

## The Virtue of Civility



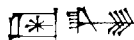
Edward Shils (1910–1995)

THE VIRTUE OF  
**Civility**

SELECTED ESSAYS ON  
LIBERALISM, TRADITION,  
AND CIVIL SOCIETY

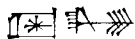
Edward Shils

EDITED BY  
STEVEN GROSBY



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo  
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# Contents



Introduction	<i>vii</i>
Editor's Note	<i>xiii</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>xv</i>
Observations on Some Tribulations of Civility	3
Ideology and Civility	25
Civility and Civil Society: Good Manners Between Persons and Concern for the Common Good in Public Affairs	63
Tradition and Liberty: Antinomy and Interdependence	103
The Antinomies of Liberalism	123
Nation, Nationality, Nationalism and Civil Society	188
Max Weber and the World Since 1920	225
The Modern University and Liberal Democracy	268
The Virtue of Civility	320
Principal Works of Edward Shils	357
Index	361

# Introduction



THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC REGIMES of the twentieth century have without exception been beset by a number of severe problems. While some of the problems are external in origin, others are a result of the contradictory character—what Edward Shils called the *antinomy*—of liberalism. Still other problems arise from the imperfect relations among various truths of the human condition. Nonetheless, these regimes have shown themselves to be remarkably resilient.

Theorists of both fascism and Marxism have been one in their denunciation of liberalism. Their principal charge is that the individualism and pluralism fostered by liberalism are aimless and disorderly. They also charge that liberal democratic regimes are so weak that they are incapable of action so long as they insist on maintaining the form of representative government.

But the liberal democratic regimes have withstood and even defeated these challenges. In doing so, both the ultimate meaning and the order of human affairs upon which these regimes are based have been reaffirmed. This meaning and order arise from liberalism's belief in the sacredness of the individual human being, in the dignity and therefore the freedom of the individual to live in accordance with his or her own beliefs, and in the moral value of reason and civil discussion.

The existence, the success, and even some of the persistent problems of liberal democratic regimes lie in liberalism's acknowledgment of these foundational beliefs and the order of society that evolves from them. The following essays by the late Edward Shils on liberalism, tradition, and civility elucidate this contradictory character of liberal-

## INTRODUCTION

ism. In doing so, these essays constitute an important defense of liberty and of the civility necessary to sustain liberty.

The beliefs that account for the contradictory character of liberalism are neither accidental nor capricious. They are grounded in nothing less than certain truths of the human condition. I wish to bring to the fore a few of the observations on the human condition and the nature of social life that are assumed by, and occasionally explicitly put forth in, these essays. These observations, on what Shils called “the fundamental proclivities of the human mind,” are to be found throughout his work and they place his work in the best traditions of philosophical anthropology.<sup>1</sup> The bearing of these fundamental proclivities of the human mind on the contradictory character of liberalism and on civility is a recurrent theme of the following essays.

Time and again over a period of fifty-five years, Shils observed that the coherence and stability of any society depend at least in part on the existence of the image of that society; on the attachment of the society’s members to that image; and, concomitantly, on the attachments that the members of that society form with one another. Such an image includes beliefs about the society, about the ultimate meaning of life, and about the order of the universe. Both the image and the body of beliefs that constitute the image are in large measure what Shils means in these essays by the terms “consensus” and “collective consciousness.”

The fact that there are consensual beliefs about the ultimate meaning of life and of life lived within society suggests a number of things about the human mind. For example, it suggests that the mind of the

1. For example, see especially such essays as “Center and Periphery,” “Primordial, Personal, Sacred, and Civil Ties,” “Charisma,” “The Sanctity of Life,” and “Charisma, Order, and Status,” all of which appear in Shils’s *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); and his *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

## INTRODUCTION

individual orients itself not only out of consideration to the pleasurable impulses of the body, or merely in response to or in anticipation of the actions of other individuals, but also to ideas. In other words, it suggests an imaginative capacity of the human mind to transcend the immediacy of the body and thereby to participate in, and to reflect upon, the meaning and order of human affairs. It further suggests the human need of what Shils called “cognitive order.” By this term Shils meant that man is compelled to seek the meaning of his existence and to justify his actions and the order of society in accordance with that meaning. This is to say that the nature of man evidently requires the recognition of, and is in some measure expressed in, the order of his society.

There are, if you will, two bearers of life: the individual who makes choices and decisions, and the achievements—the language, traditions, laws—of the lives of many individuals of the larger collectivity. Determining the proper relation between these two bearers of life presents a great problem. This is true especially because human beings also exhibit the striking capacity—however limited or intermittent—to separate themselves from their participation in the consensus of the larger collectivity. Put succinctly, human beings have the capacity to say “no” to many sets of circumstances, including those circumstances that ought not to be denied. This ability to say “no” suggests that the human mind constitutionally exhibits not only a need for cognitive order but also a potential for independence. One can observe Shils’s own acknowledgment of this truth of the human condition in his reference to one of his favorite quotations from Max Weber about the “magic of freedom” being “one of the most primordial dispositions of the human heart.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps it is the uneasy combination of man’s disposition to independence and his inexorable search for and participation in order that lies

2. See footnote 2 to the essay “Max Weber and the World Since 1920,” reprinted herein.



## INTRODUCTION

at the basis of another truth of the human condition recognized by Shils, namely, man's ambivalent relation to authority; that is, man's propensity to be both awestruck by authority and yet resentful of it. The economist Frank Knight nicely captured this contradictory tendency of human nature when he observed that "man seeks to be inherently both a law-maker and a law-breaker."<sup>3</sup> Liberalism openly acknowledges this contradictory tendency of man.

Liberalism in its more classic sense, what Shils in "The Antinomies of Liberalism" calls the tradition of autonomist liberalism, acknowledges the openness of the human mind. Liberalism also acknowledges the freedom of the individual to live in accordance with his or her own beliefs, and it acknowledges the incommensurable plurality of ends that man pursues. Liberal democracy did not create this plurality. Rather, liberal democracy is an order of human affairs that is most prominent in the history of mankind in permitting the expression and the pursuit of different and at times conflicting ends. Liberal democracy affirms the legitimacy of this differentiation of ideals and the accompanying conflict of interests in human affairs. As Shils observed, these acknowledgments allow for the potential disaggregation of society itself. Even so, this potential disaggregation is the price that liberalism pays for the prominence it accords to liberty. Thus, there is an overt antinomy inherent in liberal democracy between the prominence accorded to the freedom of the individual and the consensual order that is necessary for freedom.

However, it would woefully misrepresent the relation between the freedom of the individual and the consensual order of society to conclude that it is merely a conflict-ridden dichotomy. The human mind's capacity for detachment is not only a natural prerequisite for individual freedom, it also is a precondition for that imaginative ability of the

3. Frank Knight, "Science, Philosophy, and Social Procedure," in *Freedom and Reform* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 253–54.

## INTRODUCTION

mind that makes possible a consensual order. The mind's very capacity for detachment therefore allows for the possibility of dispassionate analysis and rational conversation. Analysis and conversation allow, in turn, for the recognition of the common good along with individual self-interest. This is the capacity that Adam Smith recognized in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in his discussion of the "impartial spectator" and that Shils recognized as the capacity for disinterestedness. It is in the cultivated exercise of dispassionate analysis and rational conversation in pursuit of the common good that the virtue of the citizen is to be found. This virtue is in part what Shils meant by *civility*, the developed skill to be free. This is a skill that does not deny but artfully adjudicates between the consequences arising from the openness of the human mind, the pluralism in human affairs, and the meaning of life.

The violence against human nature perpetrated by ideology in all its various manifestations is in its denial of the plurality of ends that man pursues.<sup>4</sup> In the twentieth century, three of the more significant statements recognizing this plurality of orientations in human affairs are Max Weber's "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" (1915), Michael Oakeshott's "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" (1959), and Edward Shils's "Primordial, Personal, Sacred, and Civil Ties" (1957). In opposition to the totalitarian temptation of ideology stands liberalism's acknowledgment of a plurality of ends. Because this acknowledgment contains the potential for conflict, it is important that the virtue of a citizen—of civility—be cultivated in a manner that confines this potential.

Edward Shils is known to the world as a sociologist. But such a description requires an immediate clarification, especially at a time when sociology has come to mean for many people the pursuit of either what is not worth knowing or what already is known, and a pursuit

4. See "Ideology and Civility," reprinted herein.

## INTRODUCTION

that often is in the service of a technocratic manipulation of society. This was never Shils's understanding of the tasks of sociology. Rather, he understood the calling of sociology to exist in its contribution toward the self-understanding of society, and not in sociology's potential for direct, manipulated social improvement.<sup>5</sup> He argued that the best that sociology can offer is the cultivation of the dispassionate pursuit of truth through training in circumspection and imagination. Shils was a sociologist who understood sociology to be necessarily humanistic because, at its best, sociology attempts to comprehend whatever man does in categories that acknowledge man's humanity.

In this regard Shils described sociological analysis as "a variant in a contemporary idiom of the great efforts of the human mind to render judgment on man's vicissitudes on earth."<sup>6</sup> These of his essays on the nature of liberalism, its past, and its prospects for the future have for their foundation Shils's observations on man's vicissitudes on earth and the fundamental proclivities of the human mind: its need for order, its disposition to independence, and its plurality of orientations. These contradictory proclivities of the mind are at the basis of both the antinomy of liberalism and the ability of liberalism to ameliorate that antinomy, namely, civility.

STEVEN GROSBY

5. See "The Calling of Sociology," in Edward Shils, *The Calling of Sociology and Other Essays on the Pursuit of Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3-92.

6. *Ibid.*, 32.

# Editor's Note



FOR THE MOST PART, these essays of Edward Shils are reprinted as they originally appeared. Because of the autobiographical nature of the opening essay, "Observations on Some Tribulations of Civility," it was thought reasonable to ask Edward Shils to make a few additions to its previously published version. He made these few additions in the autumn of 1992. Two of the essays, "Civility and Civil Society: Good Manners Between Persons and Concern for the Common Good in Public Affairs" and "The Virtue of Civility," appear here for the first time in their original, longer versions.

In the preparation of these selections for publication, efforts were made to correct grammatical flaws and inconsistencies within the previously published individual essays. In particular, British spellings have been Americanized. Finally, where appropriate, a few footnotes have been added in the hope of clarifying Shils's references.

# Acknowledgments



I WISH TO ACKNOWLEDGE the assistance of the John M. Olin Foundation, whose financial support allowed me to fulfill in a timely fashion my obligations as editor of this volume of Edward Shils's essays. I wish also to acknowledge three people whose efforts made this volume possible: Stuart D. Warner, of Roosevelt University; Charles H. Hamilton, director of the J. M. Kaplan Fund; and the late Elie Kedourie. Shortly before he died, Elie Kedourie reviewed with approval the proposal for this collection of essays. Many of us deeply feel the loss of Elie Kedourie, who was an unflinching defender of liberty and civility.

## The Virtue of Civility

# Observations on Some Tribulations of Civility



**T**HE INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS required for the freedom of expression of beliefs and the representation of interests and ideals—both of which can be divisive—can function effectively in society if those who use them for their own particularistic ends are at the same time restrained by an admixture of civility. Public liberties are conditions of the proposition, confrontation and persuasion of contending beliefs, of their cultivation in autonomous corporate bodies and of their presentation to public authorities. Representative institutions are the arrangements through which contending beliefs and interests are brought forward, considered and taken into account in the making of laws governing the territorially bounded society. The institutions in which beliefs and desires or interests are proposed and confronted in argument and the institutions in which beliefs and interests are taken into account and digested discriminatingly into law cannot work acceptably without some constituent civility and consensus of the contending parties. If the contending parties are vehemently irreconcilable and if effectively contending beliefs and interests are very widely disparate, one or another of the groups will resist physically or seek to impose its will by coercion and actual violence on the other. The representative institutions cannot, moreover, work effectively if they have too many tasks to master and if the different contending

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## THE VIRTUE OF CIVILITY

parties within them are irreconcilable to the point where they deny the legitimacy of the institutions themselves, of the procedures for arriving at decisions, and the decisions themselves, should those decisions be uncongenial to their own beliefs and interests.

Civility is a belief which affirms the possibility of the common good; it is a belief in the community of contending parties within a morally valid unity of society. It is a belief in the validity or legitimacy of the governmental institutions which lay down rules and resolve conflicts. Civility is a virtue expressed in action on behalf of the whole society, on behalf of the good of all the members of the society to which public liberties and representative institutions are integral. Civility is an attitude in individuals which recommends that consensus about the maintenance of the order of society should exist alongside the conflicts of interests and ideals. It restrains the exercise of power by the powerful and restrains obstruction and violence by those who do not have power but who wish to have it. Civility is on the side of authority and on the side of those over whom authority would rule.

The argument that civility is necessary in any society which grows beyond the lineage as an adequate principle of social organization does not imply an expectation that it can ever be found in all the members of a society. It does require enough civility in enough persons in positions of power and prestige to restrain the conflicts arising from incompatible interests and widely diverging ideals. Civility is a virtue because it permits a variety of substantive interests and ideals or virtues to be cultivated and because it attempts to keep a balance among the parties to the conflicts by an example and an insistence on self-restraint. It is a restraint on the passions with which interests and ideals are pursued.

In a variety of ways, many of the tendencies which have become prominent since 1945 are injurious to civility. The main tendencies of belief and action about society of this period in Western countries are collectivistic liberalism, emancipationism, anti-patriotism, egalitarian-



ism, populism, scientism and ecclesiastical abdication. Taken together they form a complex which I call progressivism. They are statements of what the members of society believe about authority in their society, about what it should be, and about the criteria by which to assess institutions of authority and in accordance with which these should be modified. These progressivistic beliefs are not universally shared in any one of these countries but they are very prominent on the public scene and they are very influential the nearer they come to the intellectual and political centers of society. All of these beliefs are in various ways very critical of and hostile to authority. Some, like emancipationism, will tolerate no authority over the expression of desires, sentiments and impulses which are directly injurious to it. Collectivistic liberalism is a menace to civility because it burdens government with unfulfillable tasks and thus brings its authority into discredit.

Towards the latter part of the first decade of our period, there set in an abatement of the attractiveness of Marxist ideology and no other ideology emerged to take up the slack created by its recession. But during the same decade, in a diluted or attenuated form, the rudiments of Marxism inherited from the people's front of the 1930s entered into collectivistic liberalism which ever since the revolution of October 1917 had shown an opening on that side. Disillusioned or intimidated fellow-travellers became supportive of collectivistic liberalism as the best they could hope for.

Until the end of the 1950s, ideological zeal was in a state of despondency, collectivistic liberalism followed the rule of "piecemeal social engineering," emancipationism was still moderate and content with privacy. The knowledge of the atrocities of the Stalinist regime had reached many intellectuals by the early 1950s, although the Soviet Union still had many intellectual supporters in all Western countries who denied those atrocities, explained them away or justified them. There were few exponents of a Marxism detached from Stalinism. The Frank-

furt School was still in process of resettling the simplified Utopian Marxism which it masked under the name of "critical philosophy." It was the early springtime of "polycentric Communism." Socialist parties had reconciled themselves to a controlled capitalism. Conservative parties accepted the general rightfulness of most of the reforms which had been instituted in the recent past; in any case they accepted most of the achievements of social democracy and collectivistic liberalism as part of the tradition which they would support. Fascist ideologists and ruffians were discredited and discouraged.

The Western governments were committing themselves to the specific articles of the program of collectivistic liberalism, to policies of full employment, economic growth, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, etc., and in varying degrees these policies appeared not to be unsuccessful. In all countries the proportion of young persons over the age of 17 attending advanced secondary and higher educational institutions was increasing and there were corresponding increases in educational expenditures. McCarthyism had been brought down in the United States. The difficulties of British society did not yet appear to be as endemic as they have later shown themselves to be. Patriotic pride in British accomplishment in the Second World War was still very high. British intellectuals were enjoying the moral pleasure of reconciliation with their country and of the emancipation of the colonies; a sensible matter-of-fact social democracy moved forward, with the assent of the conservatives. In France in the middle of the 1950s the war in Indo-China was ending and the war in Algeria had not yet come to torment the country. The "Third World," then only in the process of formation, was still fairly quiet; the United Nations had not yet been made into its forum. The spirit of Bandung still had relatively few followers; "neutralism" was biased towards the Soviet Union but it was still not as virulently hostile to the Western countries as it later became. The developments in the "Third World" had not yet become ingredients in the bitter partisanship which later became so widespread in Western countries.

This was the setting of the brief “end of ideology.” There was certainly an abatement of ideological fervor at this time. Raymond Aron and I were right when, in 1955, we discerned this abatement and affirmed it.<sup>1</sup> Neither of us said that ideological possession had disappeared forever from human history or even that it had disappeared for the rest of our century. We both saw that it was an inexpugnable potentiality which is always present in society. What we did say was that the fervent self-confidence of its devotees had abated. We welcomed the diminution which had occurred and recommended that those who espoused any ideology should cease to do so. (This gave rise to a clamorous and confused attack by many would-be ideologists and their *bien-pensant* supporters who thought that we were digging away the ground from under their feet. After all, what could be more distasteful to them than to be told that they were participants in a losing cause, and one which was far from noble. The acrimony of their response formed what is now retrospectively called “the debate about the end of ideology.”)

The disclosure of Khrushchev’s speech of February 1956 at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was a further wound to the wavering forces of radical ideology. The “Polish October” and the uprising in Budapest which was followed by the armed Soviet invasion of Hungary immediately thereafter were severely disturbing experiences for many Communist intellectuals. The attachment of the ideologists to their idol was loosened, although not broken.

The fiasco of the attempted Anglo-French invasion of Egypt was a salvatory stroke for the disordered battalions of the Marxist ideologists. It compensated them for their losses from the now admitted misdeeds of the Soviet Union. While this collocation of events freed them from their subservience to the Soviet Union, the Anglo-French military action against Egypt vindicated their animosity against their

1. Edward Shils, “The End of Ideology?” *Encounter* 5 (November 1955): 52–62; Raymond Aron, *L’Opium des Intellectuals* (Paris: Calman Levy, 1955), specifically the concluding chapter, “La Fin des idéologies?” (*ed.*).

own societies, the iniquity and weakness of which gave them courage to embark on a new course of radicalism. The “new Left” was the result.

The upshot of this devious course of ideology is the present condition in which there is ideological passion without a single authoritative ideology. The Marxism of the new Left was a very heterogeneous thing, having acquired infusions from psychoanalysis of an extremely emancipationist sort and from sociology; in addition, there was much disagreement, as various types of older Marxism, buried for years by Stalinist-Leninism, were exhumed. Having for the most part separated itself from the industrial working class, the new Left took refuge in the ivory tower of the university; this gave it a very effective way in which to carry on its “long march.” The intellectual defenselessness of many students makes them a very easy field to sow; it is a self-expanding process since those already appointed help to appoint others like themselves.

The reborn ideology is not like the one which “ended” in the 1950s. Its intellectual content is widely and vaguely dispersed around a hollow core of negation of existing authority. The rudiments of an ideology are there in the shambles of Communist Marxism and the later accretions of hitherto unorthodox Marxism and emancipationism. Writers like Marcuse and Habermas have attempted to reconstruct this new ideological orientation but their achievements are more straws in the wind than solid and effective constructions. Hatred for the existing order of society and a conviction that reforms are hypocritical, impossible, trivial and undesirable are almost all that remains of the old ideology. Incivility of an extreme sort is coupled with exploitation of the potentialities afforded by public liberties and affluence—the new Left does not have to rob banks since its supporters often have sufficient wealth to support their publications and other activities. Unlike the ideological radicals prior to the invention of the people’s front and the numerous institutions of fellow-travelling, the uncivil new Left addresses itself to and to some extent reaches a much wider audience.