**The Chicago School goes east: Edward Shils and the dilemma of the Indian intellectuals, c.1956-67[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Abstract**

The sociologist Edward Shils (1910-95) is a neglected commentator on modern India. Best known in a South Asian context for his involvement in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Shils also produced an influential study of Indian intellectuals, published in 1961. Shils was one of the few non-Marxists to write about the role of intellectuals during the era of decolonisation in Asia and Africa. His book appeared in the same year as Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), a year before C. L. R. James’ *Marxism and the Intellectuals* (1962), and just as Pan-Africanism was finding its ideological voice. This article recovers Shils’ work on the Indian intellectual. It describes his Indian interlocutors, his methodology, and his claims about the isolated and ineffectual character of the Indian academic elite. The article concludes with the longer-term influence and validity of Shils’ critique of the Indian intelligentsia.

The sociologist Edward Shils (1910-95) is a neglected commentator on modern India. Best known in a South Asian context for his involvement in the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), Shils also produced a large study of Indian intellectuals, published in 1961. Moreover, he was part of a remarkable generation of scholars based at the University of Chicago, where he worked from 1947 through to his death in 1995 – who helped to foster an enduring and influential approach to the study of India. Shils’ colleagues included Milton Singer, Stephen Hay and later Bernard Cohn, a school of Indian expertise honed by the entrepreneurial Robert Redfield, Dean of Social Sciences, and son-in-law of Robert E. Park, pioneer of urban studies and the Chicago School of Sociology. But whereas much is known about the work of his peers, Shils’ studies in and on India have never been properly evaluated. Shils’ credibility took a major hit when it was revealed in the mid-1960s that the CIA had funded the CCF. Whilst his reputation and legacy as a mainstream sociologist survived this exposure, Shils’ standing as an interpreter of the Indian intelligentsia waned almost overnight. However, there are good reasons to recover Shils’ work on the Indian intellectual. Shils was one of the few non-Marxist scholars to write about the role of intellectuals during the era of decolonisation in Asia and Africa. His book appeared in the same year as Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), a year before C. L. R. James’ *Marxism and the intellectuals* (1962), and just as Pan-Africanism was finding its ideological voice.[[2]](#footnote-2) Shils merits inclusion within any analysis of this post-colonial moment. He exemplifies occidental writing about the global south, but also points us to the legacy of colonialism amongst new elites.

 The article is in four main parts. First, it provides some general background on Edward Shils and his Indian connections. Then, secondly, it analyses and interrogates his 1961 study, entitled *The intellectual between tradition and modernity: the Indian situation*.[[3]](#footnote-3) The third section of the paper discusses the book’s reception, and also what happened when it was discovered that CIA funding was behind the CCF. And fourthly and finally, I look at the legacy of Shils’ work on India, its relevance today, and also at why his reputation as an interpreter of Indian intellectual culture suffered, whilst the profile of other Indianists at Chicago went from strength to strength.

 ***1: Edward Shils and India***

India was not part of Shils’ original academic plan. Nor was sociology. He had studied French at the University of Pennsylvania and then became a research assistant of the Chicago School sociologist Louis Wirth, translated Max Weber and Karl Mannheim, worked with Talcott Parsons at Harvard on social theory and functionalism before joining the Office of Strategic Services, the US intelligence service in the second world war. This work brought him to London where he interviewed interned German officers about their loyalty. Shils now began writing about some of the important themes that would dominate his career as an intellectual and academic. He had an interest in charismatic leadership (he noted that the German officer was more loyal to his immediate superior than to Nazi ideology). He published on the importance of tradition: for example, he co-authored with the British sociologist, Michael Young, an article on the meaning of the Queen’s coronation in 1953.[[4]](#footnote-4) And he wrote about the ethics of privacy and civility in general, but especially in relation to academic research and the precarious relationship between the state and knowledge production, with which his monograph, *The torment of secrecy*[[5]](#footnote-5) in 1956 was conceived, railing against the effects of McCarthyism, and asserting the importance of intellectuals and their institutions in both the West and in newly decolonised states and nations. Whilst the legacy of his work on intellectuals is highly regarded, his detractors label Shils as a conservative thinker, part of that moment of American conservatism that includes Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley and Alan Bloom.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, it might be more accurate to say that although Shils worked on tradition during an era of Cold War conservatism, he was in fact an unapologetic liberal, concerned above all to protect liberal democracy in the post-war world from the onslaught of the kind of fascism and communism that he had witnessed in contemporary Europe. For example, in 1955 he gave a talk at a CCF event in Italy arguing that tradition and sacred rules of conduct were not restrictive, but actually helped to maintain free society and individual liberty.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Whilst in London Shils met a number of Indian students. He started to interest himself in the politics and development of newly emergent states and the role played therein by the indigenous intelligentsia.[[8]](#footnote-8) Shils was not alone in being drawn to this topic. Many post-war commentators identified intellectuals as the one group that could lead their countries into modernisation. In his book, *Mandarins of the future: modernisation theory in Cold War America*, Nils Gilman has written about this phenomenon as a Cold War moment. Gilman cites Shils’ speech at the Committee of Comparative Politics conference in New York in 1959, when he appealed to his fellow academics to emphasise the word ‘modern’, as opposed to ‘western’ when dealing with the new nations of the developing world.[[9]](#footnote-9) Not that Shils himself always followed his own advice, as we shall see.

India was an obvious case-study for anyone who, like Shils, was interested in the project of modernisation and liberal democracy. India gained independence in 1947. From being the largest exemplar of imperial dominion of modern times in the size of its subject population, India became the largest secular democratic republic in the world. And the eyes of the world were trained on India. Journalists, economists, political scientists and anthropologists from America and the west poured into the country, funded inter alia by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Institute, in order to study and support the pioneers of the new democracy.[[10]](#footnote-10) Film directors and architects followed. Frank Capra went to India in 1952 and was later told by Dean Acheson, Harry Truman’s Secretary of State [[11]](#footnote-11) that he had single-handedly forestalled a Communist take-over of India films, while the new city of Chandigarh was designed firstly by Albert Meyer, the American town-planner, and then subsequently by the exciting French modernist Le Corbusier, announcing the ravaged provinces of Punjab, partitioned between India and Pakistan, as a new centre of global modernity. Roberto Rossellini came with 100 kilograms of spaghetti to direct a documentary (and ran off with a married Indian celebrity).[[12]](#footnote-12) Other western visitors had less success. The African-American journalists Carl Rowan and J. Saunders Redding were heckled and ridiculed by Indians unwilling to be lectured to by so-called ‘Uncle Toms’, sent out to explain racial segregation in America to a nation of people who had just won their own freedom.[[13]](#footnote-13)

From Chicago a number of scholars homed in on India. The anthropologist Milton Singer worked on the religious mythology of Madras, the mathematician and classicist David Pingree whose Harvard PhD was on Hellenic influence on Indian astrology; the historian Stephen Hay who worked on Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi; the political scientist Myron Weiner, who came to Chicago for a spell after gaining his PhD from Princeton; and Milton Friedman, the economist who went out to India and reprimanded Nehru for his five-year plans. All these men were acting out the game plan of Robert Redfield, Robert Park’s son-in-law and a pioneering anthropologist of rural Mexico. Using Ford Foundation money, Redfield, the Dean of Social Sciences at Chicago, transformed the Asian language expertise that had been developed at the university during the second world war, turning it into a study and research programme on comparative eastern civilisation. If the civilisations of China, India and Islam could be compared, Redfield surmised, then the similarities that comprise the core of human values could be discovered. This in turn could ensure peace in the traumatised world after 1945. At Chicago, Redfield put together the Committee on Southern Asian Studies in 1955, using this coterie of scholars, including Shils. The same group came together in 1960, when Shils and the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who was hired at Chicago in that same year, established the ‘Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations’.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, Shils’ contact with Redfield goes back even further, to the summer of 1945. Both men were shocked by the effects of the atomic bomb, not only because of the devastation and unprecedented loss of civilian life wreaked in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also because of the danger that nuclear power posed to scholarship and the autonomy of scientific research. Together they set up the office for the ‘Social Aspects of Atomic Energy’ later that year.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Whilst India was a land of hope and a beacon for the rest of the colonised world, there were many who were fearful about the influence of her close neighbours. China and the USSR, both communist, the former a rising power and the latter already a super power, were bearing down on India’s fledgling democracy. One organisation that was particularly concerned about keeping India outside the scope of communist ideology was the Congress for Cultural Freedom. This was a group of intellectuals, largely drawn from the non-Communist Left but also including conservatives such as the English historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper. All of them wanted to win the ideological war against communists that raged in the early years of the Cold War. This diverse group, which included luminaries such as Benedetto Croce, John Dewey, Arthur Koestler, Bertrand Russell, Carlo Schmid, Stephen Spender, and Tennessee Williams, first met in Berlin in 1950. Their second meeting was in Bombay the following year. Shils was an active member of the CCF from 1953. He had helped to plan the ‘Science and Freedom’ conference held in Milan in 1955 to which he, according to Chadbourne Gilpatric, the Humanities officer of the Rockefeller Foundation, ‘escorted’ his ‘close friend’ the civil servant and writer, Astad Dinshaw Gorwala, the Socialist MP Asoka Mehta and the leading voice of the Indian Congress for Cultural Freedom, the politician Minocher, or Minoo, Masani.[[16]](#footnote-16) By 1957 Shils was a member of the ‘Planning Committee’ based in Paris and charged with overseeing the activities of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Asia . Daniel Bell, in particular, saw Shils’ involvement as crucial: ‘[s]ince India as you know better than anyone else, it’s such a delicate country it needs preparation’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Two years later, the CIA operative, novelist and executive secretary of the International Association of Cultural Freedom, John Hunt wrote to Shils to tell him that he would be paid a monthly salary of $1250 per month in return for which Shils would be based in England and help to ‘shape the entire program and I would say with particular reference to Asia.’[[18]](#footnote-18) This salary was increased to $3600 in October 1961 for running the CCF’s seminar programme and its ‘Science and Freedom’ committee and establishing and editing a new journal on education and policy entitled *Minerva.*[[19]](#footnote-19)

Within the CCF, Shils was a dove-like presence. He tried hard to move the Congress away from being simply anti-Communist, wanting to build a community of intellectuals signed up to a cosmopolitan agenda. In March 1962, he submitted his ideas on future strategy for the organisation, which denied that the role of the CCF was ‘to win over intellectuals to any particular ideology or sway loyalty from their own countries’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Instead, the CCF needed to create a fellowship which fought parochialism, specialism, and overcame the isolation of the intellectual community from mainstream thinking, particularly in new nations where ~~they~~ intellectuals only existed in small numbers. To grow and strengthen the intellectual cadre, Shils also argued, youth and women needed to be encouraged and enlisted. When the Executive Committee met in Zurich to discuss his paper, Shils was adamant that the CCF must spell out what it was in favour of, rather than just what it opposed, commenting tartly that ‘being a communist is unpleasant – being an anti-communist is also unpleasant – not quite as unpleasant as being communist – but it is not worthwhile in life just being opposed to something.’[[21]](#footnote-21) However, although Shils may have sat at the liberal end of the spectrum of anti-Communist opinion on the CCF, he was tarred as a Cold War warrior when the links between the CCF and the CIA were revealed later on. I shall come to this controversy shortly, but let me first say more about Shils’ contact with India, to place it in the context of his own work.

Shils’ connection with India was long and enduring. He travelled to India for both the CCF and for academic work, one of the first of the Chicago School to go east and discover India. He spent a large part of 1955 and 1956 in India interviewing Indian intellectuals, as well as building up the Indian CCF, from his base in Delhi.[[22]](#footnote-22) Thereafter, he spent at least a month there every year for the next dozen years, down to the time of the CIA exposure in 1967. He also taught summer school for three years at Agra, Delhi and Bangalore, as well as spending three weeks in Delhi in 1962, advising and helping to write up the report on universities for the Indian Government’s Commission on National Education.[[23]](#footnote-23) When the report was finally published, Shils boasted of his involvement to Milton Singer, with a knowing wink: ‘I think I have brought the commission almost entirely to my viewpoint. I have given them a number of papers…. I feel a little like a second Macaulay one hundred and thirty years later!’[[24]](#footnote-24)

Beyond India, Shils masterminded CCF activities. Along with Michael Polanyi and Daniel Bell, he organised a series of global symposiums called ‘Mid Century Dialogues’ on political economy, growth and development in Rhodes, Oxford, Vienna, Ibadan and Rheinfelden between 1956 and 1959 to which he invited his Indian coadjutors.[[25]](#footnote-25) This symposium was held every year for three years culminating in a meeting at New Delhi in 1961. Although he travelled around India, Shils preferred the *adda* (intellectual camaraderie or chit-chat) of Calcutta, where, despite his rather grumpy and gruff demeanour, he made lifelong friends in Satindranath Bannerjee, André Béteille, Nirad C. Chaudhari, and A. D. Gorwala. Moreover, Shils’ connection with India continued away from the country. From 1961 he was based in Cambridge University for half of every year, and whilst there sat on the board of the Centre of South Asian Studies (est. 1964) and the African Studies Centre. In his autobiography, he pointed out that he ‘was the only person astride both of them.’[[26]](#footnote-26) and he also taught at Cambridge on the political development of new states.[[27]](#footnote-27) The remainder of each year saw him in teaching in Chicago and chairing the ‘Committee of Social Thought’ and also the ‘Committee of New Nations’. His courses included classes on ‘New states’, ‘The roles of intellectuals in advanced and developing countries’ and ‘Elites in Asia and Africa’. He also ran a seminar on ‘Problems of Indian intellectual life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.’[[28]](#footnote-28)

In these fora Shils was joined by his Chicago colleagues. The roll-call included Geertz, Cohn, and Singer, as well as others such as McKim Marriott, Morris Janowitz and Max Rheinstein, all focused on the new states that were being forged in Africa and Asia. This was a seminar programme in which Shils’ interests could converge: his studies on Indian intellectuals, his work with the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and his political commitment to shepherding newly liberated societies away from the influence of communism. Chicago was thus his intellectual home, but of course his fieldwork, such as it was, lay in India. Let us follow him there.

***2:* Shils’ *The intellectual between tradition and modernity***

Shils conducted the research that led to his 1961 study as a good sociologist. His research on Indian intellectuals was a comparative case-study. He later clarified that his interest in India was governed by what he called the ‘political propensities of intellectuals, first in Europe and America and then in recently emancipated and newly sovereign countries’[[29]](#footnote-29) and that this work would always be of necessity, comparative. He went on, ‘[a] sociologist who looks at a country other than his own is compelled, by virtue of the fact that the original concepts formed with reference to problems of his own society and culture to compare situation in own society.’[[30]](#footnote-30)As a Weberian sociologist, Shils also believed in ‘ideal types’. Like Karl Mannheim (whose work he translated) he saw intellectuals as basically classless, capable of transcending their own original social background through academic pursuits. So Shils was looking at intellectuals because he thought that they were the nerve-centre of society, they had the power to build or change social direction. Furthermore, the intellectuals of newly independent states had a still greater importance, because they were tasked with creating the nation anew.

Shils’ methodology was thorough. He based his study on interviews conducted with one thousand ‘intellectuals’. These were university lecturers and professors, civil servants and journalists and authors. It is noteworthy that all of his interviewees were men. He visited their homes, reviewed their reading habits, talked about their attitudes toward marriage and caste and made observations on their tastes and life choices. The thousand that he picked were a relatively small sample compared with the 160,000 intellectuals that he estimated made up the Indian intelligentsia, a figure he derived from adding together the number of people who had passed the competitive Indian Civil Service exams and other professional entrance tests. However, these interviews as well as a look at the intellectual environment in which these people worked and lived, sufficed for him to report on the Indian situation with confidence. Transcripts of the interviews, unfortunately, do not survive, but a visiting official from the Rockefeller Foundation observed Shils going at his work with energy: ‘he has two or three interviews a day, sometimes lasting four hours. He reads the publications of each man and has built up a remarkable library of speeches, books, pamphlets and other materials, probably not available to students in the United States’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Shils began his book by describing the main influences on Indian intellectual endeavour. He did not think it necessary to go beyond the nineteenth century. For Shils, echoing occidental prejudices in which the basis of all modernity was western civilisation, Indian thought emerged during colonial rule and was its result. Thus, in one fell swoop rather like Macaulay, he dismissed the entire edifice of indigenous thought. Indeed, the main reason, he argued, why it was so important to look at these Indians was that theirs’s was an intellectual tradition that had successfully taken on western beliefs and ways of thinking. In his opinion the Indian intelligentsia was most like the west than any other country’s intelligentsia apart from Japan.[[32]](#footnote-32) Part of his definition of what it meant to be an intellectual was to be educated in a university, be that one of the federal ‘Presidency’ colleges established by the British (Madras, Calcutta and Bombay) or a university in the west such as Cambridge, Oxford or London. It was also thanks to the British and some local Indian initiatives, that intellectual organisations, such as the Royal Asiatic Society, dominated the Indian landscape of India’s intellectuals. Shils described the resulting institutional apparatus – the libraries, bookshops, university seminars, research laboratories, reading rooms, publishers, bibliographic services, learned societies, journals, clubs and cafes – as complex and dense. India was thus rich not only in the numbers of intellectuals but also the spaces in which they could operate.

However, in Shils’ view, India was a poor country and this poverty had a telling effect on its intellectual citizenry. It did not pay to be an academic or an author in the country. The life of the mind was hard unless one could rely on inherited wealth. An academic was paid a pittance. Making a living as an author was even less financially viable. This also meant that the men Shils interviewed did not own many books, a fact he conveniently explained by referring to Hindu beliefs of non-attachment. They lived in conditions that were, according to him, tacky and in bad taste. If they were employed in a college, the hierarchy, lack of facilities and Kafkaesque bureaucracy and meant that, ‘[f]undamentally the Indian college is a mind-deadening machine.’[[33]](#footnote-33) This was also, he concluded, why so many of the brightest academic minds sought careers in the government or in the West where the rewards for their considerable achievements were far greater.

Having thus set out the importance of his inquiry and the institutional context in which his subjects lived and worked, Shils went on to present his ‘findings’. They were the central part of his book but also had been substantially prefigured in two research papers in 1959.[[34]](#footnote-34) Shils’ main argument was that Indian intellectuals were not sufficiently detached from their culture. A degree of rootlessness and alienation was necessary for any intellectual to function, to be imaginative and to make a difference. This applied to intellectuals everywhere, in Chicago as well as Calcutta. However, Indian intellectuals were neither Indian enough, nor Western enough, and lacked a coherent intellectual tradition. As a result, they situated themselves permanently in opposition to their nation’s political culture.

For Shils, intellectual tradition radiated outwards from the West into the rest of the world. There was an intellectual metropolis: Europe and North America; and its periphery or provinces: areas that were intellectually dependent on the West. This was the ‘indispensable condition of modernisation of intellectual life.’ This was not permanent or fixed, but a fluid process which would lead to the intellectual tradition of each nation becoming as robust and modern as those of its mentors. His examples of former intellectual ‘provinces’ were 18th-century Russia and nineteenth-century America, countries where, despite the considerable cultural and artistic innovations generated indigenously, national intellectual life was still derivative of outside influences and driven by what Shils called ‘parochial self-sufficiency’ to seek advances in science and scholarship. It should not be too surprising that, in the age of Walt Rostow and Andre Gunder Frank, Shils was using the language of dependency and stages of development. Equally, it is hard to miss his description, albeit uncritical, of intellectual centres and peripheries or provinces, forty years before Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincialising Europe* (2000), a manifesto-like critique of the tendency to equate modernity with the West. The problem with Indian intellectuals, argued Shils, was their unremitting deference to the work, ideas, research agendas and academic standards that emanated from abroad, especially from Britain. As he wrote, ‘[t]he sad fact is that India is not an intellectually independent country.’[[35]](#footnote-35) The Indian intellectuals encountered by Shils were obsessed with the western world, like Chekhov’s provincials, always awaiting news from Moscow.[[36]](#footnote-36) They judged their own research by comparing it with that of Oxbridge or American ‘Ivy League’ colleges, and privileged western academic journals and publishers over those in India. In fact, these views were widely expressed by Indians at the same time, and lay behind the drive to reform the higher education system inherited from colonial rule.

Shils was thus acutely aware how important the legacy of colonialism was for the Indian intelligentsia. As he said, ‘[t]he truth of the matter is that the British not only ruled India for a long time but they also took partial possession of the Indian mind.’[[37]](#footnote-37) Every ideal towards which the imaginary Indian was drawn was taken from Britain. ‘The novels he reads, the science he studies and practices, the principles of administration which he applies, the economic policy which he recommends or seeks to carry out, all come from the foreign metropolis.’[[38]](#footnote-38) Shils claimed that these ideals resonated with Indians who struggled to survive in the haphazardous economic conditions of hardship, tried to have a choice in who they married, exist in hierarchical extended family arrangements and fought to influence how they taught. Shils’ informants suggested that the liberty they had learnt about while in the bosom of empire had left an enduring trace. The British colonial project had been so successful at penetrating the indigenous mind as English was the language of administration and education, the *lingua franca* of power and control. Shils also showed that his informants had fallen in love with the Anglophone literary scene. One of the pieces of evidence he used to exemplify this was the 1947 survey carried out by the Madras publisher, Natesan, on the favourite authors of India’s elite.[[39]](#footnote-39) Without doubt, those questioned listed mostly British authors, and some American. A few of the respondents regretted that they had only named a few Sanskrit works. But none mentioned any European writers who were familiar with Indian vernacular languages. Shils, in the context of the debates raging at the time in government and the media alike about India having a national language of its own, was aware of the call in some universities for English to be dropped as the main medium of instruction. Others argued that losing English would be a move towards insularity and leave India even more backward. Shils picked up on this theme in his book, claiming: ‘[e]ven where the world which is seen through the window is French or German or Russian or American, the “window” remains British. Science, Marxism, psychoanalysis and existentialism are not British, but these too come largely through translations made in England, through British books and periodicals.’[[40]](#footnote-40)

Britain’s centrality and ubiquity in Indian academic life reaffirmed the provincial status of Indian intellectuals. They could not sustain themselves without referring to or deferring to the British metropolis. The most respected intellectuals were those who had come back from the West (‘the ‘foreign returned’). The most important textbooks were British. So how could an Indian intellectual get out of to this provincial state? Shils saw nationalism as the most immediate, but not necessarily the most helpful, response. Rather than a way out, it was a constant reminder of the distance which Indian intellectuals faced between province and metropolis. As Shils stated, the Indian intellectual ‘cannot escape into London in the way a young man or woman from Leeds or Nottingham or Cardiff can escape, assimilating himself in it with the reasonable expectation that, after a few years, he too will have ceased to be provincial.’[[41]](#footnote-41) The only way out was to develop an indigenous modern cultural tradition, sustain it, nurture it and ensure that it became so embedded that everyone came to think of it as home.

Having discussed what Indian intellectuals owed to the West, Shils then turned to examine their own domestic arrangements. For Shils, another barrier in the way of the development of a modern intellectual culture was the ties that bound the intelligentsia to their home, their family and especially, their caste. Shils’ thinking on caste is curious: on the one hand he accepted its logic, but on the other, he condemned its continuing impact on Indian society. In his view Indian intellectuals who had thrived were those who worked on the fields closest to the traditional roles of the Brahman scholar: ‘Sanskrit linguistic and grammatical studies, mathematics, statistics and theoretical physics’.[[42]](#footnote-42) He also accepted that, as a caste, Brahmans were intellectually ‘superior’ simply because they populated universities, and had been educated in the West or in western-inspired universities such as the Presidency colleges. However, Shils also condemned the pervasive and divisive character of the caste system which cut off Indian intellectuals from the majority of their own compatriots.

Shils claimed to have observed his intellectuals at close range. He wrote about their marriages, their domestic habits, their social mores, and the contradictions between their stated politics and their actual practices. For example, he noted that most of his interviewees had married within their caste and remained living in the family home, where the mother was the centre of the domain. They ate in the family unit, so as to avoid caste ‘impurity’, and tended to observe caste customs so as not to upset the sentiments of the extended family. ‘Many who have few or no conscious desires to maintain caste barriers and who are proud of the inter-caste nature of some of their friendships would not think of inviting a person from another caste to take food with them at home "because it would cause distress to my women-folk."’[[43]](#footnote-43) In accepting and perpetuating these mores, intellectuals were restricting their own development: their prejudices helped to perpetuate inequality and prevented their fellow citizens from joining academia under more meritocratic systems. The entire project of intellectual modernisation was thus compromised because prejudice was so ingrained that intellectuals were simply unaware just how much it dominated Indian life. ‘It is the caste system which helps deaden the imagination to the state of mind of other human beings. It is the caste system, perhaps even more than the other factors like poverty and the crushing ubiquity of other human beings, which makes the upper-caste Hindus, from whose circles most Indian intellectuals are recruited, fundamentally and humanly insensate to the mass of the population who belong to the lower castes’.[[44]](#footnote-44) For Shils the most profound effect of the caste system was to make the Indian intellectual socially blind, unable to empathise with others in their society. Shils saw this in the Indian press, which for him had little concern with human interest or social reportage. He saw it in Indian literature: Shils believed the Indian novel was ‘poorly developed’. And he bemoaned the state of his own discipline: empirical sociology was ‘practically non-existent’, a sweeping judgement that betrayed his ignorance of developments in the field at Lucknow and Bombay.[[45]](#footnote-45)

In characterising the Indian scene in this way, Shils seems to have fallen into the trap of cultural reductionism that he himself had criticised in Karl Mannheim’s work, that is to say, a ‘sociology of knowledge’ in which ideas are shaped fundamentally from the position in society of the intellectual putting them forward.[[46]](#footnote-46) Shils put great store on the domestic environment of Indian intellectuals and its psychological and social effects on their outlook. Caste was centrally important, the role of the women in the house being the other principal determinant. These were the main obstacles in the way of the Indian intellectual’s development, the shackles of religiosity reinforcing the imperative of having to provide for the household. Poverty emasculated Indian intellectuals, making them, in Shils’ words, ‘despised and disregarded’. The Indian intellectual was acutely sensitive to the contradictions between his ‘desire to be a democrat’ and his obligations to his caste and community.[[47]](#footnote-47) In accepting these rules of the game, Indian intellectuals were irremovably rooted in their own culture.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Shils emphasised this theme in his article in *Encounter,* published in the same year as his book, in which he sought to an explain student protest in India. Long before May 1968, student protests were a constant of academic life in India. According to Shils, students were in turmoil because more of them were coming from families ‘with less of the traditional, indigenous or Westernised respect for learning – from families where English was less spoken and understood.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Thus, without really getting to the bottom of the actual reasons for student unrest, Shils concluded that student protestors recruited their activists because they were not as smart as other students. He also considered that these students were easily led by older students who remained on campus despite coming to the end of their studies, and they also were drawn into agitations because their anxiety about unemployment and poverty could be forgotten in the ‘immediate delights of denunciation and resistance against his elders’.[[50]](#footnote-50) However, for Shils, the most important factors that drove student protest was, given the later age of marriage and concomitant lack of sexual intercourse, there was little to ‘bind the youth into a pleasing or compelling routine’.[[51]](#footnote-51) This claim had been implicit in his 1961 book, but was further developed in the piece for *Encounter*. In Shils’ words, ‘[a] mind which cannot attach itself to intellectual objects, a libido which is prevented from attaching itself to sexual objects, a spirit which resents the burden of familial discipline and resists incorporation into modern impersonal adult institutions – what direction can it take except rebellion, blind causeless rebellion?’[[52]](#footnote-52)

Shils thus explained the dilemma of the Indian intellectual, of being simultaneously not Indian enough and yet too Indian, too reliant on the West, and yet too rooted in caste and matriarchy at home. The interviewees that he spoke to remembered their education in the west during the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Independence movement. Many had been impressed especially by the magnetism of Gandhi and his denunciation of the ‘brown sahibs’ of his country, contrasting the sense of purpose of those years with the dampening disillusionment of idealism of the late 1950s. This manifested itself in similar attitudes and prejudices and explained, for Shils, certain political tendencies adopted by his informants. Was nationalism a way out? In his view, nationalism stemmed from a sense of being aggrieved or alienated from those who ruled the nation.[[53]](#footnote-53) Nationalism, in India, but also earlier in Russia and Ireland, had involved campaigns to ‘return to the people’. In India this meant learning about Indian art, architecture, dance and music crafts and folk style. These nationalists connected with village India and its peasants, they read religious texts (in English) in order to reach out to ordinary, uneducated and unintellectual people. It was also manifested, for example in the revival of hand crafts and the development of regional Crafts Emporiums initiated by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and others, also the national revival of dance forms suchas Kathakali and Bharat Natyam. Surprisingly, Shils saw all this as a descent into what he termed ‘populism’, which he defined as imputing superior virtues to the simple peasant. Gandhi, in his somewhat simplistic analysis, was its source, and after the assassination of the Mahatma, he saw it as surviving and prospering under the leadership of men such as Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan and Jawaharlal Nehru.[[54]](#footnote-54) In Shils’s thinking they were Gandhi’s heirs and legatees, who had fashioned a politics of disdain towards bureaucracy, championed the village community, and as Bhave and Narayan in following Gandhi, renounced worldly concerns by retreating into the ashram.

With populism came socialism and Shils tried to explain why Indian intellectuals were so drawn to Marxism. This was, he argued, not so much because of its Marxism’s scientific ‘pretensions’, but rather from a mixture of prejudice and hope. Shils described how these intellectuals had picked up derogatory notions of business and business practice popularised in British socialist tracts of the 1930s and 1940s, an attitude that was reinforced with Brahmanical disdain of commercial castes. Shils also noted how Indian intellectuals, as Shils and others have noted, also saw in the political experiments of the Soviet Union and Communist China the opportunity to fundamentally change society. In a context where the Indian intellectual was ‘the insulted and the injured’, and conscious of his duty to be improving his country, the attractions of a socialist India, Shils concluded, were inevitable. Socialist thinking for Shils, was not a problem in itself: it was more that it might lead to totalitarian dogma that would stifle rather than encourage intellectual debate which was his concern. Although an active member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an anti-Communist organisation, Shils’ agenda in this book was not to fulminate against international communism, but rather to set out an alternative, a positive model for intellectuals of newly independent countries. His understanding of the Indian situation led him to conclude that the best Indian intellectuals either worked for government, attracted by the access to power and the fact that government was the one agency capable of effecting change in the new state or they ended up as resentful outsiders within opposition groups linked to the Communist Party. In his view, neither path would create, nurture and sustain a modern intellectual culture, a new force that would pave the way for Indian intellectuals to innovate and invent, to become, parochially stated, a Chicago School in the East and of the East.

Shils’s solution to the predicament of the Indian intellectual was a return to tradition that had existed in colonial India, expressed in the form of societies such as the ‘Servants of India’. This tradition of national social service, he observed, was dying a slow death, as the young elite of the nation were increasingly recruited into government and administration. Instead, they needed to return to ideals of civic responsibility espoused by an older generation, and he took hope in the trend by which groups of young men met to discuss social, political and cultural topics.[[55]](#footnote-55) Here lay an organic source of change in India, and Shils set great store by its development.

***3: Reactions to Shils***

Predictably the reception of Shils’ work in India was mixed. At first it was met with anger, resentment and sarcasm. One reviewer in the *Times of India*, accused Shils of reheating old stories about the detached intellectual as an ‘obnoxious variation on the tiresome theme of Indian spirituality’. Others, such as Vinod Sena, took Shils more seriously, rejecting his claims and saying Indians needed to return to their Hindu past in the manner of Mohandas Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda, not embrace modernity. Did not, Sena suggested, Vivekanada, Tagore and Gandhi shed their ‘provinciality and self-derogation’, and did they not feel themselves ‘to be at a creative centre, one of the world’s creative centres’? Might not the modern Indian intellectual’s road to freedom lie the same way?’[[56]](#footnote-56) Shils’ critique of Indian students also brought rebuke, notably from Ranjit Gupta, who accused him of being patronising.[[57]](#footnote-57) But as time passed many Indian writers came to be influenced by Shils’s ideas, came to value his research and quoted him at length. Three trends can be identified. First, some Indian sociologists, specially some that Shils had met and interviewed, for example André Béteille, have deployed Weberian analysis of the kind Shils advocated and have taken his his concepts and work to the next stage within some of the frameworks set by him. This in turn has established a particularly Indian liberal tradition of sociological thinking, one that is more Weberian in approach and one that could, in political terms, be labelled free thinking rather than Marxist or conservative.[[58]](#footnote-58) The second trend, understandable in the circumstances, if misdirected, has identified Shils as a conservative, who thought of tradition as backward, its shackles preventing Indians from fashioning a modern society.[[59]](#footnote-59) As argued here, this is not what Shils was arguing: he was more concerned with the isolation, not the atavism, of the Indian intellectual. However, his approach was so flawed by orientalist notions of Indian history and explicit assumptions about the supremacy of the West, that most commentators have not been able to see past his occidental conceit. Other Chicago scholars have also written about the developing world from much the same perspective, employing a tripartite division, of first, second and third worlds, albeit without Shils’ insistence that west was best.[[60]](#footnote-60) And new nations themselves used these categories to their political advantage. For example, the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, at the Bandung conference of 1955, as he urged the ‘people of Asia and Africa’ to unite against the super powers.[[61]](#footnote-61) The third trend has been evident among Indian and western commentators who accepted Shils’ characterisation of the Indian intellectual. Most of these were fellow American sociologists or Indians trained in the USA.[[62]](#footnote-62) They ensured that by the 1970s, Shils’ depiction of the subordinated Indian academic would be routinely invoked in studies of higher education in south Asia.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Curiously, those who review Shils’ work have not been primarily interested in Shils’ claims about the ubiquity of caste in Indian academic life, and its detrimental effects on the scholarly life. That is not to say that they argue that the Indian intelligentsia ignored caste. It is after all a central feature of the Indian academy, for example, just consider the issue of the place of Dalit (or so-called ‘untouchable’) students, and giving a place in universities to them and other deprived or disadvantaged communities. In the 1970s, policies of positive discrimination in Indian higher education reserved places for staff and students from such backgrounds. Shils had opposed affirmative action for black and women students in the United States, so it is likely that he would not have favoured such moves in India. But, Shils’ perspective on caste – as blinkering the intellectuals whom he interviewed – was missed by reviewers and critics. Nor did any of them engage with Shils’ call for institutions that would nurture research and teaching programmes aimed at solving Indian, as opposed to western, problems. Having said that, Indian participants in the Congress for Cultural Freedom – men such as A. B. Shah and Asoka Mehta – were involved in the discussions that led to the creation of a new national university: the Jawaharlal Nehru University or JNU, which opened its doors in 1969, conceived to ‘promote the study of the principles for which Jawaharlal Nehru had worked during his lifetime, national integration, social justice, secularism, democratic way of life, scientific approach to the problems of society’.[[64]](#footnote-64) And many of its subsequent students and staff saw it as a space where the barriers of caste and gender would not be allowed to stifle academic work. But judging from the Marxist bent of the most radical initiatives in JNU, this was certainly not the sort of institution envisaged by Shils.

Ultimately, Shils’ reputation in India never recovered from the revelations in 1967 that he had been all along a ‘cold war warrior’. In that year, *Ramparts*, a New York magazine, began exposing the links between the CIA and cultural aid programmes since the end of the second world war. Soon the fact that the Congress for Cultural Freedom had been administered by a CIA operative from the very beginning, funding each international initiative, including its extensive operation in India, became common knowledge. The issue was debated in the Indian parliament and Indian recipients of CIA money were condemned as anti-national stooges of Anglo-American imperialism.[[65]](#footnote-65) Many Indian members of the CCF claimed ignorance of the CIA connection, others were instrumental in hounding the CIA operative, Michael Josselson, out of the Congress, continuing to work instead with a renamed organisation until its eventual demise.[[66]](#footnote-66) However, CCF connections did not tarnish the reputations of Indians as much as it did of Americans who had been its beneficiaries. One, Minoo Masani, led the Swatantra party to become the main opposition after the 1967 elections. Another, Jayaprakash Narayan, was Indira Gandhi's chief antagonist in 1975, rallying students and railway strikers just before the Emergency. Their credibility stayed intact. But Shils remained loyal to Josselson till the end. He felt that anyone who feigned innocence of the CIA role was in fact lying, or trying to survive in the current political context. For Shils, all funding – government or charity, public or illicit – was tainted if intellectuals played the tune they were required to play by donors.[[67]](#footnote-67) However, if the funds were deployed solely to encourage freedom of scholarship and intellectual endeavour, which he believed all funding should in fact be, the CIA connection, he argued, did not warrant the hue and cry it generated. Anyway, it can surely be no coincidence that Shils was never to return to India after 1967. In the preface to the third volume of his collected works, *The calling of sociology*, published in 1980, Shils wrote that: ‘India which for many years was one of the countries most studied by foreign social scientists, particularly American, began several years ago to put some restrictions on such study; controlling visas.’[[68]](#footnote-68) One can assume that Shils was himself a victim of this process.

Although he would refer to Indian intellectuals and teach about India throughout his working life, Shils never did complete the larger book of which his 1961 monograph was only an introduction. This is in stark contrast to other members of the Chicago school who focused on India. The anthropologists Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn were prolific, with the latter influencing not only his own discipline, but also given pride of place in the famous ‘Subaltern Studies’ group, that revolutionised the social and cultural history of colonial India.[[69]](#footnote-69) One big difference between later Chicago Indianists and Shils was his role in the CCF, and the abrasive manner in which he refused to recant or apologise, although by the end of the 1960s, there were other factors, notably a growing rejection of the concept of ‘tradition’, signalled in the work of Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph.[[70]](#footnote-70)

***4. The legacy of Shils’ work on India***

What can Shils’ work on Indian intellectuals in the late 1950s tell us today? The first obstacle of a balanced assessment is to confront Shils’ status as a ‘cold war warrior’. It undoubtedly explains why he does not occupy a more prominent place in the history of south Asian scholarship, at Chicago and beyond. The university has named a reading room after Shils, but nowhere has it recorded his India-related activity. This omission continues in recent work on Shils’ colleague, Robert Redfield.[[71]](#footnote-71) In rewriting the history of the Chicago school and South Asia where the role of its most prominent pioneer has been written out, is reminiscent of political power games described in Pierre Bourdieu’s *Homo academicus*, with Shils as victim.[[72]](#footnote-72) Welcomed initially as an expert ready to document India’s modernity, by the early 1960s there was no place for Shils within an Indian intellectual scene that was increasingly nationalist, and influenced by socialism and communism. This challenges the idea that Shils symbolised a powerful western gaze and the simplistic view that the adoption and development of knowledge in India has been dominated by the West, and has been based on practices, superior or inferior borrowed from the West. Rather, it was negotiated on a number of levels – one of which was political orientation. And in that respect, Shils was left stranded by Indians moving rapidly to the left, while Shils remained tired and unmoving in his conservatism. In 1967 when the CIA exposure broke, this left him vulnerable, his reputation in tatters and his contribution rejected.

For all that, Shils’ findings should not be ignored. His book offered the first comprehensive critique of the peculiar predicament of intellectuals in India, summed up in the paradox that they were both too Indian and yet not Indian enough. Years later, in 1983, Ashis Nandy, the Bengali political psychologist, made a similar argument, emphasising, as Shils had done, the traumatic after-effects of centuries of imperial rule on the mental habits of Indian intellectuals.[[73]](#footnote-73) There are still hints of that today. Ironically some of India’s best known intellectuals today are those who have had their careers overseas, for example scholars such as Amartya Sen or Gayatri Spivak, both based in the United States (Harvard and Columbia respectively); and of course, India has come to Chicago, Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty being two outstanding exemplars. By interrogating issues that are peculiar to India these Indian scholars have the authority to address problems in economics, culture and society which go well beyond India.

Shils also addressed, admittedly in a different context, one of the most pressing issues of contemporary Indian politics: the undercurrent and impact of populism. He appreciated how Indian intellectuals were both attracted by and vulnerable to a rhetoric that elevated ordinary people, those who had been neglected by the political elites. In India, populism has forced its way into academic study: ‘subaltern studies’ themselves have been a form of ‘going to the people’ to restore their place in history written by elites, be they the colonial power or the official nationalism of Congress. And of course, populism has been mobilised as a political force in modern India, most emphatically since 2014, when Narendra Modi rode into power on a wave of Hindu popular nationalism.[[74]](#footnote-74) It is striking how complicit much of India’s intelligentsia have been in Modi’s rise, and in explaining away and sometimes justifying the ominous anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit mood that has developed, not least on Indian university campuses. In Shils’ work, we find the classic plea for intellectuals to remain independent, to be the custodians of disinterested liberalism, never more important today than any previous juncture in the history of independent India. As a neglected founding father of South Asian studies at Chicago, and as an early chronicler of the ‘argumentative Indian’, Edward Shils is worth another look, and his contributions deserve a permanent place in understanding the endangered role of the intellectual in India’s history.

1. I am grateful to the David Bruce Centre, Keele University, for funding my research and to the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fanon’s work was translated into English two years later, as *The wretched of the earth* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1963); C. R. Johnson *pseud*. [C. L. R. James], *Marxism and the intellectuals* (Detroit: Facing Reality Publishing, 1963). On Pan-Africanism, see: Leslie James, *George Padmore and decolonization from below: pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the end of empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E. Shils, *The intellectual between tradition and modernity: the Indian situation* (The Hague: Mouton, 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E. Shils and M. Young, ‘The meaning of the coronation’, *Sociological Review*, n.s., vol. 1, no. 2 (1953), pp. 63-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E. Shils, *The torment of secrecy: the background and consequences of American security policies* (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Susan Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph offered the following description in 1993: ‘Edward Shils: sociologist, Weber translator, conservative theorist’: S. Rudolph and L. Rudolph, ‘Remembering Raman’, *Times of India*, 25 July 1993, p. 13. For a recent reassessment of Shils (albeit one that does not look at his work on India), see: *The calling of social thought: rediscovering the work of Edward Shils* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), (eds) Christopher Adair-Toteff and Stephen Turner, esp. Jefferson Pooley’s chapter. See also: Stefan Collini, *Absent minds. Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 145-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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10. Mark T. Berger, *The battle for Asia: from decolonization to globalization: Asia’s transformations* (London: Routledge, 2004), ch. 2; David C. Engerman, *The price of aid: the cconomic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. F. Capra*, The name above the title: an autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 437. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Thapar, *All these years: a memoir* (Delhi: Seminar Publications, 1991), p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See: C. Rowan, *The pitiful and the proud* (New York: Random House, 1956); J. Saunders Redding, *An American in India* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Memorandum 1, 8 May 1959, University of Chicago Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations Records, 1958-1975, File 13, Box 2, Special Collections Research Centre, Chicago. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John A. Simpson, ‘A personal note’, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 37, no. 1, (1981), pp. 26-33 at p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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17. Herbert Passin to Edward Shils, 4 November 1957, International Association of Cultural Freedom Papers, File 13, Box 290, Special Collections Research Centre, University of Chicago. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John C. Hunt to Edward Shils, 16 July 1959, International Association of Cultural Freedom Papers, File 14, Box 290, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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20. E. Shils, ‘Confidential note, ‘Further thoughts on the Congress in the ‘60s’ for information of the members of the Executive Committee and International Council only’, (March 1962), International Association of Cultural Freedom Papers, File 7a, Box 291, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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26. Shils, E., *A fragment of a sociological autobiography*, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ibid., 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Memorandum (n. d. 1965), File 28/3, Milton Singer Papers, Special Collections Research Centre, University of Chicago. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. ‘Introduction’ to *Centre and periphery: essays in macrosociology. Selected papers of Edward Shils 2* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975), p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. ‘The confluence of sociological traditions,’ in *The calling of sociology and other essays on the pursuit of learning. Selected papers of Edward Shils 3*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Chadbourne Gilpatric, ‘Diary of South Asia Trip January-March 1956’, 20-23 February 20-23, 1956, Box 60, Folder 397A, Series 460, Rockefeller Foundation records, General Correspondence, RG2, 1952-1957, Rockefeller Archive Center. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. E. Shils, *The intellectual between tradition and modernity*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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35. E. Shils, *The intellectual between tradition and modernity*, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. E. Shils, *A fragment of a sociological autobiography*, p. 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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38. Ibid., p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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41. E. Shils, *The intellectual between tradition and modernity*, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For this criticism of Mannheim, see: Shils, *A fragment of a sociological autobiography: the history of my pursuit of a few ideas* (New York: Transaction Books, 2006), pp. 33-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
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48. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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51. Ibid., p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
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