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The Young Shils

Stephen Turner

Key words: Michael Polanyi, Edward Shils, Karl Mannheim, tradition, ideology, Louis Wirth, University of Chicago

ABSTRACT

Edward Shils began as a sociologist under the close mentorship of Louis Wirth, with whom he collaborated on the translation of Karl Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia. After 1940, however, Shils' career, which had been focused on topics in sociology, notably the class and occupational structure of cities and on German Sociological Theory, took an apparent turn, which in 1946 led him into a relationship with Michael Polanyi, a half-time appointment at the London School of Economics, and a new intellectual direction. Part of the biographical background to this was personal: his relationship with Wirth ended, and with it his expectation of a Ph.D. and his role in the Sociology Department. Yet his new direction had Chicago roots in his work on Mannheim, and his relation to Frank Knight and the planning disputes of the 1930s and 40s.

Richard Moodey's fascinating discussion (2012) needs no addition, but it might be useful to say something about Edward Shils' personal trajectory that adds to his autobiography, and is relevant, though in obscure ways, to his motivations in relation both to Parsons and Polanyi. The story of Shils' relation to Talcott Parsons is still unwritten, and may never be fully understood. Clearly there was a moment of intellectual excitement during the creation of the general theory of action. Shils' own account of their work together captures some of this. But there is a biographical background to Shils' (however brief) enthusiasm that sheds some small light on the relation of Shils and Polanyi and on Shils' unusual and indeed frenetic efforts to connect to the larger intellectual community, represented for him by Polanyi, and on the specific form that this took.

The Illusion

Sociology in the postwar 1940s in the United States was a field on the upswing. The vast new demand for college degrees and graduate education produced by the GI bill allowed scholars who were barely surviving on the margins of academic life during the 1930s and the war to gain secure appointments and thrive. The field itself, its status raised by interdisciplinary wartime research, some of which Shils participated in, and which Parsons benefitted from, was newly confident and hopeful. The generation of students that came into the field at this time were energized by the idea that they were destined to make sociology into a science, as part of the larger development of what were being called the behavioral sciences. Psychology and especially social psychology were the intellectual ballast for this optimism, which represented a change from sociology's close relation to economics in the prewar period.

On the surface, Shils was a full participant in this new mood. He was employed at the University of Chicago, which retained its traditional status in sociology, at least in the world at large. He had co-translated *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim [1929] 1936) and translated *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (Mannheim [1935] 1940). His sometime mentor Louis Wirth was a prominent urban sociologist and played a large role in the founding of the International Sociological Association in the immediate postwar period. Shils' wartime work on primary groups fit the new mode of social psychological thinking. He was an active

presenter to German post-war summer schools for sociology, and a major figure in introducing “American” sociology to the London School of Economics. For Europe and Britain, he was a representative figure. His collaboration with Parsons cemented his reputation in the minds of American sociology students. Although the book itself, *Toward a General Theory of Action* (Parsons and Shils 1951) was something of a failure, even at Harvard, it left a long tail: it is still cited for its definitions of norms and values.

But beneath the surface, the story was quite different. In the 1930s, Shils was a marginal figure in the Department of Sociology at Chicago. Wirth employed him as a research assistant in a project of surveying German sociological theory from 1933 to 1935. This was followed by a year on a grant under the urbanism committee, a year as a Marshall Field fellow, and a year at Columbia as a Research Fellow in Teacher’s College in 1937-38. In 1938 he returned as an Instructor in Social Science in the College of the University of Chicago, meaning that he was not part of the Sociology Department. He was also young. He turned thirty on July 1, 1940.

As Moodey explains, it was Shils’ relationship to Wirth that led to Shils’ collaboration in the translating and in some respects transforming of Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*. This was followed by his solo translation of Mannheim’s *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, published in 1940. The relationship was hierarchical and in a sense exploitative, as many relations of student and mentor were at the time and at that University. Alan Sica recalled Shils telling him “bitterly, that Wirth had paid him \$90 to translate *Ideologie und Utopie* during one summer when Shils was otherwise hard up for money, that Wirth wrote the intro to the published translation with Shils’ help, and that even though the book sold very well indeed for decades, Shils never saw a penny of royalties. But he also said that he was so entirely entranced by Mannheim at the time (though later he would badmouth him in characteristic fashion) that he would go to some local diner every day and spend the entire day translating and have a wonderful time of it.”¹ Kettler and Meja note that

Archival evidence also indicates that Shils composed the lecture notes for Wirth’s first course on sociology of knowledge (LWP/66:2 and Shils Interview, 25.8.67. AA). The documentary record is unequivocal. All in Shils’ unmistakable handwriting: analytical reading notes on Mannheim, Grünwald, Plessner, and others; the analytical outline and the bulk of lecture notes for the first offering of Wirth’s Sociology of Knowledge course in 1935 and lectures on intellectuals. Even after his departure from Chicago, Shils collaborated with Wirth on issues arising out of *Ideology and Utopia*. Wirth’s 1937 rejoinder to Robert MacIver’s critique of Mannheim in Atlantic City rests on a detailed memorandum from Shils (LWP/65:4; LWP/67:2; Kettler and Meja 1995: 241-42n7).

Wirth continued to teach this course; in 1946, it was one of his main teaching contributions.

By 1946, Shils was far removed from this relationship. Although he was secure, he was outside the department: an Associate Professor of Sociology in the College, who had taken a half-time position at the LSE. Under the organizational scheme of the University of Chicago, this position in the College was a status outside and independent of the Department of Sociology. He was not among the “graduate officers” of the department. Indeed, matters were worse. His courses were not listed with the department. He was a pariah, for reasons that take some explaining. It is this period in which Shils seems to develop his distinctive intellectual concerns, especially those which come to align him with Michael Polanyi.

Jefferson Pooley has written an extensive discussion of Shils' turn against Karl Mannheim during this period (2007), a turn which was also a turn in the direction of Michael Polanyi, whom he met only at the end of it. Textual evidence of influences is scant during this period, but as Pooley notes, Mannheim was being pilloried in some of the most influential books of the period, such as Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1950), which listed Mannheim among the enemies. David Kettler and Volker Meja, writing from Mannheim's point of view, discuss Shils' earlier defense of Mannheim. What follows is to some extent a contribution to the discussion of the problem of Shils' apparent turn, and what he took from Mannheim in relation to tradition and ideology, but with an emphasis on the obscure problem of his relation to Wirth.

The Newcomb Episode

Shils met Robert Merton in December 1938. They were fellow Philadelphians, similar in ethnic background, but not in class. Shils had gone to Penn; Merton to Temple. They had an arm's length relationship over many years. There is a curious footnote to this: Merton was Karl Polanyi's strong supporter for foundation grants in the 1950s, and professed his profound admiration for *The Great Transformation* (Polanyi 1944) in his private letters to funders on Karl's behalf. Nothing in Merton's published work expressed this enthusiasm. But Merton had a long record of involvement with and support of scientists' movements on the Left and this did leak into print (cf. Turner 2007).

In 1940, Merton was Chair of the Sociology Department at Tulane, as part of an odd practice in the department of appointing and promoting junior scholars who would serve as department chair and enticing them by an elevated rank, in this case Associate Professor. In fact, Merton, who was the same age as Shils, had a quite astonishing record by this time, aided by his publications with Pitirim Sorokin. His own description on his appointment in 1938 listed a book, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* and "Some twenty articles published in various American, English, French, and Italian journals in the fields of sociology, history of science and scientific method." He also mentioned "Translations from the Italian: published in various international journals" and "fifty or sixty extensive book reviews."² Shils, in contrast, had a few grant reports, three translations, and four minor articles.

At the time, Tulane had a very prestigious sister institution for women, Sophie Newcomb College. Shils applied. The application is revealing. Shils presents himself as a conventional sociologist. His grant work, beyond his study of German sociological theory for Wirth, was about the occupational structure of cities. His interest, he said, was in researching the middle class in cities, something he could continue in New Orleans. The cover letter, written in January of 1940, promised that he will have the Ph.D. by the end of the year. According to Shils' letter to Merton, Wirth encouraged Shils to apply for the job, and Shils tells Merton that Wirth's "account of New Orleans and the problems which it offers for research made the possibility of going there genuinely attractive."³

Lewis Wirth had been appointed assistant professor at Tulane University in 1928, fresh out of graduate school. He had returned to Chicago, where he had received his Ph.D., in 1931, shortly before Shils himself arrived. Wirth may have believed he had some influence at Tulane, but perhaps he was mistaken. Although he had been well-paid there and had received a prestigious Social Science Research Council grant, he had created a problem for the closely linked School of Social Work by giving a talk on "companionate marriage," a controversial topic of the time (cf. Davis 2008), that was reported in the newspapers and had offended the Catholic charities in this Catholic city. This was significant: Wirth was appointed in the School of Social

Work. The Catholics complained to the administration and threatened to suspend co-operation.⁴ In any case, the position Shils applied for went to a Harvard man with an M.A., Nicholas Demerath, who was appointed as an instructor and would not receive his Ph.D. until 1942.

In 1940, in short, Shils was eager to embark on a conventional career in sociology, in a position at a good women's school, a pattern that was well-established: W. F. Ogburn, F. S. Chapin, and Harry Elmer Barnes, prominent figures of the time, all had started in such schools. Something then happened. It has long been a puzzle as to why Shils never finished a Ph.D., and he brushed off the question in later years. But there was a pivotal event in Shils' life. He explains it in his autobiography in these somewhat guarded terms:

I thought and still think that the disputes centering on Robert Hutchins, of which the polemics of Wirth, Gideonse and Knight against Hutchins were only one, did the University much harm. During the war, I wrote to that effect to a friend who indiscreetly summarized my views to another friend and so the message passed from one person to another to the point where it became, "Edward Shils thinks that Louis is foolish." That is the form in which it came to Wirth. Naturally he was offended. That was a sad ending to a relationship from which I have benefitted and for which I am grateful (2006: 46).

This understates the situation. Shils was completely dependent on Wirth for any sort of future in Sociology. On the (handwritten) vita he sent to Merton, Shils listed two other sociology references from Chicago: Ernest Burgess and Earl Johnson. Johnson was powerless, and not even a part of the department (he spent his career running the interdisciplinary MA for the Division of Social Science); Burgess was not close to Shils, and Shils later had harsh words for him. The promised Ph.D. never materialized.

The break with Wirth must have been brutal, but it was private. After Wirth's death, the department, desperate to catch up to Columbia and Harvard, and in need of a theorist, discussed Shils. A memo referred to the need to knock down barriers. As Hughes explained,

By knocking down the barriers I mean fuller use of the university's resources outside the department. One of the first things I did last fall was to speak to Ed Shils about listing his courses in our department. They were so listed. I am glad that the department is minded to have us pursue this collaboration further and have, in accordance with the recent motion, written to Shils on the point.⁵

This is revealing on many levels, but one point is obvious: Shils had no friends in the department, or this situation would not have gone on for over a decade.

Wirth had stood in his way not only as an enemy, but as someone with almost identical interests. Wirth is, of course, remembered as an Urban Sociologist. But this was not how he saw himself. Herbert Blumer recounts a "personal conversation" about Wirth's own aspirations just before his death in 1952. He spoke to Herbert Blumer:

Even though he had already attained the highest eminence in the field of sociology, a brilliant future still lay ahead of Dr. Wirth. In a personal conversation a few days before his death he had indicated his intention to restrict the broad range of his interests and to focus his

efforts more centrally on the development of systematic social theory (Blumer 1952: 69).

Elsewhere he confirmed this primary interest in theory, and added that

My second interest is in what is known as the sociology of knowledge. This is a field which is misnamed and with the misnaming of which, unfortunately, I have had something to do. It should rather be called the sociology of intellectual life. You may recall that I translated and wrote a rather extensive introduction to Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* and thus introduced this work to the English-speaking public. I have written very little in this field myself, aside from an article or two, but I have underway a monograph on the sociology of science which I hope will have some value. I have also directed a number of Doctors' theses in this field, such as one on the sociology of art and another one on the sociology of literature which begin to open these fields to empirical inquiry (Odum [1951] 1969: 231).

Shils was erased from this recollection. But it is notable that Wirth taught a seminar in Sociology of Knowledge during the 1940s.⁶ Shils later taught his NEH Seminar on the topic under the title "Sociology of Intellectuals."⁷ Their professed interests, as distinct from what Wirth was best known for and published on, were very close.

Ideology and Tradition

In 1941, Shils published a short paper on Mannheim's *Man and Society*, which he had translated. The paper appeared in an odd place: *The Journal of Liberal Religion*. But it appeared in the pages following another paper that was very consequential, Robert Merton's "Karl Mannheim and the Sociology of Knowledge." Despite Merton's somewhat oily praise of Mannheim, the text as a whole was a devastating hatchet job, showing Merton at his most destructive and erudite best. Merton focused on the problem of reflection, of just how ideas were supposed to reflect social position, and on the idea of total ideologies, that is to say the encompassing worldviews that were supposed to characterize groups.

Merton showed that the notion of reflection was incoherent. He lists Mannheim's usages:

- . . . follow inevitably and unwittingly from certain *causal determinants* (G, p. 54).
- . . . *bound up with and grow out of* a certain social reality (G, p. 72).
- . . . *in harmony with it*. The same estrangement goes on with reference to knowledge. . . (G, p. 76).
- . . . rooted in a definite *Weltanschauung* and has progressed *in close connection with* definite political interests (G, p. 148).
- . . . outlook *in accordance with the structural relationship* of the groups representing it (G, p. 199).
- . . . transformed *in close conjunction with* social forces. It is *never by accident* that they appear at given moments in the social process (G, p. 223; Merton [1941] 1968: 553; italics added by Merton).

These are either empty metaphors or unprovable hypotheses: Mannheim would have liked to show that there were causal determinants, but the best he could do was describe the vague connections Merton highlights in italics. But it is the concept of total ideology that is Merton's main target, for it is unclear where its application

ends, or why it would end. Why should science be exempt? Why should Mannheim's own theory be exempt? What we might call the liberal theory of ideology, to which Shils (and Polanyi) later adhered, made a sharp distinction between ideological and non-ideological thinking. For them there could be an end to ideology—not so for the Mannheimian notion of total ideology.

What was Shils thinking at the time? We can glean some clues from the paper that came in the next pages. Shils is explicitly not writing a critique of Mannheim, and the text he is discussing is not primarily about ideology. Nevertheless, Shils' treatment gives us some clues to his attitude toward Mannheim at this crucial point, and about how Shils was thinking about the larger problem of ideology. The framework is one that Shils, Merton, and Polanyi all shared: the problem of planning.⁸ And by this time the crucial arguments are already present: there was no need to wait for Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* of 1944. As Shils says,

Observation of the totalitarian regimes has led to the view, widely held, that planning and dictatorship are identical, that planning necessarily involves dictatorial power, and furthermore that the expansion of governmental control over private economic activity must end ultimately not only in the loss of entrepreneurial liberties but of all other significant liberties as well. (1941: 151)

Shils characterizes Mannheim as seeking to refute this argument. And although Shils praises the book for its seriousness and depth, his comments indicate, in a gentler but quite explicit way, that he thinks this book is marred by the same kinds of problems that Merton points out: that crucial issues are passed over blithely, as when Shils notes that "He is rather light-heartedly optimistic about the possibilities of parliamentary control over bureaucratic experts" (1941: 152).

The praise is in any case often double-edged: he begins the review by commenting that "Mannheim places himself in the line which proceeds directly from the French 18th and the English 19th centuries" (1941: 148), but does so in the language of social science. The fact that Hayek was at the same time writing on the abuse of reason is revealing: by this time there was something naive and even sinister about promoting planning in the name of rationality (Ebenstein 2001: 107-108). When Shils comes to the shortcomings of the book, he says they are

numerous: the formulations are seldom free from ambiguity; the propositions remain too frequently on the level of generality and are accompanied neither by the corroborative evidence which is available in many cases nor by illustrations which would heighten the plausibility of those propositions which are still in the hypothetical stage (1941: 153).

This is to say in a mild way what Merton said in a brutal way about *Ideology and Utopia*.

The Bridge to Ideology and Tradition

Shils, in short, had all the material he needed to repudiate Mannheim before he went to England. That he was further influenced by the more radical attacks of Popper, Hayek, and ultimately Michael Polanyi, there can be little doubt. But, armed with his knowledge of the thought of Frank Knight, himself an active polemicist, Shils was already deeply engaged with the issues that divided these thinkers. Indeed, Knight is cited in Shils' paper on *Man and Society*. Nevertheless, there is an open question about the extent to which Shils and even

Michael Polanyi himself was influenced by Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, an issue Moodey captures nicely by quoting the comment by Nye, that "Mannheim's sociology of knowledge is the shark cruising beneath the waters of Polanyi's argument" (Nye 2011: 280).

With Shils, the issue is superficially clear: his later writing on ideology pointedly did not use Mannheim's categories, and endorsed a "liberal" conception that contrasted ideological to non-ideological thinking (Shils 1968). When the mass ideological parties lost their grip in the 1950s with the end of the classic proletariat, that was "the end of ideology" of that kind. Even writers on the Left at the time, such as Otto Kirchheimer, understood this when they complained about the interest-based parties that took over in the 1950s: they were nostalgic for the coherence and attachment of the unifying all-encompassing parties of the 1920s, and regarded the new parties as alienating (Kirchheimer 1961: xxix; Turner 2011). What was missed was precisely the kind of ideological party of the past, which was tied to a vast set of workers' institutions that promoted this viewpoint.

Mannheim's conception was more encompassing, because he wished to apply it to liberalism, which lacked these institutions and disclaimed such ideas as a party line, and to conservatism, which lacked even the kind of articulation of ideas found in liberalism. But his terms are confusing, and there are multiple notions to be found there. The translators intended to clean some of this up, and to some extent they did, but Mannheim wished the book to be understood as a kind of open-ended experiment rather than a closed argument, so he resisted. The net result was confusion.

Some of the confusion is with Mannheim's terms. What he calls utopias are what nowadays would be called ideologies. Utopian elements are ideas and values that arise in social groups and organize experience, but at the same time represent a wish that goes beyond experience, and potentially lead to demands that burst through the existing order. What Mannheim calls ideology, in contrast, works like this: "Thought becomes illuminated when a concrete situation is penetrated, not merely through acting and doing, but also through the thinking which must go with them" (Mannheim [1929] 1936: 128). Mannheim's emphasis was on the social location of thought, but he pairs this with the term "concreteness."

This is the novelty in our approach, also in the field of logic and in the analysis of concrete human thinking. The point of departure of the "sociology of knowledge" is the "connectedness to existence (*Seinsverbundenheit*)," the "situational determination" (*Situationsgebundenheit*) of thinking—and not "thinking in general" (Mannheim *Mensch und Gesellschaft* (1935: 164-5, cited in Kettler & Meja 1995: 194-95).

Curiously, this passage disappears from Shils' translation of *Man and Society* (Kettler & Meja 1995: 195).

The term "concrete human thinking" is a tip off. An ideology, as Mannheim used the term, was associated with something very concrete—with a form of activity, or in current terms, a practice. He confused the issue by borrowing quasi-Marxist language suggesting some sort of *Überbau* relation. He confused it more by borrowing neo-Kantian language and introducing the notion of total ideology, which as Merton noted seems to have no limits, and to apply to thinking in general.

Polanyi opposed what he saw as an ideological, or as Mannheim would perhaps have said, utopian understanding of science. Bernal and the Left saw science as technology: their "wish" was for society to be

organized scientifically, meaning planned, which they believed they could easily do. This was a wish with great attractive power, as Polanyi saw. But it represented for him a misunderstanding of science. And here there is a certain convergence with Mannheim: Polanyi thought that science needed instead to be understood as a concrete activity together with the thinking that goes with it, to use Mannheim's phrase.

Whether Polanyi read Mannheim's book, or read it this way, we do not know. But in this mish-mash we do find ideas that stay both with Shils and Polanyi: the interest in concrete acting and doing and the thinking that goes with them, and the critique of ideological thinking. This is in some sense the core of the notion of tradition and it is Polanyi's startling and radical application of the term to the activity of science itself. This is a weak reed on which to construct an argument. But in fact there were many strands that connect these thinkers within the ferment of the time. This ferment, which as the example of Knight shows, was already bubbling in Chicago in the late 1930s, produced the great texts of Hayek, Popper, Oakeshott, Eliot, and the rest in the 40s. Shils, academically orphaned, was well-prepared for this moment and seized it.

Endnotes

¹Personal Communication, March 22, 2013.

²Merton File, Biographical Record, University News Bureau, Louisiana Research Collection, University Archives, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

³Edward Shils to Robert Merton, January 18, 1940, Merton RK Collection, Box 79, Folder 4, Columbia University Rare Books & Manuscript Library.

⁴Tulane University Archives, Louisiana Research Collection, University Archives, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

⁵Everett Hughes, Chairman, March 14, 1953. Memorandum to Department of Sociology, p. 2. Philip W. Hauser papers, Box 14, Folder 11, Department of Special Collections, The Joseph Regenstein Library, The University of Chicago.

⁶Kettler and Meja make a point of the difference between a sociology of intellectuals and one of knowledge, and criticize Wirth for opting for the weaker formulation (1995: 234-35). But this was Shils' choice as well, and this was not unconnected to his view of ideology. Intellectuals for him had a special role in relation to the central ideals of society that led to their antinomianism. And as Moody notes, this was a point that Polanyi came to accept.

⁷Scope Note, Louis Wirth Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁸Merton, crucially, is on the other side: he was to write at the same time that the fulfillment of science was possible only under Communism, a claim he later deleted (Turner 2007).

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