxian doctrine of class consciousness, particularly the doctrine of true interests, and its various implications. De Man’s book provides a psychological interpretation of the kinds of processes of worker social attachment later made famous by E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), though he draws different morals. De Man’s basic argument is against the commonplace of Marxism—and indeed of the present “political” critique of hegemonic power—that ideas about one’s “interests” are often matters of false consciousness. In its classical form, this is the thesis that the true interests of the working class are concealed from workers by social attachments, patriotism, and traditional religion. De Man makes the opposite point: that worker solidarity is dependent on a prior moral sensibility, including a sense of justice, a sense of decency, and so forth, that is essentially the product of the western (Christian) tradition, but is so deeply ingrained as to be almost instinctual.

The individual human being who, as a working man or woman, reacts on the environment of contemporary industrial capitalism, is the product of a long precapitalist past. The motives which make him (or her) a socialist are not created by the present; they are rooted in that distant past. The time honored customs of social life have traced deep furrows in his instinctive and affective disposition, and these furrows indicate the course of the valuations and the volitions by which he reacts to present circumstance. His present life can only influence this course in so far as it creates new habits of affective valuation, and furnishes new customary directions for the will. (de Man [1928] 1974:39)

Socialist doctrine thus elaborates on a moral and social foundation that is already established.²

De Man's *Ideologiekritik* of Marxism is based on a Schelerian-Nietzschean idea about the emotional substructure of theories like Marxism, that are seen as sublimated expressions of more fundamental impulses of *ressentiment*. Socialist theories are an intellectualization of an "affective complex" that arises from the conflict between a particular deeply furrowed moral inheritance and present circumstances. The basic disposition of the European masses, for de Man, was "characterized by a certain fixation of the sense of moral values, a fixation which can only be understood with reference to the social experiences of the days of feudalism and the craft guilds, to Christian ethics, and to the ethical principles of democracy" ([1928] 1974:39). The condition of the masses was such that these dispositions were unfulfilled, leaving workers with a feeling of being exploited, of impaired independence, but nevertheless with a hope of a happier future. Workers' explicit beliefs in equality, the right to the full product of labor, and so forth, were psychologically compensatory ideologies. Each element of the belief system of socialism corresponded to an affective complex resulting from a reaction to the conditions produced by the interaction between the environment and the basic moral disposition (*ibid.*:45–47). In short, there was a conflict between ingrained moral ideas or intuitions and present realities, which distressed people and led them to adopt compensatory beliefs.

Like many other socialist thinkers, de Man argued that the Marxist interpretation of the state as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie was simply mistaken, and that anyone familiar with state operations, and with the minuscule and largely parochially self-interested role of the bourgeoisie in politics, could see that the Marxist analysis was untrue. The state is not only largely self-directed, it is dominated by intellectuals, and intellectuals are thoroughly bound up with the state. Intellectuals are produced by the state, in its universities, and the state employs intellectuals. The real significance of the French Revolution, he suggests, was that it established the close relationship between the intellectuals and the state.

De Man saw the problem of intellectuals—and this was a reflexive problem, for de Man described himself as "a voluntarily declassed university graduate serving the labor movement in a salaried employment" ([1928] 1974:230)—as a serious anomaly in Marxist theory.³ What in Marxist theory explained the attraction of Marxism for intellectuals? There was another aspect to this puzzle. De Man was acutely sensitive to the differences between the Marxism of intellectuals and that of the working class. "I have learned by personal experience how much an intellectual feels expatriated in this environment," he says, and he catalogued the ways he attempted to become "an authentic proletarian" (*ibid.*). Here is where he discovered "that most of my comrades . . . were at bottom far more bourgeois in their ways of living and thinking than I was myself" (*ibid.*:231). The passions of the intellectual on the left were not the passions of the working class.

So what was the nature of the "socialism of intellectuals?" What was the attraction? He argues that some forms of the fascination of intellectuals with Marxism had psychological sources. The basic psychology of the declassed intellectual, the Bohemian, was the resentment of the "unrecognized genius." Bohemianism was soon outgrown as universities absorbed intellectuals into the state apparatus. But the sense of alienation between the intellectuals and the bourgeoisie persisted. Why? De Man approaches the problem of the

²De Man points out that even the symbolism and iconography of socialism taps into these more fundamental psychological sources: "almost all of the symbolism of the socialist working-class movement is of Christian origin. There is nothing strange in that. If symbols are to touch our affects, they must be linked with our customary associations" ([1928] 1974:134).

³As did Gramsci (see 1996:184–93), Mannheim (1943), and a great many others.

inclination of intellectuals toward socialism through the content of the kinds of socialist ideas favored by intellectuals, and notes that it is guild socialism that most attracts them—the idea, central to the Fabians and Tawney, that in the future “the acquisitive motive of the capitalist and the worker will be replaced by a new motive, that of service to the community” ([1928] 1974:223). He suggests that this represents “a desire to make all members of the community into intellectuals,” an idea paradigmatically expressed in the notion that “industrial work should become a ‘profession’” (ibid.), or in Germany that it should be motivated by a sense of public service, like a civil servant (ibid.:224). At bottom, de Man notes, these formulations are simply an expression of the *intellectuals’ own* will to power, a will to “use their functions of domination in order to grasp the totality of power” (ibid.:222). The misrecognition was entirely theirs, and it was misrecognition of their own motives.

The text had the core elements of what were to be Shils’s great themes. There was, in the first place, the problem of the intellectual, particularly the intellectual with a desire to be “political,” and in the second, the idea of tradition, of fundamental moral impulses that were deeper than ideas, and which informed and provided the impulses behind even those who were attacking the established order. Implicitly, there is the contrast between ideology and tradition, and the problem of ideology itself, of its relation to ordinary morality, and its psychological roots. But these themes were developed by Shils in a context that needs to be recovered.

THE EMERGENCE OF SHILS’S BASIC PICTURE OF SOCIETY

Shils did not immediately identify these themes as issues. This was characteristic: ideas that Shils came across and noted often did not mature in his own thinking for decades, and when they did they reemerged in forms that reflected his own attempts to think systematically about the nature of society. These attempts were made in a field of intellectual forces that can be crudely distinguished into four distinct groups. One was the phenomenon of the dissolution of the Marxist tradition and the continuing political importance of the left, especially for intellectuals. Shils did not abandon this topic, and for reasons that will become apparent shortly, it was to take on a large significance for him. The second was empirical sociology, which he practiced with a strong Parkian accent. During the war he participated in the analysis of the morale of *Wehrmacht* units, and had observed (as he of course was intellectually well prepared by the American sociological tradition to observe) the difference between primary bonds and the kinds of attachments to central things exemplified by the attachments of a few soldiers to Nazism. In the early fifties he was involved with the study of New Nations, and especially with Indian intellectuals, whom he had encountered first as students at the London School of Economics. The third was “sociological theory,” reflected in his collaboration and friendship with Parsons, but also in his intense engagement with Weber and especially with the concept of charisma, a concept that is largely absent in Parsons, but which Shils extended creatively. The fourth was surely the most important: the emergence of a British liberal response to Communism and Fascism that gave an account of culture, science, values, religion, and politics that countered the attacks of Fascists and Communists with respect to each of these subjects. It is the least understood of the influences on Shils, but it is the one through which all the others became meaningful. It was also the source of perhaps his deepest intellectual relationship, with Michael Polanyi (see Swartz 1998; Turner, 1996). The arguments he derived from these sources set him apart from the American sociological tradition, and indeed from sociology itself.

Shils was no stranger to the dispute over the basis and nature of liberal democracy. He taught a course at the University of Chicago called “Freedom and Order” (later Soc Sci 3),

before the war, at a time when a vivid debate raged on campus between defenders of a natural law conception of moral truth and a “scientific” relativism (Purcell 1973). But Shils approached the issues in a way that is understandable only from outside the American context, in terms of a discussion that evolved in England during the war, and to which Shils was exposed first hand during his wartime service and afterwards, when he taught at the London School of Economics.⁴

One aspect of this debate has recently been much discussed in connection with Isaiah Berlin, who recently died (see Ignatieff 1998), and his doctrine of the plurality of values. Berlin was in some ways an unrepresentative figure of a group that had no truly representative figure and indeed was not a group so much as a current of thought within which there were a large number of personal relationships. But it was a deep current, and the commonalities between its concerns was strong. Among its major contributors were Michael Oakeshott, T.S. Eliot, Michael Polanyi; at a degree removed, Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper; and more distantly yet, Berlin,⁵ as well as some thinkers who are now less well known, such as J. P. Mayer and the Catholic Christopher Dawson, both of whom were associated with Eliot, who was Mayer’s editor at Faber and became a personal friend. Mannheim’s wartime writings are also touched by these concerns and evolved through contact with some of these figures; several of them used Mannheim as a foil for their own arguments.

The commonalities were these: they rejected the ideological cast of mind, and sought to identify and defend something valuable at the basis of liberal democracy that could not be understood in the Marxian way as an ideology. They did not so much find this thing—which they most frequently called “tradition”—as find arguments for its ineffability, its irreducibility to explicit doctrines or creeds; for the inadequacy of such notions as norms and values, or for that matter principles, as a means of characterizing it; and for the peculiar qualities of tacitness and commitment that it possessed. Moreover, they found traditions, cultures, and the like in places previously not thought of in these terms, such as factories and the laboratories of research science. Rationalism, reductivism, and the closure characteristic of ideological systems was the error they sought to avoid: explaining the rise of ideology was for them a problem of explaining a pathology. But the term “ideology” was treated with great care. It was the term of their enemies, and suspect in many of its uses.

Michael Polanyi, who wrote *Science, Faith, and Society* ([1946] 1964) shortly after the war, tended to think of traditions primarily as traditions of learning embodied in institutions that assured their transmission, such as the law, the church, and science. Polanyi also argued that tradition in this sense (far from being, as the Enlightenment had it, mere prejudice that reason could and should supplant) was essential to the higher activities of the mind itself, including science. This was based on an argument about the irreducibility of science to formulae or rules, in the fashion of positivism, or at least in the fashion of A. J. Ayer. Michael Oakeshott’s essay “Rationalism in Politics” ([1947] 1962) made an analogous case for the irreducibility of political activity to rules or explicit principles. In 1949, Karl Popper published “Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition” ([1949] 1968) in

⁴One historical question that I cannot answer, though it has some bearing on what follows, is when Shils encountered the thought of Carl Schmitt, and in what form. Certainly he encountered it indirectly, though forcefully, in the thinking of his Chicago colleagues in politics, Hans J. Morgenthau and Leo Strauss, by the end of the forties, and also less directly through the Frankfurt School. “The Concept of the Political,” Schmitt’s famous tract, was cited by Shils as early as 1958 and as late as 1992, as I will show in what follows.

⁵J. P. Mayer, whose book on Weber is an exemplary work in this current ([1944]1956), went on to serve for many years as the editor of Tocqueville, where he extended the argument. It is to many discussions with Mayer that I owe my knowledge of wartime London and its intellectual life. There is no good published overview of the subject, though it is a very rich topic. It is briefly discussed in Turner and Factor (1984:154–61).

which tradition was seen to be subject to rational evolution and thus justified by the notion of rational evolution.⁶ T.S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* was written before, and published during, the war, in 1940 ([1940] 1968); *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* shortly afterwards, in 1948 ([1949] 1968), of which more will be said shortly.

These texts worked with a distinction between tradition and ideology, though these were not always the terms employed, that is similar to de Man's, but developed the idea of tradition in a different direction. The contrast between ideology and tradition became a matter of the difference between ideologies understood as doctrines purporting to be "rational" and tradition understood as the tacit base of practice in politics, science, the law, and in other areas of life. Oakeshott's essay is today the best known of these texts. Indeed, it is widely regarded as the greatest political essay of the century. It is the quintessential metapolitical text, concerned with the nature of politics and the errors that arise from its misunderstanding, and with the political implications of these errors. As Maurice Cowling later summarized it, it "emphasized that human behavior is a matter of art, not nature; that human conduct is rational when it exhibits intelligence appropriate to the idiom of the activity it is concerned with; and that concrete activity—knowledge of how to act—is 'practical' or 'traditional' knowledge" (1980:272). Politics, of course, is a concrete activity. But it also deals with values, though not in this language. Oakeshott's comment is revealing: "Moral ideals are a sediment; they have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition" ([1947]1962:36).

There is little in the way of an explicit theory of society in most of these writings, in part because their strategy is to point to features of political or social life, and especially of knowledge, that, properly understood, undermine the claims of ideologists and technicians of the human realm, reductive philosophers, and the like. They defended liberalism by denying that liberal politics was simply another formulaic doctrine, a cookbook like socialism or fascism, and then by denying that politics could be adequately conducted by following cookbooks. They were especially dismissive of the idea that "democracy," the term that Dewey had made central to the American discussion (while becoming progressively more vague as to what it meant), was a sufficient ideal: Eliot notes that "the term . . . does not contain enough positive content to stand alone against the forces you dislike—it can easily be transformed by them ([1940] 1968:50). As Eliot wrote that the value of Aristotle's *Politics* derived not from its universality but from the fact that it was "founded on a perception of the unconscious aims of Athenian democracy at its best" and adds that "what I mean by political philosophy is not even the unconscious formulation of the ideal aims of a people, but the substratum of collective temperament, ways of behavior and unconscious values which provide the material for the formulation (ibid.:14). Oakeshott, similarly, in a discussion of the Chicago economist Henry Simons, comments that "He is a libertarian, not because he begins with an abstract definition of liberty, but because he has actually enjoyed a way of living (and seen others enjoy it) . . . and found it to be good" ([1949] 1962:39–40). The distinctions they urged were metapolitical, in the sense that they supported no particular political practice, but did distinguish invidiously between conceptions of politics.⁷

Why were these arguments so gripping, and what did they have to do with liberalism? The simple historical answer is that they were all directed against the idea that politics

⁶The text itself discusses Oakeshott ([1949]1968:121). The book in which Popper reprinted it was dedicated to F. A. Hayek, who became an enthusiast for Acton and Burke, as did Mayer. For a discussion of Hayek's relation to Polanyi see Mirowski (1998). Popper and Polanyi had a brief flirtation and quick falling out. This hardly exhausts the connections, but is meant simply to give a flavor of the times.

⁷The contemporary political theorist John Dunn (1990:127–28) states this in terms of the contrast between practical and theoretical reason, to the same effect.

could be transformed, as the Saint-Simonian tag has it, into administration, or into “planning,” but if this was their only significance they would be ignored today.⁸ The key to their enduring significance is to be found in the fact that they have much the same practical conclusion as the very different, indeed opposed, Straussian argument for the possibility of normative political truth, which I will take up shortly. The claim that politics is a practical activity implies that it is not a theoretical activity, and that therefore there is no such thing as (theoretical) political truth as distinct from practical wisdom. To put this in a more recent locution, it is to say that there can be no such thing as political correctness, no extrapolitical principle that sets the standards for political activity, that defines its goals, or is greater than and trumps the claims of ordinary politics. Politics is more like the pursuit of truth than its application. And a politics which imagines itself to engage in the application of truth typically ends in the application of force. But liberal politics, that is to say, the politics of government by discussion, requires civility, and much of Eliot’s attention in his writings of the forties was devoted to the argument, as Maurice Cowling summarizes the texts, “that ‘civility in general’ needed a ‘total culture’ which could not exist ‘without a religion’” (1980:123).

The background to this discussion is specifically English. Cowling’s *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* provides an elaborate genealogy of one strand of the underlying net of ideas, the problem of the political meaning of Anglicanism, and it is this strand that is perhaps the most alien both to the American discussion of the same questions and to present thinking about liberal democracy. The American discussion of the problem of liberal democracy during the thirties had focused on such issues as the natural law basis of rights (see Purcell 1973) and the nature and meaning of “democracy” as an ideal; and in the forties on the problem of the intellectual legitimacy of a constitutional order based on the philosophies of figures like Locke, which were discredited both by historicism and by scientific social science, which rejected the appeal to human nature and more generally the idea that norms could be grounded on facts. In the fifties, under the influence of Strauss (1953), this line of thinking evolved into the negative argument that nothing in the claims of historicism or scientism sufficed to disallow the possibility of normative truth about human nature, and therefore about the best political order; this in turn meant that the claims of the liberal political order to be in accordance with nature, laid down in figures like Locke and the American Founders, could not be simply dismissed.⁹

The American discussion was bounded by the issue of the validity and grounding of the Constitution. The First Amendment is a paradigmatic piece of liberal political engineering. It states that congress shall make no laws with respect to the establishment of religion. This was an answer to the question of religion in public life: the state declares neutrality, and ties its hands in the face of matters of religion. In so doing, it defines the public sphere, the sphere of political discussion—negatively, to be sure—by excluding issues that would disrupt the processes of persuasion and debate that enabled political issues to be resolved. This tactic is central to, even definitive of, liberalism. It creates a situation in which reasoned persuasion is possible by limiting the state to those activities that can be made subject to reasoned discussion. But there is another way to handle the problem of religion, and that is to allow the state to establish a church, and to regulate (or to encourage the self-regulation of) the political activities of the church, leaving a defined sphere of the

⁸The veterans of the sixties and the idea of participatory democracy would be shocked at the ease with which the figures of the left in this period slipped into the idea that the rule of experts was a good thing and would be better than democracy (e.g., J. D. Bernal), and that culture and values could be planned (e.g., Mannheim), also, and necessarily, by experts.

⁹The Straussians did not embrace liberalism except, so to speak, tactically, as the best presently possible regime, and its philosophic sources were taken seriously, not on their own terms, that is, as true, but in light of this tactical consideration.

religious in which the state ties its hands and does not interfere. This was the English solution, which left the head of state at the head of the church and the national church interwoven with national life, but often in tension with the actual politics of the state. And this was the model that interested Shils most.

One might well ask what conceivable relevance any of this had to sociology, or to Shils. To see this one must turn to Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. The picture of society and culture that emerges in this text is marked by its origins in the problem of church and state, and the Anglican solution to this problem, but generalizes it. Eliot traces the problem of religion and culture back to primitive society, and the problem of class and culture back to the Renaissance. A culture consists of the activities and interests of a people, or as Eliot puts it, in a phrase that could have been lifted from Polanyi or any of these other writers, "culture can never be wholly conscious—there is always more to it than we are wholly conscious of" ([1949] 1968:170). It is Derby Day, beetroot in vinegar, and the music of Elgar (*ibid.*:104).¹⁰ But it is more than this, as well: "we have to face the strange idea that what is part of culture is also a part of our *lived* religion," so "that from one point of view religion is culture, from another point of view culture is religion" (*ibid.*:105). But the two concepts cannot be collapsed into one another, and the religious character of culture is not simply a matter of Christian belief, even in England: "the actual religion of no European people has ever been purely Christian, or purely anything else. There are always bits and traces of more primitive faiths, more or less absorbed . . . there are always perversions, as when patriotism, which pertains to natural religion . . . becomes exaggerated into a caricature of itself (*ibid.*). Yet these widely distributed religious bits and traces are not entirely unordered in the Christian world: "anyone with a sense of center and periphery must admit that the western tradition has been Latin, and Latin means Rome" (*ibid.*:148).

A "sense of center and periphery" is part of the inchoate feeling that is the true ground of culture. But culture, sensitivity to culture, and consciousness of culture are distributed unevenly. In a phrase that could have been cribbed from a sociology textbook, Eliot says that "As a society develops towards functional complexity and differentiation, we may expect the emergence of several cultural levels: in short, the culture of the class or group will present itself" ([1949] 1968:97). But the relationship between class and culture is complex, more complex than Mannheim imagined. In the first place the meaning of the term culture changes in its application at different levels (*ibid.*:134). Contributors to high culture may be members of an artistic elite without being upper class, and the upper classes may not be highly cultured in the sense of being particularly conscious of the culture. But "if we agree that the primary vehicle for transmission of culture is the family, and if we agree that in a more highly civilized society there must be different levels of culture, then it follows that to ensure the transmission of the culture of these different levels there must be groups of families persisting from generation to generation, each in the same way of life" (*ibid.*:121–22).

For Eliot there are and should be different cultures, and people should have various attachments, be attached to the local or peripheral as well as to that which is more universal or central (*ibid.*:125). These attachments might include class attachments, but also cut across the category of class. That there are tensions between people's various attachments is inevitable, and also a good thing—uniformity would be the end of culture (*ibid.*:131). Moreover, as the example of Antigone shows, there are basic conflicts of values in any society beyond the most primitive, and this too is a good thing for culture.

¹⁰Cf. Oakeshott's list of examples of traditions: "the common Law of England, the so-called British Constitution, the Christian Religion, modern physics, the game of cricket, shipbuilding" 1962:128n)

To acknowledge the deep identity of religion and culture is not to deny the existence of surface tension between the two. In 1940 Eliot had said that this tension is central to the idea of a Christian society ([1940] 1968:44). In *Definition*, he reiterated and broadened these points by “insisting on the importance of various and conflicting loyalties” ([1949] 1968:133) and on the point that this is a good thing precisely because “numerous cross-divisions favor peace within a nation, by dispersing and confusing animosities” (ibid.:125). He also reiterated his insistence on the importance of the tension between religion and culture. The point is critical: when one finishes peeling the onion of social life, what one finds is not a core of something solid, like values, but rather a deep and irresolvable tension between two things that are bound to one another.

Eliot of course has in mind his own society and more generally “Christian society,” the “idea” of which he considered in the 1940 book. The root idea is that the kingdom of God and worldly kingdoms are, on the one hand, bound to each other, and on the other, never reconcilable. Christian society is always unrealized, yet its Christian character is fundamental to what is realized. The external tension between the religious and cultural in Eliot has a parallel in Weber’s concept of charisma, which appears, flits in and out of history, in and out of institutional practices, and in unstable combination with such things as discipline, educational practice, law, business rationality, and the like. At the broad historical level, an odd relationship of underlying tension and support between charisma and its partners holds. The tension is not precisely parallel to Eliot’s; but if Eliot’s is generalized to all societies, and Weber’s emphasis is shifted from the charismatic individual to the charismatic aura of institutions, symbols, and the like, one has the core material for Shils’s account of society. One needs to substitute this extended notion of charisma for Eliot’s notion of the “religious” aspect or character of “culture,” including institutions. In a sense, this is a short step, because Eliot had already extended the notion of the religious to reach what he himself called a “strange” result, and Weber had already extended a specific Christian doctrine of charisma to account for a wide variety of religious phenomena, and religious aspects of phenomena that would not ordinarily be understood as religious.

Shils did not hide these sources. In the preface to *Tradition*, which began as the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent in 1974, Shils wrote that he “welcomed the opportunity [to give the lectures] because I thought it would enable me to compose my mind about this bewildering subject and also to acknowledge my debt to T. S. Eliot, whose writings had done so much to arouse and nourish my mind on tradition”; he also wished that “the spirits of Max Weber and T. S. Eliot look with charity on this effort to work out some of the implications of their unfathomably deep thought on tradition (1981:vii–viii). The conjunction of the two names is telling, for it is the reconciliation of the one to the other that is at the core of Shils’s thought.¹¹ In putting these ideas of Eliot and Weber together, Shils preserved their common idea that at the core of society (or in Weber’s case, history) was a fundamental tension between its charismatic core and its actual forms, which nevertheless depend in part on their charismatic character. The tar baby of the unrealizable charismatic core of institutions can never be shaken off, and never be entirely satisfied.

It is a picture of society that is at odds with Parsons. The tensions Shils speaks of, following Eliot, do not disappear, or tend to disappear, but are permanent. They are held in check by conflicting attachments, as Eliot also said, each of which has its own charismatic element. In contrast, values add up to a value system, at least for the Parsonsian: “All societies have a more or less coherent set of central values and the more specific norms

¹¹ Shils dated the beginning of his thinking on the issue of tradition, in which the notion of center and periphery figures importantly, to seminars that began in 1956 (1981:vi).

that express them in myriad particular behavioral situations” (Barber 1998:57).¹² Charismatic elements do not necessarily add up in this way. Eliot saw that they live as bits and fragments, some pagan, some Christian, in the same society.¹³ Moreover, this is not an account of society in which anything, such as the continuation of the civility necessary for liberal society, is produced by equilibrating mechanisms and the like.

Shils identified many other sources for the idea of the essentially religious character of the solidarity of social bonds. Rudolf Otto’s “idea of the holy” (1924) also attracted him.¹⁴ One can even find a rudimentary form of one part of the argument in de Man, who quoted a remark of Guyau, Durkheim’s source for the term “anomie,”: “Religion is a universal sociomorphism; the religious sentiment is a feeling of the dependence of will-forces which man projects into the universe,” with the observation that “This much is certain, that every sense of social relationship tends to expand into a sense of cosmical relationship, in this way, that the motives which are seen to be at work in social destiny are introduced into the interpretation of the universe” ([1928] 1974:425). This is the argument that social relations become sacralized, which appears in Shils in various forms, such as the fact that charismatic qualities are attributed to the center ([1972] 1982:xvii). Eliot, as we have seen, goes beyond this by stressing the tensions this involves. Shils went beyond de Man in interpreting the character of common social symbols and their related moral ideas as religious, a strategy that was raised to its pinnacle in his essay with Michael Young on the “Meaning of the Coronation” (1956).

INTELLECTUALS AND CIVILITY

Intellectuals fit into this model of society in a special place. Eliot had seen that intellectuals were themselves greatly oriented to the center things, and that high culture was self-conscious culture. Shils, using the insight of de Man, saw that if intellectuals “rejected” their own societies they did so on the basis of a utopian standard of values that was itself derived from their own societies. They were, in a word, antinomian. They demanded that society live up to the impossible standards implicit in that society’s highest idea of itself, or rather in a partial and overemphasized aspect of it that is believed to be insufficiently regarded (1972:25). One sees here a reflection of the present idea that subalterns and the oppressed have distinctive knowledges. But Shils’s point, based on his own extensive experience with Indian and African intellectuals as well as left-wing ideologists, was that even here we find a sensitivity to the center. Intellectuals’ rejection of the societies in which they lived was not so much rejection as unrequited love deriving from the deepest and most central moral impulses of the society, in a word, its sacred part: “However passionate” the reaction of an ideology against a culture, “it cannot entirely divest itself of important elements of that culture” (ibid.).

If we understand this in light of the problem of ideology and tradition that was so important in the forties British setting, and bring this together with the problem analyzed by de Man, we can see where and why Shils diverged from the kind of response to ideol-

¹²It is worth noticing the difference between the editors’ preface to *Center*, which uses the language of “central value system” and makes it the principal meaning of Shils’s term “center” (Greenfeld and Martin 1988:ix) and Shils’s own concluding comment that “I was never satisfied with the argument that society is integrated by ‘common values’ or by ‘shared values’” (ibid.:264). Shils occasionally used this language, but for the most part he had something else in mind.

¹³I recall that Shils once described the tombs of saints one finds scattered around the countryside in some Islamic countries as little concentrations of charisma.

¹⁴One might expect to find Durkheim as a source, but Shils claimed never to have appreciated Durkheim. The difference between Otto and Durkheim enables us to see why Shils preferred the concept of charisma, despite the fact that its main “individual” meaning was inappropriate to his purposes. For Otto the numinous was self-subsistent or self-originating, like charisma, rather than reducible to its social origins, as was Durkheim’s notion of the sacred (see Pickering 1994).

ogy found in Oakeshott, Berlin, Eliot, Popper, and the rest. The approach is characteristic of his thinking as a whole. For Shils, ideology was not error, but a deeply rooted though transient historical phenomenon to be explained sociologically. The roots are in the basic tension between the sacred or charismatic aspect of institutions and social life and their actual operations. Shils added to this a bit of philosophical anthropology: the idea that people naturally seek to construct a “cognitive and moral map of the universe” (ibid.:29). It may be noted that this need is located in individuals, though of course they ordinarily accept maps that are, so to speak, ready-made for them and are thus shared. Shils saw ideology, which is a systematic structure of thought, as the product of an “intensification” of this need for a map (ibid.).

Ideology is concerned with the sacred, a transcendent entity such as an ideal, and is thus inherently in conflict with ordinary liberal politics: “Ordinary politics are the Kingdom of Darkness; ideological politics are the struggle of light against darkness (ibid.:28). Yet ideologies have political consequences for ordinary politics, and occasionally invade and transform politics. Shils’s older contemporaries of continental origin typically understood the fatal course of central European history as a direct consequence of the failure of “ordinary politics” to contain these invasions, and accepted the inevitability of the collapse of liberal discussion into ideological struggle. Mannheim, whom Shils translated and had close contact with in London during the war, wrote that “If you come over from the continent one of the things that strikes you most is that over here it seems to be part of the accepted ways of life to leave unsaid many things which elsewhere would be plainly stated . . . differences of opinions are rarely fought out in full, and hardly ever traced back to their final source” (1943:66). Mannheim thought this kind of civility was doomed.

The reasoning behind this assessment had already been fully articulated by Carl Schmitt, who argued that “the *ratio* of parliamentarism rests . . . in a process of confrontation of differences and opinions, from which the real political will results. The essence of parliamentarism is therefore public deliberation of argument and counterargument, public debate and public discussion, and parley” ([1923]1985:34–35. Italics in original.).

Truth played a special role in relation to this process. Truth “becomes a mere function of the eternal competition of opinions. In contrast to truth [in the proper sense] it means renouncing a definite result. It is concerned with relative truth rather than absolute truth (ibid.:46). But “the development of modern mass democracy has made argumentative public discussion an empty formality (ibid.:6). “Today it is no longer a question of persuading one’s opponent of the truth or justice of an opinion but rather of winning a majority in order to govern with it (ibid.:7).

Schmitt famously saw this as evidence of the contradiction in the core of the idea of “liberal democracy” between its “liberal” and its “democratic” elements. The possibility of rational deliberation belonged to the less democratic liberal past only, and to societies which were sufficiently homogenous that rational discourse was still possible. The present, however, belonged to parties, and particularly to totalitarian or ideological parties, which by their very nature refused to “renounce a definite result,” believed themselves to possess truth and thus made public deliberation into a sham, since they participated in it only to express this truth and were not themselves open to persuasion. When one of these parties seized power by winning a majority, it would end the sham of parliamentarism, whose peculiar attitude to truth it rejected in favor of a totalizing *Weltanschauung*. The fact that the Weimar republic ended in this way was a powerful argument for the essential truth of this line of reasoning, and it is hardly surprising that it was deeply ingrained in the political thinking of the emigrés. Yet Schmitt was wrong. In the Anglo-Saxon countries liberal politics did not collapse, and, in the postwar period, liberal democracy became the normal form of government in Europe. Why?

In 1958 Shils published “Ideology and Civility” ([1958]1997c). The paper contains a direct reference to Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* ([1958]1997c:28), specifically to the pages in which Schmitt explicates the basis of the concept of the political and attacks liberalism for having “attempted to transform the enemy . . . into a debating adversary” ([1926]1976:28). Schmitt reappears at the beginning of Shils’s last essay on civility (1997b:63). The central feature of liberalism, according to Schmitt, is the creation of zones or spheres that are neutralized or depoliticized—the market, the religious, the legal, the scientific, and the cultural. Liberal politics, politics as discussion, depends on these neutralizations or depoliticizations and the respect for the limits of politics and the limited role of the state that they imply. The problem of liberal *democracy* is that the “democratic” part of the combination is incompatible with these neutralizations. The majority will sooner or later decide that the line should be moved, that the formerly personal, or cultural, or economic, is political, and will inevitably move in the direction of a totalizing state for which there are no boundaries to the political. “Totalitarianism” is the achievement of such a state.

Shils used slightly different terms to talk about exactly the same problem. For Shils, the domain of the liberal politics of debate is called “civility.” Civility excludes certain things from debate, that is to say neutralizes or depoliticizes them. Liberalism requires a recognition of exclusions, of the limits of politics. Discussion is impossible without these limits. The passions of religion and ideology preclude persuasion. The enemies of civility and therefore liberalism do not recognize the legitimacy of these limits. The limits are, for Shils, a matter of at least a rough but possibly also quite fragile consensus. Shils was fascinated by, but never wrote on, the problem of the emergence of religious tolerance in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was a crucial step in the creation of the kind of rough consensus about the limits of political discussion and action that civility consists in.

The consensus originated, historically, in the liberal regimes of notables in the eighteenth century, and has gradually been extended. This extension, the inclusion of more and more people into the liberal discussion, is the great process of western politics. Shils compared this to Tocqueville’s secret force of equality (1988:272). But he conceived of it in a somewhat different way, one might say spiritually, as the closing of the spiritual gap between center and periphery that formerly existed and had been embodied in the differences between the aristocratic sense of ownership of the society and the popular sense. He took the Putney Green debate to exemplify the difference between the old and the new, and he quoted Rainsborough, who said “that the poorest he who is in England has a life to live as the greatest he” and Ireton, who replied “no person hath a right to [share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom] that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom,” that is, wealth in land or trade (in Aylmer, 1975:100). The growth of civility meant the closing of the gap between the two, and this meant the inclusion of the many in the discussions of the few, but more or less on the terms and within the limits of the rough “depoliticizing” or “zone of neutrality” consensus that had originated among the few. This process of the extension of civility is Shils’s answer to the problem posed by the failure of Schmitt’s prediction.

Schmitt had identified what he took to be the inevitable solvent of this liberal depoliticizing or neutralizing consensus: the kind of political antagonism that “degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed” ([1926] 1976:36). In international politics, this is an enemy for whom merely keeping them within their own borders is not enough. Domestic politics has its own analogues to this degradation of the enemy into moral categories. It is this degradation—into the idea that one’s political rivals are evil—that makes government by discussion an impossibility.

As Shils observed, this degradation of opponents into the category of enemy was characteristic of ideological thinking about politics (1997b:29). And in the fifties his account of ideology became Schmittian, in the following sense: he recognized that the “political” issue with ideology was a matter of the boundary of the political; that ideological thinking was a denial of the boundary; and that something had to keep the boundaries secured, and that this something could not be a counter ideology, for this would reduce politics to ideological struggle by definition. The answer was that civility was a “tradition” or rather was bound up in traditions that were the basis for the boundaries. He denied that the descent into ideological thinking was inevitable, and that the civility of western democracies was a sham, a neutralization that was a political weapon, as Schmitt argued. Indeed, he pronounced the extension of civility to be a qualified success: not to be taken for granted, but no longer seriously threatened by ideological parties in the West, as it had been in the Weimar Republic.

THE END OF IDEOLOGY

Shils’s conclusion about the passing of the threat of ideology was shared by other thinkers, notably Raymond Aron, who recounted its farcical life history in a festschrift for Shils. Shils and Aron used phrases very close to “The End of Ideology” within months of one another in 1955. It was later taken up by Daniel Bell. The issue, as both Shils and Aron saw it, was with the kind of ideological parties that Schmitt had in mind. Their point, in Schmittian terms, was that Schmitt’s prediction of the collapse of liberalism in the face of ideological politics had been disconfirmed. On the Marxist side, “ideology” had a different, non-Schmittian, meaning.

Two debates, equally bitter, ensued. The demotic debate, inspired by Bell’s book, which used the phrase in the title, was inspired by the revival of “ideological” discussion in the sixties throughout the West. It was conducted for the most part in terms of a Marxism that was unaffected by Schmitt, in which the state was still the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, liberal democracy was its legitimating ideology, and opposition meant attacking this ideology. Reducing all political alternatives to “ideologies” was the basic move in this argument; the fact of “ideological conflict,” it was circularly argued, was the living refutation of the thesis of the end of ideology. The main consequence of this debate in sociology was collateral damage: the fact of “ideological” conflict undermined the Parsonsian image of society as rooted in shared values, and this ended Parsons’s influence.

The other debate was different, and it was conducted indirectly. It was a debate between sides that had taken the Schmittian argument on board, and moved beyond it. It did not hinge on terminology, even on the terminology of “ideology.” Both sides understood the Schmittian point that in a political struggle all political terms and antitheses can become political weapons and that terminological quibbles thus are a distraction ([1926] 1976:31). The similarities between this other debate and the demotic debate result from some commonalities in language, notably with respect to the term ideology. But the language is used ironically and self-consciously in the second debate.

We may begin, to shorten a complex history, with the observation that the Frankfurt School had absorbed and incorporated the thought of Schmitt, just as Shils had, though it obviously developed it in different ways and for different purposes.¹⁵ To put the point very brutally, when the first Frankfurt School argued that totalitarianism was the last stage of

¹⁵I have not included a historical discussion of the relations between Schmitt and the Frankfurt School, though it is a fascinating story. The short story is this: the Schmittian sources were hidden and even denied for many years as a result of the association of Schmitt with the Nazis. In the last two decades they have been widely acknowledged. The full significance of Schmitt for twentieth-century social theory has only recently been seriously discussed. The best source on this is Pels (1998b), a brilliant and innovative text in its own right.

capitalism they already accepted the basic Schmittian recognition that “capitalism,” property, and the like are political rather than economic facts: a state in which “what is property?” is a political question is no longer a classic capitalist state, and the categories of Marxist analysis apply only in light of the politicization of the formerly private sphere of economic life. Hitler achieved this, and the welfare state continued it. When they reached this point they became, so to speak, Left Schmittians. The Schmittian conception of politics was a substitute for the Marxian notion of the state as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, which the Frankfurt School had long abandoned.

Marcuse’s famous essay, “Repressive Tolerance,” is a late, but especially clear, document of this absorption. It simply repeats Schmitt’s argument, unknown to Marcuse’s popular audience at the time but well known to other participants in this second debate, that the “pretense of an apolitical purity” or “designating an adversary as political and oneself as non-political (i.e., scientific, just, objective, neutral, etc.) is in actuality a typical and unusually intensive way of pursuing politics” (Schmitt, [1926] 1976:21). For Marcuse, “tolerance,” the political virtue of liberal regimes that is encompassed by what Shils calls “civility,” once was “liberating,” but “what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today is, in many of its most effective manifestations, serving the cause of oppression ([1965] 1969:81). As Schmitt had said, terms like “objectivity” “are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term” ([1926] 1976:31). This gives “critical theory” a task after having given up hope in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat—the task of exposing the political meaning of such terms, on the assumption that they can be comprehended if one knows exactly who is “affected” by them. “Tolerance” was merely one of these terms.

The tasks of post-Schmittian critical theory was the determination of what the political struggle was, that is to say who were the beneficiaries of the liberal regime, of government by discussion. This was a difficult question to answer, and it became more difficult in the postwar period. The proletariat were now the rather visible winners in social capitalism. They had entered the tent of civility, and their leaders championed it. To stop at this would have been to concede Shils’s point about the end of ideology, whatever language one chose. The sheer reduction of all terms, such as scientific, to their political meaning, led to apparent absurdities, as in Marcuse’s attempt to treat science as ideology, an argument that Habermas critiqued ([1968] 1970). But Schmitt’s thinking was always concerned with exclusion, the exclusion of questions from politics, and this provided a basis to go forward.

Habermas’s contribution to critical theory consists in his attempt to do so, and it is an attempt that is deeply marked by these Schmittian ideas. The problem with liberalism, for Habermas, is that it is insufficiently discursive, that it limits discourse in such a way as to exclude the questioning of the basic presuppositions, such as the notions of science, law, justice, objectivity, and so forth that are used to exclude topics from political discussion. Liberalism depends on interdictions; these interdictions have a political meaning, and the ability to enforce these interdictions, the ability to refuse to answer questions, is the essence of power itself. The ideal speech situation is one in which there are no exclusions, no interdictions of questions. And this supplies us with a standard of criticism against which actual liberal regimes, with their limited discussions which exclude, affect, and negate, can be judged, and their political meaning made comprehensible.

There is a deep Shilsian response to this, and it is to be found in the concept of tradition. Habermas assumes that it is possible to surface—his term is “thematize”—the presuppositions of an activity or the elements of a shared life-world and subject them to discursive interrogation ([1981] 1984:82). Shils followed the reasoning of Polanyi’s discussion of science as a tradition constituted by a tacit dimension that contained nondiscursively accessible contents. One of Shils’s favorite sayings of Polanyi was that “science is an apostolic succession,” meaning that great scientists conveyed the capacity to do great science not by

writing articles, but by shared work in a laboratory. The hands of the bishop, in science, are the hands of the hands-on work of discovery. For Shils it is impossible to be free of tradition in this sense in science, which is the most explicit and “rational” of all activities (see Shils 1981:107–20).

The civility necessary for liberal democracy is necessarily traditional. It needs a “largely unreflective acceptance of these rules of the game of a free society” (1997b:110). To say that civility is a matter of tradition is not to say that it is not bound up with beliefs and ideas, but it is to say that these are not the essence of the tradition, and it is also to say that the practice is what makes civility a matter of tradition. Shils’s version of the idea of civility, however, was at variance in various ways with the tradition of talking about tradition that he absorbed in London in the forties, and it is important to notice them to see what Shils meant. Many of the thinkers in the British discussion did not believe that liberal democracy was for everyone. Mayer quoted Taine’s view that “underneath charters, written laws . . . there are the ideas, the customs . . . in short a ramified network of deepseated and invisible roots beneath the visible trunk and foliage. . . . Plant the tree [of liberal democracy] without roots, . . . it will fall at the first gust” (Mayer 1943:78). Oakeshott was dismissive about the idea that the Germans had a political tradition at all. None of them had a notion of the meaning of the liberal tradition that turned it into a generic process. They tended to find its local roots, and reason as Taine had, that liberalism was a wine that did not travel.

The idea of the traditionality of civility in Shils differs from this localized one. Civility is on the one hand highly particularized, with an identifiable series of self-understandings and a continuous sequence of transmission that varies from political tradition to political tradition, as manners vary; but it is also a highly generic notion, for civility operates, analogously to Tocqueville’s “equality,” throughout advanced societies, and with similar consequences. The generic aspect was democratization or inclusion, as I have already noted: Shils thought there was a centuries-long process of the diminution of the distances between centers and periphery: “the movement toward equality of deference, the reduction of differences in mode of life—both remaining quite large—and the spread of education and of civil and social rights are parts of this approximation of center and periphery” (1988:257). The expansion of civility in the sense of more localized traditions supporting a rough consensus about the limits of the political needs to be understood in relation to this—as Shils liked to say, in terms of a circularity of effects (*ibid.*:255).

The main effect of civility is that it “inhibits the extension of politics and the politicization of other spheres, e.g., the economic, the ecclesiastical, the academic and the domestic” (1998:95). The long process of inclusion signified by the phrase “the diminution of the distance between center and periphery” is made possible by the existence of a distinct political sphere, and other distinct spheres. The existence of distinct spheres makes inclusion possible by limiting what is included, though leaving these limitations open to criticism by those who wished to modify it, so long as the discussions were themselves governed by the rules of the game, and particularly a mutual respect for the common good. By not importing into politics cultural differences, religious differences, and the like, it becomes possible for more people to participate in the limited zone of the political. The fact that these distinct spheres are themselves governed by traditions, such as religious traditions, reduces the burden on the political, the burden of acting where consensus is impossible to obtain: the work of religion can be done in the church, not in the public sphere. The existence of limits on the political allows the traditions of each sphere to continue and flourish. Civility is protected by the massive fact of these traditions, sustained by the primary group relations in which they are transmitted or “reproduced.” Both the negative and the positive side of civility depend on traditions. The negative side is the rough consensus (or, better, sense) of what is excluded from the political. The positive side is the

concern for the common good which makes the discussions of civil politics into something other than mere negotiations of interest (1997d:111). These are the conditions for the openness to persuasion that government by discussion requires, and Schmitt believed to have already passed from history.

SHILS, FOUCAULT, AND HABERMAS

“What should we understand by liberalism? . . . I tried to analyze ‘liberalism’ not as a theory or an ideology . . . but rather, as a practice, which is to say, as a “way of doing things” oriented toward objectives and regulating itself by means of a sustained reflection.” The words could be Shils’s own. But they are Foucault’s (1997:73–74). Shils was, very straightforwardly, what is now called a “practice theorist.” “Tradition” is his term for “practice.” It means for him what it meant for Polanyi, as contrasted to what it meant for Weber, which was a belief in the authority of the past. Polanyi accepted a kind of relativism or pluralism about truth that was very radical: he was a philosophical antifoundationalist of a sophisticated kind, who saw all knowledge as a matter of practice carried in ungroundable traditions. By understanding Shils as a practice theorist, we can understand the way in which he represents a genuine alternative to Habermas and Foucault.

The three stand in a triangular relationship. Foucault too is a practice theorist. There is no sense in which the kinds of *epistemes* or power/knowledge complexes that appear in Foucault can be reduced to “values” or “presuppositions.” They are nondiscursive foundations of discourse that may be exhibited in various ways, but are not themselves discursively available in the form of assumptions to be “thematized” and interrogated. In this Foucault is at one with Shils, and in opposition to Habermas. But Shils, like Habermas, considers the construction of civil dialogue to be a project that requires our continued reflective engagement.

All three are post-Schmittian thinkers. They accept the ultimately political character of the boundaries that constitute the limits of what Shils calls “civility,” that is to say the distinctions that bound political discussion. They come to different conclusions. Foucault captures the basis for the opposition in what is only a slightly different context:

Max Weber posed the question: If one wants to behave rationally and regulate one’s action according to true principles, what part of one’s self should one renounce? What is the ascetic price of reason? To what kinds of asceticism should one submit? I posed the opposite question: How have certain kinds of interdictions required the price of certain kinds of knowledge about oneself? What must one know about oneself in order to be willing to renounce anything? (1997:224)

Civility for Shils is a renunciation for the sake of a particular kind of rational political discussion, a form of discipline, with limits or boundaries, requiring self-restraint, and “a general disposition to respect the whole” (1997d:111) It may be asked here as well, what has been lost?

Each of these thinkers is Schmittian in agreeing that what is lost is the truth, the absolute as opposed to the relative truth, as Schmitt puts it. For Habermas this is destructive of human potential. Interdictions, for example in the name of scientific objectivity in environmental disputes, are exercises of power, and the elimination of interdictions is the path to genuine knowledge of the political good and the truth generally. Foucault and Shils see no “reason” that is genuinely autonomous from tradition or embodied practices, and consequently dismiss this. But they part company with respect to fundamental attitudes toward

the liberal order. Foucault wished to preserve the possibility of protest without providing or believing in an alternative, much less engage in discussions of policy. For him, liberal practice, of which the machinery of repression and administration of the modern state is a major part, is inescapable, and liberalism is in no need of defense.

Shils, who said that “even the best traditions are not perfect and even these have costs which have to be paid in terms of other valuable traditions,” accepted that liberalism and the present order have a price (1981:323). But he also viewed it as fragile, and if no longer threatened by ideological parties, threatened by their cultural legacy in the form of the intrusion into ordinary politics of the radical attitudes of those for whom “there is ideological passion without a single authoritative ideology,” a passion whose “ideological content is widely and vaguely dispersed around a hollow core of negation of existing authority” (1997b:8). Foucault he would have put among these enemies of liberalism. Habermas posed for him a threat of a more traditionally ideological kind (1997b:8).

Why did Shils think civility was fragile and under threat? Shils in the fifties was very much alive to the other kinds of threats to civility that still lurked, the most significant of which he called “populism.” Populism, like ideological politics, was inclined to degrade political opponents into moral opponents, into traitors, as in McCarthyism, without rising to the level of political organization or intellectual coherence of genuine ideologies. It is not too much to say that “populism” for Shils was a code word that means what Schmitt meant by democracy. But Shils grasped that these movements, American “nativism” and the like, were too weak to seriously damage civility. But by the eighties, he had come to see what he called collectivistic liberalism, the liberalism of political correctness and preferences, as a similar threat for its casual importation of the moralism of more straightforwardly “ideological” radical critics of society into daily politics. This threat is not as overt as McCarthyism, but is rather a danger of liberalism “obliterating itself through an unseen modification of its postulates (1997b:127).

A certain distasteful fustiness inevitably attaches to the language of threat and danger, and the discussion of threats and dangers with respect to such abstractions as civility and rational discourse is peculiarly distasteful. The Schmittian prophecy failed the first time. Why believe it will succeed now? Yet Schmitt may have gotten the prophecy wrong but the analysis right. And to the extent that we are all Schmittians now, at least in the respect that we take words like “objectivity” to have a political meaning, in which someone is excluded, negated, or affected, we are obliged to ask Shils’s question of whether rational persuasion is possible if we do not bracket and more or less unreflectively adopt (subject to piecemeal reconsideration) the limits that these terms signify; and his follow-up question, of whether as analysts we have come to contribute to civil dialogue or are contributing to the replacement of discussion with struggle.

When a historian of France and French intellectuals describes the period between the end of the Great War and 1970 as one in which cultural polarization in politics ensured that serious discussion of national problems was jeered, with the consequence that national illusions were preserved; that the policies that politicians “advocated—when they had something to advocate—were partisan in the narrowest sense, which is to say that they drew only upon the traditions and interests of a narrow segment of the community and made no serious effort to appeal beyond that segment”; and that intellectuals contributed greatly to this situation by their misinformed but theoretically elaborate “oppositional” stances (Judt 1998:12), it becomes apparent that the problems of civility that exercised Schmitt and Shils are not merely the imaginings of hysterics. It should also be sobering that for France and Germany, Schmitt was right, civility did fail, and Foucault and Habermas are the legitimate heirs of intellectual traditions in each of their countries that contributed to the contempt for civil discourse that helped ensure its failure.

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