

Edward A. Shils, *A Fragment of a Sociological Autobiography: The History of My Pursuit of a Few Ideas*. Edited and with an Introduction by Steven Grosby. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 2006, pp. vii + 220. \$39.95, cloth.

Edward A. Shils (1910-1995) was a brilliant scholar, renowned sociologist, and sophisticated secular humanist based for more than sixty years at the University of Chicago. His interests and expertise far transcended the conventionally understood boundaries of the sociological discipline; he incorporated knowledge and insight from history, the other social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences into an essentially sociological understanding of reality. Throughout his career, Shils consistently grappled with issues foundational to the study of individuals and groups in social context: tradition, higher education, science, religion, culture, intellectuals, literature, secrecy, privacy, primary groups, deference, status, ideology, charisma in both its concentrated and dispersed forms, the various types of moral attachment: (“primordial,” “personal,” “sacred,” and “civil”), “mass society,” “center-periphery” analysis, the requirements for a civil democratic society of ordered liberty, the overall discipline and various sub-disciplines of sociology, among numerous others. One indication of his ecumenical interests was his joint appointment as a member of the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought originally founded by Robert Hutchins. Appropriately, he was the recipient of many prestigious awards such as the Jefferson Lecture and the Balzan Prize.

A Fragment of a Sociological Autobiography was edited by Steven Grosby, Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Clemson University, a former student, and Co-Executor (along with Joseph Epstein) of the estate of Edward Shils. With a useful introduction, the book consists of three previously unpublished essays of Shils: a long autobiographical essay whose title is given to the overall collection as well as two shorter pieces, “Society, Collective Self-Consciousness, and Collective Self-Consciousnesses” and “Collective Self-Consciousness and Rational-Choice.” The reader is informed by Professor Grosby that *Fragment* was written “during the years of 1991 and 1992, when [Shils] was eighty-one years old and in full command of his considerable intellectual abilities” (1).

Readers of the volume can profit in various ways. In descending order of importance, *Fragment* represents a significant theoretical contribution to the sociological literature regarding the

central issue of moral and social integration. It also includes incisive commentaries on the utility of the work of various scholars (Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Karl Mannheim, Georges Sorel), theories (Marxism, psychoanalysis, exchange theory) and works (*Economy and Society*; *Ideology and Utopia*; *The Structure of Social Action*; *The American Soldier*). It provides frank reflections on and evaluations of the many significant intellectuals who crossed paths with Shils' own biographical career (Louis Worth, Robert Park, Frank Knight, Karl Mannheim, Talcott Parsons, R.H. Tawney, Michael Polanyi, Audrey Richards, Friedrich Hayek, Raymond Aron, Lloyd Fallers). Finally, and relatively speaking least important, it provides a fascinating account of autobiographical details: his father was a Russian Jewish immigrant and cigar maker from Philadelphia; he started his career as a social worker; he loved to walk city streets always engaging in conversations in search of learning something about ordinary individuals in ordinary occupations; he never bothered or needed to earn the doctoral degree; he attended numerous conferences at Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of Pope John Paul II.

As Grosby states, the seemingly disparate intellectual issues that Shils was devoted to throughout his scholarly career find in his autobiography "a thematic unity of concern: the moral order of society" (4). *Fragment* chronicles "the history of the development and the nature of the theoretical refinement of this concern" (4). As Shils himself puts it: "I have really been chipping away on the same rock. The rock is a single problem. What is that problem? It is the problem of all classical sociology and political theory, namely, the nature and conditions of consensus, or of social solidarity, or loyalty" (158–159).

In reflecting on his seminal co-authored essay on the German army as a fighting force in World War II, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the *Wehrmacht*," Shils notes that it was part of his attempt to reach a "realistic view of the pattern of coherence of a large society which would do justice to its pluralism and recognizes, how, at the same time, the constitution of ... smaller collectivities contributed to the maintenance of the whole" (65). While sharing an affinity with Emile Durkheim's central concept of "collective consciousness," Shils judged his theoretical contribution to the study of consensus, re-conceptualized towards the end of his career as "collective self-consciousness" as the more intricate and complex concept. For Shils, "collective consciousness means only that all or most or many individual members of an aggregate or collectivity simultaneously hold certain cognitive and normative beliefs about any particular topic or event or any class or cluster of topics or events" (171–172). On the other hand, the concept of

“collective self-consciousness” necessarily involves, for Shils, both some kind of “we” consciousness and common participation in social life. Collective self-consciousness entails, for Shils, “the awareness of the individual members of a collectivity of the existence of that collectivity as a trans-individual entity of which they and others are parts and that a corresponding belief is held by the others about other members of the collectivity including in certain cases themselves” (171).

Given that Shils’ understanding that the theory of a collective self-consciousness allows that “an individual can act disinterestedly, i.e., without regard to the realization or frustration of his own interests, then the postulate of the theory of rational choice, namely that the individual acts only with an intention to realize his own interests, requires revision” (199). Put another way, individuals act not only out of self-interest but also out of normative obligations of a “non-rational” and “non-economic” nature. As Shils states, “there is a concern for the common good simultaneously experienced in many individuals ... [although] ... I do not argue that these persons think only of the common good” (148). For Shils, his theory of collective self-consciousness complements but does not replace the theory of rational choice (199). As Grosby notes, Shils accepted *both* the claims “that there is a reality outside of the mind of the individual” *and* “that all action could only be the action of individuals” (5), thus rejecting both a hyper-individualism *and* an over-socialized conception of the human being. This position is consistent, for instance, with Shils’ rejection of the sociology of knowledge as formulated by Karl Mannheim. For Shils (47–48), Mannheim’s formulation was faulty, among other reasons, because he posited a situational dependence that did not adequately take into account the continuity of tradition and did not grant a sufficient autonomy to intellectual activity vis-à-vis the realm of culture.

A Fragment of a Sociological Autobiography is indispensable for those interested in the development and nature of the discipline of sociology and in the field of social thought in general. Professor Grosby has performed an admirable service for the academy. The volume can be profitably read along with both Shils’ published work—*The Intellectuals and the Powers* (1972), *Center and Periphery* (1975), *The Calling of Sociology and Other Essays in the Pursuit of Learning* (1980), *Tradition* (1981)—and, for the specialist, unpublished manuscripts—*Love, Belief, and Civility* written during the 1950s and *Movements of Knowledge* written during the 1980s—located at the Joseph Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. Notable among the many useful commentaries on Shils’ career is Joseph Epstein’s “Introduction” to Shils’ *Portraits: A Gallery of Intellectuals* (1997). Those interested in a

Catholic sociological critique of the work of Edward A. Shils and of the “sociology of knowledge” can consult my entries in the *Encyclopedia of Catholic Social Thought, Social Science, and Social Policy*, Volume III, Supplement One, Scarecrow Press, 2012, forthcoming.

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