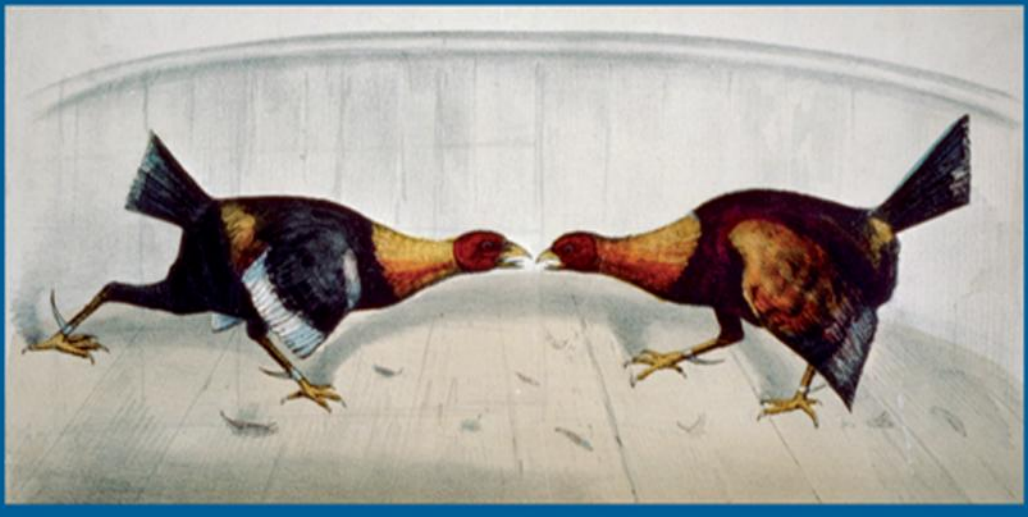
CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Interpreting Clifford Geertz

Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences



Edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith, and Matthew Norton

Interpreting Clifford Geertz

Cultural Sociology

***Series Editors*:** Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, David Inglis, and Philip Smith

Cultural sociology is widely acknowledged as one of the most vibrant areas of inquiry in the social sciences across the world today. The Palgrave Macmillan Series in Cultural Sociology is dedicated to the proposition that deep meanings make a profound difference in social life. Culture is not simply the glue that holds society together, a crutch for the weak, or a mystifying ideology that conceals power. Nor is it just practical knowledge, dry schemas, or know-how. The series demonstrates how shared and circulating patterns of meaning actively and inescapably penetrate the social. Through codes and myths, narratives and icons, and rituals and representations, these cultural structures drive human action, inspire social movements, direct and build institutions, and so come to shape history. The series takes its lead from the cultural turn in the humanities, but insists on rigorous social science methods and aims at empirical explanations. Contributions not only engage in thick interpretations but also account for behavioral outcomes. They not only develop cultural theory but also deploy middle-range tools to challenge reductionist understandings of how the world actually works. In so doing, the books in this series embody the spirit of cultural sociology as an intellectual enterprise.

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and co-director of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University. From 1995 to 2010, he edited (with Steven Seidman) the *Cambridge Series on Cultural Social Studies* and from 2004 to 2009 (with Julia Adams, Ron Eyerman, and Philip Gorsky) *Sociological Theory*. Among his recent books are *The Civil Sphere* and *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*.

Ron Eyerman is professor of sociology and co-director of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University. His areas of research include social theory, trauma, and memory, and he has taught undergraduate and graduate courses on these topics. He is the author of *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh: From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma*.

David Inglis is professor of sociology at the University of Aberdeen. He is founding editor of the journal *Cultural Sociology*, published by Sage. His recent books include *The Globalization of Food* and *Cosmopolitanism*.

Philip Smith is professor and co-director of the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology. His recent books include *Why War?*, *Punishment and Culture*, and *Incivility: The Rude Stranger in Everyday Life* (coauthored) among others.

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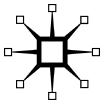

INTERPRETING CLIFFORD GEERTZ

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To the memory of David Apter

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Series Editors' Foreword

The idea that human existence is profoundly meaningful and that we must interpret social life to understand it has had many proponents over the span of intellectual history. In the past 50 years, nobody has argued the case more persuasively or with more panache than Clifford Geertz. By insisting and showing that action is a series of communicative and expressive gestures situated within a wider cultural order, he offers perhaps the most fundamental challenge to reductionist theories we have seen. It is more than fitting that the first volume in the Palgrave Macmillan Cultural Sociology Series should be dedicated to his work.

Neglected by the generation of anthropologists that succeeded him, Geertz has now become an inspiration in other fields. This volume offers the first insight into the reception of Geertz in the wider human sciences, presenting the most comprehensive review and critique of this work to date. It interrogates his cultural theory from multiple perspectives: as an intellectual performance, as an epistemology, and as a theory of culture. The results suggest that although we can move beyond Geertz, we can never leave him behind.

Preface

The late Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) is now recognized as a true giant of social and cultural theory. He has had a profound impact on the human sciences, influencing both theory and method across a raft of disciplines from anthropology, to history, sociology, religious studies, science and cultural studies, and area studies. Geertz has become so famous that he has ironically generated his own "cultural system." This is a web of public meaning in intellectual life tying together a nexus of key terms ("cockfight," "thick description"); pivotal, oft-repeated quotes (humans are "suspended in webs of meaning"); images (the wink, the turtles); and parables (the sheep raid). This density of automatic and paradigmatic reference capable of generating instantaneous recognition is found only very rarely and with the most influential thinkers. One sees it with Weber and Marx, for example, in those repeated sound bites about the iron cage of modernity, the trolley bus of historical materialism from which one cannot descend at will, the French peasants as a sack of potatoes, and history repeating itself first as tragedy and next as farce.

Our assessment of Geertz's extraordinary significance is not idiosyncratic. His masterwork *The Interpretation of Cultures* is routinely cited in lists of the most influential social science books of the past half century, sitting alongside Bourdieu's *Distinction* and C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*. A look at the Web of Science shows page after page of citations, six thousand of these to this one book. Some 35 years after its first publication, *The Interpretation of Cultures* still holds an Amazon.com sales ranking of 8,000, something that most social scientists can only dream of at the time of a first release. Geertz has been translated into 20 languages.

The fact is that Clifford Geertz is now seen as *the* emblematic figure for interpretative inquiry. By the time of his death, he had become an iconic intellectual for the "cultural turn" that has come to dominate the humanities and human sciences. Whether he is revered or reviled, all those involved in cultural research have to be familiar with his work, just as all psychoanalytic thinkers must deal with Freud, all critical theorists with Marx, and all structuralists with Saussure.

Amazingly enough, there has been no systematic attempt to date to log and critically evaluate his achievement over a range of disciplines and issues. As we suggest in our introductory essay, Geertz's authority to date has been largely unexamined—this in part due to the very strength of his iconic force. There is a pressing need for a more thoroughgoing exploration of the intellectual behind the magician. This book

undertakes this task, looking to theory and method over a range of disciplines. It probes beyond the sound bites to ask hard questions about Geertz's impact on the human sciences today and what his future legacy will be.

The origins of this book lie in a conference on "Clifford Geertz and the Human Sciences" held at the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) at Yale University in the fall of 2007. The conference explored the memory and work of Clifford Geertz through prepared papers—most of which were later elaborated as contributions to this book—and vigorous intellectual-cum-personal exchanges. David Apter played throughout these days a central role. We are grateful that he was able to complete his contribution to the present volume before his death. David Apter was a partner with Clifford Geertz in the early, pioneering effort to develop a more cultural social science, one that incorporated the theories and methods of the humanities. He was a vigorous and courageous intellectual light for both the students and directors at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology, and he will be sorely missed. We dedicate this book to his memory. We are grateful to all of our participants for writing original essays for this event and for following a mandate for critical investigations rather than eulogies. Our belief is that the greatest respect that can be given to major thinkers is to engage with them seriously, not deferentially. Four of the papers presented here—by Alexander, Reed, Smith, and Trondman—appeared in a special symposium on "Geertz and the Strong Program" in the journal *Cultural Sociology* Volume 2, Issue 2 (Summer 2008). We thank David Inglis, the journal's editor, for making this early and more specialized publication of our results possible. (They have been slightly revised for the present publication.) Robert Darnton's article originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB). We are grateful to Sage and the NYRB for permission to republish these chapters. All of the other contributions are new to this volume. The Whitney Humanities Center at Yale provided additional support for the conference that began this project, and we thank them for it.

We would also like to acknowledge as fulsomely as possible the continuing administrative, social, and intellectual contributions of CCS's administrative assistant, Nadine Amalfi.

Jeffrey C. Alexander
Philip Smith
Matthew Norton
New Haven, January 2011

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Clifford Geertz

Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith

In his analysis of the Bible, entitled *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye[1] observed the history of the Israelites to be an unstable one. First there was obscurity and marginality. Next, prophetic intervention renewed faith and solidarity. Thence came triumph and empire—but after that things would go wrong. Complacency produced decadence, fractious infighting, and broken covenants. Failure, humiliation, and exile followed. The cycle would begin again. This tidal periodicity moving over generations accounts for the epic feel of the Old Testament, as if Nietzsche's myth of eternal return were playing out through the destiny of a people.

With a little license, we can make an analogy in the realm of social theory. From humble beginnings, many intellectuals enjoy some brief visibility. They triumph by virtue of not only hard work and creativity, but also institutional position or well-timed intervention. Their impact may even extend to another generation of students. Eventually, however, citations drop off, books stay on the shelves, and there ensues a lengthy but inexorable progress toward oblivion. Only a chosen few can turn back the dark forces of entropy and neglect. The truly great thinkers have their time in the wilderness, but what makes them enduring and exceptional is that, echoing that biblical code, they walk out of the desert. Clifford Geertz was such a person.

Geertz's heroic ascent begins with his movement away from Parsons in the 1960s and the evolution of a more hermeneutically sensitive alternative to systems theory. It peaks in the ten years following the publication of *The Interpretation of Cultures*.[2] The fall comes all too quickly. His subtle and elusive approach with its humanist search for meaning is pushed aside by more muscular poststructural and more cynical postmodern alternatives. Then, just as Geertz is becoming a footnote in anthropology, he is discovered elsewhere, becoming a sacred figure for culturally minded

thinkers throughout the humanities struggling for a more profound understanding of how meaning works in social life.

By the 1960s, Talcott Parsons had developed a remarkably sophisticated and cohesive body of functionalist social theory that dominated much of American social science. Focused around analytic concerns for social and cultural integration, this brilliant intellectual system came under attack as insufficiently attentive to themes of both power and agency. Parsons gave command and control authority to overarching value orientations, seeming never to doubt that these idealized ethical orientations shaped institutional life, personalities, and societal destinies. Equally problematic was a quality of abstraction that made causal or even empirical argumentation difficult. Parsonian theory seemed too distant from the ground to really explain. In the course of the 1960s, contending theorists from neo-Marxists to revised Weberians, from phenomenologists to ethnomethodologists, emerged on all sides, and, like Lilliputans, began tying this Gulliver down. By 1975, the landscape of social theory was transformed.

Geertz shared in this revolt, but in a way that was to have profound consequences for the evolution of the human sciences. He saw the fundamental problem with Parsons in a very different, and ultimately more productive, way. The issue was not that Parsons had been too cultural, but rather that he had not been cultural enough.[3] In his famous essays from the mid-1960s on ideology and religion as "cultural systems," Geertz suggested that culture was about more than normative patterns of behavior generalized into values, about papering over tensions with reassuring ideals. Culture was something more mysterious, fluid, and deeply contradictory that could affect the entire repertoire of actions. The trick was to capture this vaporous cultural force without moving back toward Parsonian or Hegelian abstraction.

Within a few years, this vision began to be filled out. In the papers on "thick description" and above all on the Balinese cockfight something remarkable emerged. This was a call for a deep interpretation, premised on the understanding that, while culture was everywhere, it was elusive and fragmentary, dependent on performance and crystallized by aesthetic form. The task of the social scientist becomes that of the worldly hermeneut, reconstructing the implicit text behind every contingency, the symbolic gesture that frames every action, and the aesthetic envelope that expresses and shapes feeling, belief, and moral conviction. When collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the accumulated weight of these essays pressed the scales of opinion. The field of anthropology had its most important new theoretical statement since the *Structural Anthropology* of Lévi-Strauss.[4] In the 1970s, Geertz stood in triumph. He had risen from parochial beginnings as an ethnographer of semiperipheral Islamic societies to become the prophet of his discipline.

Then came the fall. Here we have a tragedy worthy of Shakespeare or Hardy, a story of betrayal. Or was it one of unintended consequences? Perhaps we should take a simpler tale as our analogy, that of the genie let out of the bottle (Smith, this volume). Geertz had argued for a textual, hermeneutic model of social life and, not least through his own example, had pointed to the centrality of writing to this task. He had pushed against the abstraction of theory by insisting on locality, and against naturalistic positivism by promoting the subjectivity of interpretation (Alexander

and Errington, this volume). The next generation, including many of his best students, recombined these elements in a new pattern, stirring in a spoonful of postcolonial guilt. Was the textual important? Yes, but so was power, which perhaps must be tightly intertwined with textual production. Was positive knowledge impossible because social life is ambiguous like a text? If so, might we not wish simply to concentrate on exploring social scientists' own written texts? Surely the least "colonial" way to make such adjustments would be to conceptualize and relativize anthropological products as representations shaped by power. Poststructuralism, especially Foucaultian theory, already offered the clues on how to proceed (Marcus, this volume). A new agenda was set.

By the mid-1980s, Geertz had been cast out. Universally admired as a sensitive interpreter and gifted prose stylist, and safely installed at Princeton in the Institute for Advanced Studies, he was seen as something of a has-been, someone still working in the humanist and pragmatist traditions (Apter, this volume) who had been decisively wrong-footed by continental theory. Anthropology turned its back on its prophet, and Geertz, assuming the role of a low-key public ironist, appeared at times, almost willingly, to accept his fate. In his late work, he all but joined the deconstructionist pranksters who deemed anthropological writing to be as worthy of investigation as anthropological reality. It is telling, if not a little sad, that as he approached retirement, Geertz sought to replace himself not with a cultural anthropologist but with an ethnographer from science studies (Marcus, this volume), seeing here the last-best-hope for his program.

But although Geertz the man died in 2006, Geertz as a set of ideas and iconic figure did not. It was the delayed but profound reception of his thinking outside his home discipline that allowed "Geertz" to return from the wilderness and gain immortality. Rejected by his own people, the approach that he developed came to enjoy the hospitality of strangers. Others, in a sense, chose him as their visionary leader. How come? One reason was the extraordinary malleability of Geertz's key ideas. Consider two of his compelling memes: the idea of "thick description" and the exemplar of the Balinese cockfight. Even without a close reading, these were attractive and transposable. They had a populist appeal, permitting shallow legitimacy for descriptions and analogies, for ceremonial citations, and for data dumps from fieldwork notebooks and archives—and this without any requirement for hard intellectual labor (Clarke, this volume). For many, of course, Geertz's appeal ran much deeper than this. Some did read him carefully, and found in his words the mandate for an entirely new way of grounding inquiry in the *Geisteswissenschaften* tradition. Even these more careful students, however, rarely talked through the logic of their readings in public, in the way we find in this book. For the most part they kept Geertz as a kind of private motivation.

Thanks to Boas in the United States and the great structural functionalists in England, cultural and social anthropology had long been about the expert reading of cultural codes that drove expressive social life. The pendulum swing we described earlier brought back power, materialism, and epistemological doubt. Exit Geertz from anthropology. Other intellectual movements in other places, however, were reinserting the centrality of culture at exactly this same moment in time. During the 1980s, we saw the consolidation of the "new cultural history," which looked

to the ritual and symbolic dimensions of the past, and drew heavily on Geertz (Clarke, this volume). In science studies, ideas of knowledge as convention described research settings as domains of local, practical, and meaningful action, drawing upon Wittgenstein, but, once again, from Geertz as well (Gallison and Marcus, this volume). As hermeneutic philosophy and epistemology kicked back against more formal and analytic approaches to understanding, Geertz came to offer a prospectus of what interpretation might look like if Gadamer or Ricoeur were to come down to earth (Reed, Wagner-Pacifici, and Warnke, this volume). His concern for the lived textures of meaning could be easily transplanted into diverse research agendas, from historical accounts of political and social conflicts,[5] to reconstructions of social dramas,[6] and through to literary criticism,[7] this last tie reciprocating the movement of ideas from Kenneth Burke to Geertz so many years before.

If there was been widespread interest, it was in sociology that Geertz was ultimately to find his new home. The conference that gave rise to this volume was held at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology, the home of a "Strong Program" that sets out to provide meaning centered accounts of social life. To explain how "Geertz" ended up here, we need to return to Parsons. The reaction against normative explanation set in during the 1960s and consolidated during the 1970s in American sociology. This was the era of the "conflict sociology" of Charles Tilly and Barrington Moore, where meaning was taken to be irrelevant to explanation and discussions on elites, class, and power became the order of the day. Microsociology in the form of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis looked to be about meaning, but they gave up on the idea of an overarching social text, toward which action was oriented, replacing ideas of expressive and moral action with a more cognitive and pragmatist model. By the 1980s, these once fast-moving vehicles for innovation had started running out of gas. As these fields had become institutionalized, interpretive scholars had already begun to look for ways to return to meaning, but in a more colorful and less abstract way than Parsons had demonstrated. The result was a cultural turn in sociology. Placing deep meanings front and center, cultural sociologists looked to Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, to such anthropologists as Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner, and to the literary theory of Barthes and Bakhtin.

Clifford Geertz was to prove the most generative and flexible of these rediscovered resources in sociology as elsewhere. Here again we encounter an irony. By rejecting generalizable theory in favor of locality and "thick description," Geertz had made himself vulnerable to the relativistic and yet arch-theoretical incursions of poststructuralism. Yet, in the push toward a more cultural sociology, his intellectual agnosticism and his deft, somewhat impressionistic brushstrokes served him well. He had compellingly demonstrated that social life needed interpretation and that it had a certain structure of feeling. It turned out that the Geertzian rejection of heavy theory allowed him to be easily used as an adjunct to more layered and more general claims, the kind usually found in sociology. He could be varnished on the parts of an account that hovered close to the phenomenon, for descriptions of settings, moods and gestures, ambiguities and performances, and for subtle wordplay and analogy. Other theoretical tools, if needed, could offer a more general hovering over, deploy the analyst's categories, and so move closer to explanation (Reed, this volume).

By the 1990s, Geertz had become ubiquitous in the human sciences on undergraduate reading lists, in edited volumes and course packs, and in PhD field exams. *The Interpretation of Cultures* has been cited thousands of times. Like all great theorists, Geertz has accumulated his own repertoire of sound bites and images, all of which appear as if by magic in the papers in this volume. There are those turtles all the way down, incomplete interpretations that become more incomplete as we investigate more, the malarial and diffident investigator, the police raid, deep play, the cerebral savage, the wink, the sheep raid, thick description, the Rashomon effect, and many more. This proliferation indicates more than that Geertz has become iconic for the cultural turn; the easy use of such phrases suggests that he has himself become naturalized and mythologized. Like Matisse's art, there is something of an armchair comfort here, a quality that is reflected in a recent festschrift by his peers full of appropriate but by the same token somewhat avuncular sentiment.[8] Our feeling is that the time has come for a more critical interrogation of Geertz's legacy. Credit must be given where it is due. Yet we must also move beyond both the shallow and the deeper deployment of Geertz to ask harder questions of his estate. Now that we have the luxury of looking backward over his life's work, we need to ask what has value and what does not. What are the principal heirlooms that "Geertz" has bequeathed?

To engage in this enterprise of sifting and sorting is what the contributions that follow are all about. First and foremost, they suggest, Geertz legitimized that very project of an interpretive human science itself. As Geertz became an intellectual giant of late-twentieth-century cultural theory—conjoined with his through-the-looking-glass counterpart Foucault—so the symbolic analysis of shared meaning became a respectable, if highly contested, endeavor in sociology, history, and political science. Yet perhaps more important than this intellectual Geertz was a Geertz-icon that provided not just a powerfully influential argument for cultural social science but also a series of aesthetically compelling and seductive exemplars of just how it could be done. In his studies of ideology, religion, theater, common sense, politics, and struggles among animals and men, Geertz set loose his pen and with it his wizardry. He made interpretation look deceptively easy. He showed as much as he told us that we should not think of culture as a thing, a field, a subsystem, or a domain, but as a dimension that is omnipresent in every traditional object of social science. There is nowhere that meaning is not present, no domain or field in which reconstructing the relatively independent forces of meaning cannot, and should not, be done.

Thanks in no small part to the charm emanating from this Geertz-icon, his return from the wilderness to the temple has been largely a matter of faith, persuasion, and prophetic charisma. There has been precious little tough questioning of the core idea set and interrogation of the intellectual Geertz. Looking to the chapters of this book, we find the authors striving to place a widespread intuition on a firmer footing: to move beyond a structure of feeling and emotive affinity and to locate the publicly accountable, more rigorous reasons why we need Geertz today. This act of formal reconnection is accomplished in several ways, but they all are efforts to reach across the sometimes unhelpful chasm opened up by Geertz's insistence on the local, situational, provisional, and antitheoretical. We might reconstruct the

implicit theory behind Geertz's writing and suggest that he was actually proposing a comprehensive vision and generalizable model of social life (Alexander and Giesen); we can point to hidden affinities with other cultural theories and claim that Geertz was less a monad than part of an ongoing tradition (Brooks, Smith, and Trondman); we can redescribe his exile—rather than his approach itself—as the mistake that requires accounting and remedial therapy (Marcus); we can see Geertz chiefly as a methodologist, as a theorist not of social process but of interpretation whose profound and (again) universal insights can and should be made more systematic (Clark, Lichterman, Reed, Wagner-Pacifici, and Warnke). Finally, we might simply claim that many, if not all, aspects of social life have a good "fit" with Geertz's own take on reality as elusive, fragmentary, ambivalent, only partly systemic, and hybrid (Errington and Gallison), that we are only now realizing this, and hence that Geertz needs to return as our guide.

As each hand reaches out toward a Geertz who can no longer represent himself, we find him reconfigured and fought over, becoming an unwitting but we hope not an unwilling player, in diverse intellectual fields and idea histories. In the contributions that follow, Geertz is stretched backward to Dilthey (Alexander), to Russian structuralism (Smith), to Barthes (Brooks), and to Weberian comparative civilizational analysis (Giesen). He is hauled forward to ethnography (Lichterman), the philosophy of social science (Warnke and Reed), and cultural sociology (Trondman and Wagner-Pacifici). We find him pulled sideways to history (Clarke and Darnton), science studies (Gallison), linguistics (Errington), and political analysis (Apter and Giesen). Stretched, hauled, pulled in every direction, Geertz has become a contested prize in an intellectual tug-of-war. So long as this competition endures, so will his legacy. In the search for a meaningful explanation of social life, it is the rope holding the tension of scholarship together.

Notes

1. Frye, Northrop. 1982. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature.* New York. Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovitch.
2. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York. Basic Books.
3. See Alexander, Jeffrey. 1987. *Twenty Lectures: Social Theory Since World War Two*. New York. Columbia University Press.
4. Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Structural Anthropology.* Boston. Basic Books.
5. Sewell, William Jr. 1980. *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*. New York. Cambridge University Press; Hunt, Lynn. 1984. *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley. University of California Press.
6. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1988. *Action and Its Environments: Toward a New Synthesis*. New York: Columbia University Press; Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 1986. *The Moro Morality Play.* Chicago. University of Chicago Press.
7. Greenblatt, Stephen. 1988. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Berkeley. University of California Press.
8. Schweder, Richard, and Byron Good. 2005. *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues.* Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

Part I

Geertz, Text, and Structure

CHAPTER 2

Semiotics and Thick Description (Barthes and Geertz)

Peter Brooks

Many years ago, I was a participant in a discussion group organized by Richard Sennett that met occasionally to discuss new work of a cultural analysis, "sciences of man" sort—work coming out of structuralism and the poststructuralism that, in the United States, came so closely on its heels. Cliff Geertz was part of the group. When it came my turn to lead a discussion—on Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*—I was somewhat surprised and taken aback by Geertz's resistance to what might seem to me today my excessively linguistic and narratological reading of the novel. I was deep in the ascetic pleasure, the kind of self-denying self-pleasuring, of semiological and narrative theory, finding a great deal of satisfaction in taking apart the clockwork mechanism of a text to show how it all worked, and, more than that, what its workings told you about clockworks overall, what they could do and could not do, and, by extension, how those clockworks were part not only of literary schemata but also of our very toolkits for understanding our places in time and history.

Geertz found work of this type too formalist, too abstract, and too perilously close to the kind of "High Science" and universal rationalism of Claude Lévi-Strauss that he denounces in his essay of 1967, "The Cerebral Savage." There, you recall, Geertz writes, "Like Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss' search is not after all for men, whom he doesn't much care for, but for Man, with whom he is enthralled."[1] This may be a bit unfair, to Lévi-Strauss and certainly to Rousseau, but I think both characteristic and key in understanding Geertz's resistance to semiotic structuralist analysis. He tells us, in the essay entitled "Thick Description," "The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one."[2] But the essay on Lévi-Strauss takes strong exception to the linguistic paradigm as a basis on which to try to build systematic understandings of different social codes as transforms of one another. The structuralist semiotician generally works from some version of Ferdinand de Saussure's fundamental

distinction between *langue* and *parole* or the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev's formulation: "For every *process* there is a corresponding *system*, by which the process can be analysed and described by means of a limited number of premises."[3] It is the universalizing and abstraction of that system, that *langue*, that appears to bother Geertz. As he writes in a later essay, "Art as a Cultural System," a semiotic approach "cannot be a formal science like logic or mathematics but must be a social one like history or anthropology."[4] He wants to be able to read cultural messages; he recognizes the presence of social and cultural syntax; but it is not so clear that he wants to recognize the universalistic rules of a grammar.

Let me turn away from the Geertz–Lévi-Strauss encounter—which is really too highly charged—and turn instead to an analyst with whom Geertz has closer affinities, though of course still a very basic disagreement: Roland Barthes. The earlier work of Barthes—best known in his *Mythologies*—aims at a kind of descriptive analytic of everyday cultural messages. Cultural icons such as *steak pommes frites*, Racine, Einstein's brain, or the Citroën DS serve as the ground of an analysis of how culture and society construct and send messages, all the while claiming—and believing—that these are *not* constructed messages but simply the inevitable dictates of nature, the unquestionable facts of life in society and culture. It is Barthes's task to show how the seemingly natural is in fact the cultural, disguised in such a way that we, the receivers and consumers of the message, never question its naturalness. Barthes is very much a cultural anthropologist here, working on the utensils and accessories of French life in society in much the way Geertz works on a Balinese cockfight.

Barthes achieves his anthropological stance through a certain alienation of himself from the cultural phenomena he lives amidst. He joins a long literary tradition here, reaching back to Swift and Voltaire (and of course even farther back, to Rabelais and Petronius), in which the observer divests himself or herself of the usual cultural familiarities, to claim a certain strangeness. Nearer at hand for Barthes, it is a technique you can find in Sartre's *Nausea*, for instance, where precisely the values of the self-satisfied bourgeois world, once set at a certain defamiliarizing distance, become a source of nausea, something to be regurgitated. Even more pertinent to Barthes was the example of Bertold Brecht, who at this moment in his career was his great new discovery and enamorment. Fredric Jameson remarked that Brecht's famous "estrangement effect"—the *Verfremdungseffekt*—enters French critical theory by way of Barthes's *Mythologies*, and that I think is a key to understanding Barthes's way of becoming the cultural analyst of his own culture.[5] The Brechtian technique is, like Barthes's, denaturalizing. It seeks to break traditional theatrical aesthetics in favor of an "epic" in which the spectator is challenged to think rather than to collude.

The very notion of a cultural anthropology probably depends on some version of the estrangement effect—or, rather, the effect of estrangement is what calls cultural anthropology into being. It is, as many anthropologists have eloquently stated—not least among them, Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*—the sense of the very strange that nonetheless harbors the uncannily familiar that calls the anthropologist to the task. That difference, alienation, and estrangement are built into the situation of the anthropologist in the field, whereas Barthes, like Brecht, needs to create them,

to make himself a stranger in a strange but cognizable land: to engage in what Geertz calls "self-nativizing."[6] The result, in many of the *Mythologies*, is not unlike what Geertz famously called "thick description": a kind of layering, impasto description that builds the sense of cultural behavior by repeated recontextualizations and hypotheses of meaning. The Balinese cockfight has rules behind rules behind rules. You get to its meaning by a restless engagement with all of these rules and their possible interactions.

In his practice of thick description, Geertz often sounds like a practitioner of the estrangement effect. As he famously writes in "Deep Play," "What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life" is

> that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.[7]

And again,

> Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture's ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text. . . .[8]

Cultural texts demand to be read for their interpretive messages, for interpretation is their very function. And the readers must thus be able to embrace the "sentimental education" and desentimentalize it, understand what kinds of messages it is manufacturing, and give their analysis.

I cited earlier Geertz's claim that his concept of culture is "essentially a semiotic one." He continues (this is from the "Thick Description" essay),

> Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.[9]

This sounds suggestively Barthesian, especially since the image of the spider's web, and the spider itself as spinning webs of meaning out of its own bodily substances, would be crucial for Barthes as he became more "textological," especially in *Pleasure of the Text*. Since both Geertz and Barthes understand culture to be semiotic, and in need of a decipherment of its signs, why should one insist on a difference in their approach?

The issue between Geertz and Barthes is suggested both in Geertz's rejection of the concept of "law" in his search for meaning, and in the very title of this essay: "Thick Description." Barthes does want law, not of a scientific variety but of the sort that enables linguistics to be the paradigmatic social science. And he is suspicious of metaphors of depth, such as may be implied by the concept of thick description.

In the long essay that closes the volume *Mythologies*, entitled "Myth Today," Barthes argues that "semiology is a science of forms, since it studies meanings independent of their content."[10] The word *science* in French, of course, does not cover quite the same semantic field as our "science," so much identified with the hard sciences. It means more "the organized knowledge of." But Barthes's sense of semiotics as a discipline does precisely refer to a knowledge systematically organized along the lines of Saussurean linguistics. Saussure famously defined language as a science of forms, a system of differences rather than substances, in which meaning is created by formal transformations that make phonemes and morphemes differ from one another, thus susceptible of being used to make meaning. The linguistic model wants to postulate a code in terms of which meanings are made, so that one can always work back from the given message to the code that allows the message to be created. Only in this working back from manifestation to system can we really perform the Barthesian estrangement effect, since it is the laying bare of the code that forces you to see the constructed, manufactured, made nature of the message. Postulating the existence of a code is, Barthes appears to believe, crucial to the critical nature of his enterprise. Whereas Geertz seems to be content with a hermeneutic enterprise in which interpretation is text upon text without any resting point—where indeed there can be no fixed code, since a culture is always recursively recoding, making what appears as a message reappear as a code to another message, and so forth.

Yet Barthes himself is interested in this doubling and overlap of codes, interested precisely in the secondary, connoted, and what he calls—at this point in his career—metalinguistic sign presented by myth. It is, he claims, a sign about a sign, a system in which a signifier already "contains" another sign, whose meaning is more or less inalterable. One of the examples Barthes uses here is a photo on the cover of *Paris-Match* (he is careful to tell us the copy of this abominable right-wing magazine is handed to him as he sits down in the barber's chair: a given message if ever there was). The cover photo (recall that we are in the midst of the Algerian War, and the dissolution of the French colonial empire) presents a young black man in French army uniform in the process of saluting the French flag. The connoted or mythic meaning of the photo is obvious and overwhelming. It summons the viewer to acknowledgment of the French empire—the idea of the "hundred million French," all over the globe: to the fact that all its sons, whatever their color or race, serve under its flag, and that the civilizing mission passes precisely through universal military service in the support of those universal ideals France started exporting in 1789. The message is without response: if a young black African serves willingly in uniform, and salutes the *tricolore*, what is wrong with those leftist intellectuals who are agitating against the colonial war raging in North Africa—which is after all saluted by all those, whatever their racial origin, who have had the intelligence and spirit to understand the necessity of empire?

To Barthes, the mythic message and the mythic sign are nauseating, *écœurant*. This is strong language to use in a book devoted to the analysis of the mythic. It turns out that the nauseating quality of myth derives from the motivation of its signs. The Saussurean principle that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, unmotivated, offers a kind of *askesis* for the analyst who uses the linguistic paradigm: a kind of hygiene by which, precisely, the analysis proceeds through forms without content,

where demonstrating the formal property of a message, identifying the code from which it is made, suffices to show up the signifying process. But mythic meaning "is never completely arbitrary, it is always in part motivated, it fatally contains a share of analogy".[11] The salute of the black African soldier must recall, be identical to, the salute of the "normal" white French soldier. "Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth," Barthes writes, "myth plays on the analogy of meaning and form: no meaning without motivated form." And here Barthes appends a polemical and revelatory footnote, which is worth citing in full:

> From an ethical point of view, what is disturbing in myth is precisely that its form is motivated. For if there is a "health" of language, it is founded on the arbitrariness of the sign. What is nauseating in myth is the recourse to a false nature, it's the *luxuriance* of meaningful forms, as in those objects that disguise their function with an appearance of the natural. The will to weight meaning with all the warranty of nature provokes a kind of nausea: myth is too rich, and its excess comes precisely from its motivation. This nausea is the same that I feel when faced with arts that don't want to choose between *physis* and *anti-physis*, using the former as their ideal and the latter as their short-cut. Ethically, there is a kind of degradation if you play on both registers.

The whole of Barthes's sensibility lies distilled and distorted in this footnote. You note particularly his choice of formalism and minimalism as *ethical*, his rejection of everything that disguises the made as the natural, and in general the recourse to nature as false bourgeois God. That is on a par with his praise, in contemporary critical essays, of the "new novelist" Alain Robbe-Grillet for his precise but insignificant descriptions of objects that seek to evacuate "the romantic heart of things" that has haunted literature for too many centuries. You can see why Barthes would later take gratefully to Japanese culture, as an "empire of signs" that appear to mean by way of their formal arrangement and precision. You can see the allegiance to Brecht, as the promoter of a theatrical *antiphysis*, of an artifice that refuses refuge in naturalist illusion, and makes its point precisely by staging and reveling in the artifice of its signs. The ethic and the aesthetic put forward here—and they are inseparable—are to be sure very much of their time: you can sense the kind of functionalist architecture and furniture Barthes appreciates, and you can understand his admiration for the new aerodynamics of the Citroën DS.

Myth, Barthes will say a couple of pages later, transforms history into nature.[12] (Note, once again, the hovering presence of Brecht, whose theatrical goal was to reverse this process.) This is of course the principal theme and animus of the *Mythologies*: the illicit evocation of the natural where we are in fact dealing with the cultural. The natural is itself the product of a certain history—the rise of the bourgeoisie to dominance in Western culture, the coming of secularization, and with it the appeal to nature as law and moral guide—but when it is used to mask historical process and cultural sign manufacturing, then it becomes nauseating and must be met with the ascetic response, the *antiphysis*, the promotion of the artifice that knows itself as such. (I wonder, in passing, what Barthes would have made of our current cultural fondness for "the organic": a return to authentic substances or another bourgeois attempt to pass off its refined and expensive tastes as übernatural?)

What does this stance have to do with cultural anthropology and with thick description? In some measure, the thrust of Barthes's enterprise goes in the opposite direction to Geertz's. Barthes is intent to show up the misuse of signs in the myth-making process, whereas to the anthropologist there is no such thing, and Barthes's nauseated reaction has no place in the field. Where Barthes is intent to denounce the false comforts and false idols of bourgeois culture, Geertz is intent to understand the idols and accommodations of Balinese or Moroccan culture. The apparent cultural anthropology of *Mythologies* is really in the service of an ideology and an aesthetics that spurn culture in favor of some other high ideal that Barthes would spend the rest of his career seeking—without ever quite identifying it other than as what it was not. In this case, the Barthes–Geertz analogy may be very limited indeed.

Yet as readers, Barthes and Geertz are often very much in tune. For both of them, society and culture are known, and analyzable, largely in terms of social performances. (And Jeffrey Alexander and his students demonstrate the useful synthesis between them.) They are both acute and convincing readers of the cultural landscape they define. Even though Geertz does not want to follow the French structuralists into the realm of semiotic "science," he sees his work as dealing primarily with signs, and signs always ask to be decoded in terms of some implicit code, even if you do not want to go all the way toward activating the Saussurean *langue/parole* paradigm. Barthes, on the other hand, while assuring us of his nausea at the mythic sign, nonetheless is a resourceful reader of that which he loves to hate.

Take, for instance, Barthes's piece on Joseph Mankiewicz's film of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which zeroes in on two details: first, the brushing forward of all the men's hair (no exceptions, and no baldness allowed) as a sign of "Romanness".[13] This sign is supposed to be reassuring—we are really *in* the world of ancient Rome—but it creates a malaise by its intermediate status, somewhere between the unnatural or artificial sign (the stagey sign of Brecht or Jean Genet) and the naturalizing, realist-illusion sign. The forward-brushed hair is neither fully naturalistic nor fully arbitrary. The other detail is the drops of sweat that appear on the faces of all the characters, who are engaged in excruciating debate and fatal decision making (except Caesar himself, who as a simple victim is out of it and does not sweat). Again, the sweat-drop sign would have it both ways: it wants to make us understand the historical situation, in the Brechtian manner, and that is praiseworthy, but it also wants to pass itself off as natural, the spontaneous bodily reaction, and that, says Barthes, is cheating. The lesson, says Barthes, can be read as "a moral of the sign": it should either be arbitrary, intellectual, an "algebra," something from Chinese theater, the use of a single flag to signify a regiment, or it should be internal and rooted, something from the Stanislavsky theory of acting. It is the intermediate, hesitant sign that gives evidence of a "degraded spectacle, one that fears equally naive truth and total artifice".[14] There is "a culpable duplicity" when you confuse sign and signified. And he ends the piece:

> This is a duplicity that belongs to bourgeois spectacle [theatre, performance]: between the intellectual sign and the visceral sign, this art hypocritically places a bastard sign, at once elliptic and pretentious, which it baptizes with the pompous name of 'natural.'

I can imagine Geertz agreeing with Barthes here, though with the reservation that those bastard signs are after all the ones you need to come to terms with, since their cultural freight—as Barthes has indeed himself just demonstrated—is of the highest value for your analysis. While denouncing the duplicity, ambiguity, overlap, and "thickness" of the bourgeois naturalized sign, Barthes in fact plays tribute to its potency, and the need to give it analytic scrutiny. Yet he would continue to argue, contra Geertz, that the metaphor of thickness misleads insofar as it implies a depth in the things itself. The metaphor of thickness, Barthes tells us, is "overly spatial"[15]—somewhat in the manner that Jacques Lacan in his later work would seek in the theory of Borromean knots an alternative to the metaphor of a depth psychology. The spatialization of psyche, like the spatialization of the sign, plays suspiciously into Romantic metaphors of the deep as the profound. Barthes brings to the practice of thick description a warning askesis: do not be fooled by the illusion that meaning is *in* the mythic sign you are examining. Meaning rather is given to it, lent to it, and assigned to it, by processes that belong to semiotics alone.

Barthes's determination to unmask and skewer the bourgeois mythic sign remained a constant in his work, yet it would be modified by his gradual realization, later in his career, that his postulate that semiotic theory and analysis could provide a metalanguage in regard to natural language was simply untenable. It was in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, in 1977, that he publicly recanted: the idea of a language external to language is unsustainable; there is no metalanguage.[16] Once you have recognized that the analyst of signs has no privileged place, no metaplace, from which to perform the analysis, are you not very much thrown back into the world of thick descriptions? Is this absence of a metalanguage exactly what Geertz had intuited long ago? Before assuming that Barthes's abandonment of the idea of a metalanguage represents a victory of sensible American pragmatism over heady French theory, I would point out that the search for a language in which to talk about language, and for an analytic by which to talk about how meaning is made, however frustrating and possibly doomed to failure, has been animating much of the best work of our time. Geertz's semirefusal to participate does not necessarily elicit our approbation. But I call it a semirefusal, since as a declared semiotician of culture he does participate, simply rejecting the more extreme theoretical abstractions. To give Geertz the last word—not in some abstract or theoretic contest, but simply in today's context—I close with a quote that you will all recognize:

> To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense—is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them. The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said.[17]

The image of the shepherd is a humble one. Yet Geertz's claim here, for all its appealing Anglo-American modesty, is really no less bold than Barthes's French universalizing. It makes cultural interpretation the only game worth playing—and we have all been learning from that ever since.

Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, "The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 356.
2. Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *IC*, 5.
3. Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, cit. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 7.
4. Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 118.
5. See Fredric Jameson, "His Classic *Mythologies* Paved the Way for the Triumphant Entry of the Estrangement-Effect into French Theory," in *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 38. On the importance of Brecht to Barthes at this point in the latter's career, I am indebted to the insights of Larysa Smirnov's remarkable doctoral dissertation, *Roland Barthes in Search of an 'Epic' Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2007).
6. See Geertz, "Us/Not Us," in *Works and Lives* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 107. Geertz here refers specifically to the work of Ruth Benedict.
7. Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *IC*, 448.
8. Ibid., 449.
9. Geertz, "Thick Description," 5.
10. Roland Barthes, "Le Mythe aujourd'hui," in *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil/"Points," 1957), 196.
11. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil/"Points," 1957), 212.
12. Ibid., 215.
13. Ibid., 28.
14. Ibid., 30.
15. Ibid., 207.
16. See Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), 36.
17. Geertz, *IC*, 30.

CHAPTER 3

The Balinese Cockfight Decoded: Reflections on Geertz and Structuralism

PHILIP SMITH

Every new intellectual movement needs to look back from time to time. Revisiting a point of origin can provide a way to clarify a sense of identity, define a mission, and generate profitable intellectual strategies. At its best such a pilgrimage does more than simply worship slavishly at the altar of the totemic ancestor. Rather there will be an effort to reconfigure a legacy to fit present needs and to generate critical readings that have the somewhat unfair benefit of hindsight. This is not an activity of disrespect. The greatest tribute that can be paid to a thinker of a prior generation is to take them as a living interlocutor rather than as a fossil. For the growing field of interpretative sociology Clifford Geertz stands out as a scholar worthy of the closest attention. At once inspirational and frustrating, he is a writer who urgently needs to be thought through and thought over, or, put another way, fought through and fought over. Here I undertake this task via a particular strategy, looking at his output not in the aggregate but in miniature. I suggest that we might leverage some wider insights by first paying close and critical attention to Geertz's single greatest masterwork.

It is broadly acknowledged that Geertz has written some of the most fascinating and compelling essays in the standard repertoire: "Thick Description," "Religion as a Cultural System," and "Ideology as a Cultural System"—these are the items to which we return time and time again looking for ideas on how to interpret action and imagine culture. They are endlessly cited, reinterpreted, and subject to critique. Yet although Geertz has provided several pivotal texts for cultural sociology, cultural anthropology, and cultural theory, one and only one has become truly iconic. This is his "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (hereafter *The Cockfight* in italics; a text to be distinguished from its referent "the cockfight" in a regular

lowercase font). First published in *Daedalus* in 1972 and reprinted as the capstone entry in *The Interpretation of Cultures*,[1] it remains the single most celebrated attempt in the literature at fixing the meaningful quality of social life, receiving a quantity of attention altogether disproportionate to its length or even thematic centrality in Geertz's extensive oeuvre. Items such as the careful and scholarly *Islam Observed*[2] are read by dedicated specialists. *The Cockfight* is read by pretty much everyone and, once read, is never forgotten. This is the masterwork, the paper we would give to our students or to the rational-choice colleague next door when we hope they will "get the point" of interpretative inquiry. That we would run *The Cockfight* through the Xerox machine for this evangelical task is second nature. Made anthropologically strange, however, the selection starts to be puzzling. It seems curious that an account of a blood-sport activity conducted by a somewhat exotic and distant people should be our chosen instrument for converting others and for reaffirming our own faith.

How exactly are we to explain this unlikely outcome? I want to put aside such commonsensical variables as the quality of Geertz's mind, the scope of his erudition, and his famously deft prose. These attributes are not unique to *The Cockfight* and are shared over his various writings. To invoke these would not allow us to account for the unique destiny of this one text, even if they permit us to begin to answer the query: Why Geertz? I also wish to bracket out as too general to be useful the sociology-of-knowledge approach that might speak of a timely intervention in particular intellectual contexts, such as the challenge to Parsonian systems theory.[3] Again, this approach can explain the attractions of a broader theoretical move, but not the standout quality of this or that item. Might there be something at play in the text itself that can help account for our enduring fascination with *The Cockfight*, with those few thousand words that so effectively and surprisingly outcompete the other writings in his intellectual ecology? My argument will be that there are structural properties to Geertz's most compelling essay. These load the dice for this particular work to become the first among equals.

Geertz and Structuralism

My intention is not entirely innocent here. In accounting for the iconic status of *The Cockfight* I hope to make an indirect case for structuralism as a useful component of the interpretative method. There is a creative irony at play, for Geertz himself all but rejected structural analysis as an intellectual tool, somewhat problematically separating out the analysis of symbolic action from a wider commitment to semiotics and system. Turning to his famous essay on "Thick Description" we find the critique playing as follows. First, reality is muddled. It is less an ordered system than like a "manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries."[4] Hence structuralism is doomed to failure because it produces "impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe."[5] Second, the structuralist move separates culture from agency and ignores the world of the concrete. It imagines culture as "a self-contained 'super organic' reality with forces and purposes of its own."[6] This is

an approach that in Geertz's eyes can only reify culture, separating it from practices and eliminating "delicacy" through "the sweep of abstractions."[7] Third, there is a problem of explanatory levels. We have no way of knowing whether our analyses "reflect what the natives really think or are merely clever simulations, logically equivalent but substantively different, of what they think."[8] We need instead, he insists, to look to culture as a resource on the ground, as an "imaginative universe within which . . . acts are signs." Analytically culture should be treated not as a cause but rather as a context within which "behaviors, institutions, or processes . . . can be intelligibly—that is thickly—described."[9] What Geertz urges here is a move away from general explanatory theory and toward the fleeting, local, and contextual. His newly coined method of "thick description" will underpin this task by providing a textual reconstruction of particular settings, with the act of writing closely tied to the task of interpretation.

The critique of structuralism, then, is intimately connected to the advocacy of a flexible and situational hermeneutics. For Geertz, these seem opposed as projects and as analytic possibilities. To understand his rather extreme position we must of course remember that he was writing at the high tide of cultural structuralism. Although *La Pensée Sauvage* had been written by Lévi-Strauss[10] at the very start of the 1960s, its impact was maximized four years later following its translation and publication in English, and reinforced by the progressive rolling out of his monumental series on Amerindian myth over that decade. When *The Interpretation of Cultures* went to press Roland Barthes was still best known for his *Elements of Semiology*, published in English a few years before.[11] He had only just begun to discover the pleasures of the text. Michel Foucault was quietly moving on from his archaeological project toward a more practice-oriented genealogy, but this was barely whispered.

If the timbers of 1960s structuralism were being eaten out from within, this was not widely known in the first years of the next decade. To all appearances the giant of the forest stood tall and imperious, especially as delays in translation lagged Anglophone understandings of French theory, then as now, by four or five years. Although the internal evolution of structuralism was to make Clifford Geertz's polemic superfluous, the fact remains that he revved up his chain saw when perhaps a little light pruning would have been more appropriate. In picking a fight with structuralism he was losing his most robust potential ally in the broader struggle against anticultural forms of explanation. More recent attempts at structuralism suggest that a mutually beneficial coexistence would have been possible. It has become more flexible and hybrid, more modest in explanatory ambition, and has managed to combine the reconstruction of abstract cultural systems with recognition of incomplete institutionalization and cultural fragmentation in the theorization of action. Furthermore we might insist that the structuralist move does not eliminate the possibility for sensitive and situated interpretation, as Geertz claimed, but rather can assist in this task. For example, it provides an understanding of why and how cultural gestures might be constructed and read and so come to offer an explanation of why certain cultural artifacts take on iconic properties. Consider the case of *The Cockfight* itself.

Structuralism and the Hermeneutics of Geertz's Cockfight

Treatments of *The Cockfight* essay are of course manifold. The most conventional approach is to take it as a textual cipher ripe for ideological decoding. Familiar ploys here involve tagging Geertz's hokey attempts to demonstrate interpretative credibility or what the neo-Foucaultians would like to call "ethnographic authority"; noting the sleights of hand through which he moves from limited data to broader inference; denouncing his allegedly bogus solidarity with informants; detecting an "Orientalist" worldview that neglects power even as it inscribes it in the role of the anthropologist; and skewering the faux-naturalism with which a writer highly cognizant of the force of writing and language nevertheless separates out the representation and the represented.[12] Others have used the text to decry Geertz's theoretical contradictions and inadequacies, for example, the fact that he brings bits of European theory in willy-nilly despite insisting that societies contain their own interpretations and that if we look hard enough, then surely we will find these.[13] My intent here is different. It is not so much to debunk or challenge as it is to explain. And what is being explained in a way is a feature of this very literature that debunks and challenges. Geertz's interlocutors seem to choose *The Cockfight* as a battleground time and time again and not his writings on the state, on Islam, on nationalism, on development, or even on culture in the abstract. *The Cockfight* is where the action is.

To be fair, Geertz's methodological suspicions about structuralism are not entirely groundless. In its most advanced incarnations it is capable of remarkable feats of sophism and scholasticism, these allowing the virtuoso interpreter to come to almost any conclusion from almost any material. So to keep a level playing field and to make the test as hard as possible for myself, I will simply make a few basic observations on *The Cockfight*, drawing upon the most rudimentary kind of structuralism. This is the contribution of the Russian formalists of the early twentieth century, who sought to identify the ground rules of effective fiction.[14] We might start with the work of Victor Shklovsky. In his *Theory of Prose* from 1925 he noted that the prototypical story involves the resolution of an initial ambiguity. At the center of each tale is an object or a person whose exact and true nature needs to be decided. The pauper is revealed to be a prince, Captain Ahab to be the darkly obsessive human counterpart to Moby Dick, the mysterious Mr. Darcy to be a nice person after all, and so forth. Shklovsky is especially keen on Sherlock Holmes, seeing in the detective story the prototype for all narrative. In Conan Doyle's novels clues are revealed one by one. Assisted by the Baker Street detective, at the end of the tale we can put them all together. The Hound of the Baskervilles is not a phantom but a large dog covered in phosphorous; an Andaman Islander with a blowpipe can perform the perfect keyhole murder.

The majority of social science research takes something of this story pattern. The prototypical journal article will start with an empirical "research question" or better still a "research puzzle," which introduces some troubling aspect of the real that requires explanation. Alternative ways of explaining this strange or as yet unknown thing are then canvassed, rejected, or reconfigured. Clues in the form of data are

next introduced. Finally a pronouncement is made, and closure is attained as ambiguity is reduced. Apparently complex and disorganized situations are pulled into order by the provision of a unifying narrative. Although Geertz's other famous essays do not take this form, *The Cockfight* does—and to its advantage when it comes to having an attractive structure. This affinity with conventional research norms has a particular consequence above and beyond a generic appeal to the human mind. *The Cockfight* can be read and appreciated even by those doing more realist or positivist research. It is not so literary, autobiographical, or theory-incestuous that conventional ethnographers and qualitative methodologists lose interest. There seems to be a movement toward a "research finding" about something puzzling that is out there—the cockfight itself.

The Cockfight begins with a presentation of the cockfight as an ambivalent and mysterious thing that involves incredible, nonrational investments of time, energy, and emotion. It is a form of "madness"[15] that requires anthropological explanation, a glimpse of the hidden and opaque "inner nature"[16] of the Balinese society that Geertz desired to understand. Then the clues start to arrive. First, we learn that the cock is a double entendre in Balinese and that men are the chief protagonists of cockfighting. One solution presents itself, that this is a masculine ritual and that the preening "narcissistic male ego"[17] is responsible. This interpretation is confounded immediately with the announcement that the cock is also a symbol of the spontaneously animal[18] and of disorder[19] rather than of the groomed and self-confident male. So the ambiguity has not gone away. Our candidate solution, like those of Dr. Watson, does not look very convincing after all. Next we are given a generic description of a fight. Here we can search through more clues. We learn about cock handling, the spurs, and the excited onlookers. The fight is explained as a "focused gathering" in Goffman's terms and as a "melodrama."[20] So now it has a theatrical and ritual element and offers the pleasures of the crowd. This idea is dropped in turn, and we come to the question of gambling. Geertz explains a fiendishly complicated system of betting before going on to falsify a line of utilitarian analysis—the fights do not exist to support this economic activity. But the world of the wager does provide a lead. The all but incomprehensible and prescriptive way of allocating odds is designed to generate close matches that are capable of providing maximum drama. Following up on this clue and looking a little more closely still we see that the cockfight and the gambling that surrounds it are in a way mimetic of social structures. We have a "simulation of the social matrix"[21] and a "dramatization of status concerns."[22] On the next page Geertz tries to pull all this together. The Balinese cockfight is a grand existential and cosmological statement. It is a place where big picture themes of "death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss beneficence, chance"[23] can be expressed. And then he comes to the famous conclusion that it is something of a "metasocial commentary,"[24] a powerful drama tapping the fount of human experience and "saying something of something."[25] This is the final master key to understanding.[26]

Let us reflect a little more on this master key, for like that story form it provides another site of competitive advantage for *The Cockfight* over Geertz's own rival texts. According to another 1920s formalist, Boris Tomashevsky, "The separate sentences of a work of literature combine to produce a definite structure unified by a general

thought or theme."[27] This theme of a work is analytically distinct from its plot. If a plot concerns concrete characters, actions, and chronology, the theme is what the item of literature is "about." For Tomashevsky, a problem faced by all authors is to identify and key into something that makes their work interesting. The greatest works of art, he argues, must connect to the big-ticket issues such as love, death, and fate. "The more significant and long-lasting the theme, the better the guarantee of the life of the work," he writes.[28] If there is appeal in generality, Tomashevsky argues that we cannot move straightaway to abstraction and universality. How many, we might ponder, enjoy reading Hegel? Something more tangible is required to anchor the treatment of themes in our consciousness. He writes,

> Enlarging the limits of 'reality' we may reach 'general human' interests . . . which are the fixed bases of the entire course of human history. Yet these general human interests must be developed through some kind of specific material, and if that material is not relevant to reality, the formulation of the problem may prove 'uninteresting.'[29]

Here Tomashevsky arrives at a similar conclusion to another early structuralist, Emile Durkheim, who had noted in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that even that most powerful of ideas, the sacred, required fixing in the concrete world of totems, classifications, and material culture.[30]

Geertz's other great essays answer a question along the lines of "How should we academics think about culture?" This is a lesser theme, and a somewhat scholastic one that smacks of idea mongering. Furthermore these writings on ideology and religion as cultural systems and on thick description as method lack a coherent body of anchoring thematic material with Geertz plucking illustrations from the left, right, and center as required. Looking to *The Cockfight*, however, we can see an object lesson in structural poetics. Without losing sight of his ambiguous object, in the course of the essay, Geertz works out and up from the ridiculous to the sublime, from the small world of the penis and the male ego to the existential and imaginative kingdom of Lear. The cockfight is not a sport or amusement just for the Balinese but rather a drama of cosmic proportions or what Geertz knowingly calls a "paradigmatic human event."[31] Furthermore this progress builds toward universality through repeated reference to visible materiality and human activity: the police raid, the penis, the betting, the spurs, blood, crowd agitation, and familiar works of western culture. If it is ironic that Geertz, the great champion of the local, comes to hold our attention by building the cockfight into an indicator of something great and mysterious and universal, it is fitting that the particular is the means to achieve this. Yet we should not write this conjunction off as a quirk or contradiction. Rather there is a pattern here that is entirely consistent with formalist theory; big themes developed with concrete materials make for compelling storytelling.

Structuralism is condemned by writers such as Geertz as an approach that can deal with meaning only in a cold and analytic way. This is not really fair. Insights into subjectivity and emotion were made long before the poststructural turn brought with it notions of subject position and desire. Consider Boris Tomashevsky again. Freely and without duress he states that the "emotions a work of art excites are its chief means of holding attention"[32] and notes that "the function of sympathy is

primarily to direct interest and maintain attention—to call forth, as it were, the personal interest of the reader in the development of the theme."[33] In *The Cockfight*, Geertz works subtly to establish the object of his investigation as a deeply meaningful clue to our common humanity that is deserving of empathic reading. Because this cathexis is a required component of his mission, we are not presented with the alternative vision of a sadistic and cruel act. The reading of the cockfight as "primitive, backward and unprogressive"[34] is assigned to what he describes perhaps unjustly as Indonesia's hypocritical, puritanical metropolitan elite. Emotions are enlisted in other ways too. In building his theme, Geertz makes reference to triggers that his Daedalus-type model reader would have found familiar and lovable. Dickens and Hogarth, Shakespeare and string quartets, provide a series of iconic anchors that make an exotic activity both important and endearing to a particular kind of refined sensibility.

We should also note that in *The Cockfight* emotions are not just evoked but also built up toward a climax. Working through the genres, from farce to realism on toward myth, Geertz generates, or simulates, a sense of spiritual awakening in the reader. This sentimental education is refracted into his authorial persona. In the first sentence, he famously presents himself on a human scale as "malarial and diffident," but by the last, he is inviting us to participate in something bigger than our own pathetic lives. At the start of the book, he looks like a bumbling idiot and outsider. This is a passive actor who is caught up in events that he cannot control and experiences that he cannot understand. By the end, he has been initiated into great mysteries that he can divulge to his audience. He has become like the Pied Piper of Hamelin charming his readers to join in the magnificent parade of interpretation and using words such as "we" and "us" to invite participation in his enterprise. This structurally necessary transformation of selves through the text is, I believe, an intimate and furtive accomplice of the work's more intellectual appeal.

So far our formalist approach has given us quite a bit of insight into the attraction of this one item by Geertz. We have seen how those basic imperatives for effective storytelling (a, solve a puzzle; b, connect to a big theme; and c, enlist emotional support) have been combined to create an appealing and interesting product. Yet if there has been analytic progress, perhaps this has come at the price of hermeneutic oversimplification. It might reasonably be objected that *The Cockfight* is a work that is much more subtle than a folktale or detective story or bildungsroman and that our analysis should reflect this complexity. Formalism can, I believe, allow us to take some steps in this direction. Victor Shklovsky, for example, makes an important distinction between the story and the novel. The story is more firmly end oriented. We know when it has completed its action or attained some kind of closure through the solution of an initiating riddle. Novels, he claims, often lack this terminus, and it seems as if they can go on indefinitely—hence the ending of *War and Peac*e can take place several years after Napoleon's defeat. Drawing on Shklovsky's contrast, Boris Eichenbaum notes that "an enormous role is played in the novel by the techniques of retardation." That is to say the author drags things out, whereas in the short story, they move rapidly to a dramatic and total conclusion such as "a bomb dropped from an airplane."[35] There is something of a languid, expansive, and novelistic quality in *The Cockfight*, the sense that we have an ever-growing epic in miniature and not

a folktale. If Geertz does manage to end with the Shklovskian trope of "similarity revealed" at the end of his chapter (the cockfight is like this, like that), this is not the finger snapping, ah-ha resolution of some earlier riddle. There is no sense that we have circled back to the beginning of the piece. Rather this is an hmmm moment, an outcome that emerges organically in the process of telling—and it is a notable dimension of the essay's greatness.

As Shklovsky explains, some of literature's highest achievements came from just such manipulations and elaborations of the most basic story form into the more complex and extended novel structure. For example, in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, a series of initially parallel plots start to turn and cross. This allows diverse riddles to come together into a pattern, with false explanations progressively revealed and rejected. Furthermore Shklovsky notices that the

> mystery novel permits the author to incorporate into a work large passages of local-color description which, while serving the goal of retarding the plot, themselves undergo pressure from the plot and are perceived as belonging to the work of art.[36]

The Cockfight stands out from routine social science and from Geertz's other essays by virtue of just such an organization. The former are too simple in form to be great writings, and the latter are essentially programmatic manifestos telling us how we should think. *The Cockfight* leads us to a new way of thinking, but it does so in ways that are not entirely amenable to reason. In *The Cockfight*, we have a layered series of clues and candidate solutions in the field, a good deal of local color that holds back the denouement, and finally that inspiring and universal master key to understanding that resolves somewhat inconclusively. This is a novel in miniature.

More can also be said on the appealing and complex qualities of Geertz's prose style, voice, and treatment that might move us away from a simplistic reading of *The Cockfight* as simply a mix-and-bake confection. The formalist approach does not require us to fix each work as an immutable product of a timeless genre. Rather it offers a resource for looking at change. "It is precisely against the background of tradition that innovation is conceived," wrote Roman Jakobson a decade or so after the founding texts by Shklovsky, Tomashevsky, and Eichenbaum. He suggested that it was formalist studies that had first "brought to light" that a "simultaneous preservation of tradition and breaking away from tradition form the essence of every new work of art."[37] A touchstone for Jakobson here was a telling analysis from 1925 of the short stories of O. Henry by Eichenbaum.[38] Eichenbaum notes the masterly way in which the then-popular writer played with the conventions of the short story, often communicating more intimately with the reader through ironic asides as he told his tale. This movement away from panoptical narration toward self-parody and mutual awareness of pretense was understood by Eichenbaum as a prelude to creative regeneration. Jakobson[39] further observed that more personal forms of production such as "letters, diaries, notebooks, [and] travelogues" can often play a role in effecting such shifts by incorporating stylistic elements denied to more legitimate literary products.

There is something of all this in *The Cockfight* too. Appearing in *Daedalus* rather than in a more disciplinary anthropology journal of its day, *The Cockfight* was able

to display aspects of what Jakobson[40] called the "transitional genre." Writing just as cultural anthropology was surrendering its pretensions to objectivity, Geertz takes advantage of this more literary forum to sail close to the winds of aestheticism, relativism, and subjectivism. For all his claims to knowledge, there is that informal and provisional O. Henryesque feel to the writing. As he inscribes himself in the text with his irreverent and confessional prelude Geertz might be understood as doing more than hallmarking his own insider status with the Balinese[41]; he was also signaling the breakdown of a defunct form of conventional positivist ethnography. Even when he makes his grand interpretative gestures toward the end of the piece, there is something of the fireside chat in the air. Looked at as the product of a transitional genre, *The Cockfight* is far from being panoptical and authoritarian as is generally claimed. It has a certain personal and antiauthoritarian quality, and this feeds in turn into that unusually novelistic, slightly open-ended puzzle resolution. At once confident and unsure of itself, in decoding the cockfight it sits on the fence and has an elusive way. *The Cockfight* has a meaning, but not one we can easily fix. It is "saying something of something," but exactly what is a little hard to say precisely because Geertz insists those turtles go all the way down. And so the writer's voice plays out the claim from the essay on "thick description" that there is no final resting place for interpretation, for "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete," and "the more deeply it goes, the less complete it is."[42]

I argued earlier that there was a puzzle-solving quality to *The Cockfight* that offered an attractive structure. We can now see that this analysis is not quite correct. If Geertz proposes a solution, he is also opening things up. As its very title suggests, "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is really a provisional and programmatic sketch. If it is a pivotal demonstration of interpretation, it is not one bringing the satisfactions of tight narrative closure. Much like a postmodern detective story it is a distribution of clues and tentative readings of clues but without a definitive matrix holding them together. As Jeffrey Alexander[43] noted long ago, we end up with lists and not a theory.

The Balinese cockfight began Geertz's chapter as an ambiguous artifact and ended it in much the same way as a jumbled movement of parallel themes whose vanishing point of congress is always somewhere over the horizon. Much the same can be said of the textual *Cockfight*. Geertz's essay is in a sense the analogue or palimpsest of the cockfight itself. As he himself notes, and without any apparent sense of irony, "art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display."[44] He too produced an artifact, an allegory for the human condition more generally "saying something of something" and saying it in a particular way. By conjuring great themes, enlisting solidaristic emotions, and offering readings that are now tentative, next elusive, and sometimes emphatic, *The Cockfight* gives us anxious readers two ambiguous artifacts for the price of one—the activity of the Balinese and the text through which we come to imagine it. This, as much as anything else, has assured immortality. As continuing vigorous debate testifies no two people can quite agree on what either cockfight means or where one ends and the other begins, and that perhaps is the magic. Freud[45] noted in his neglected study of the Moses by Michelangelo at the tomb of Pope Julius II that objects that are "unsolved riddles to our understanding" have a "magical appeal." He was repeatedly

attracted to the artwork because he could only go so far in interpreting the puzzling posture of Moses himself. At a certain point, the clues ran out. With the Balinese cockfight, we have something analogous to this fusion of mystery and charisma. There is a problematic referent, a problematic text, and a problematic relationship between them. It is this Moebius strip of connecting ambiguities that has locked in *The Cockfight* as a puzzling, iconic, and contested surface for inquiry. We start with a factual claim, but as we track its edge, we find a mimetic textual conjuring, which refers in turn to the real for validity, and then we find we have returned to our starting place.

For Geertz, the effort toward universalizing knowledge was tainted by the association with structuralism. He writes of Lévi-Strauss as the producer of an "infernal culture machine" and of his method as perhaps a "sleight of hand"[46] that "annuls history, reduces sentiment to a shadow of the intellect, and replaces the particular minds of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind in us all."[47] Likewise functionalism and psychoanalysis were flawed. Only a method of close hermeneutic reading could attend to "substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them."[48] True enough, there are risks to grand theory. Yet what I have been suggesting is that a more modest and flexible structuralism might help us to explain the particular as much as the general. The approach taken here avoids the sins of structuralism identified by Geertz that were briefly reviewed earlier. I do not identify a particularly coherent cultural system in *The Cockfight.* Nor do I reify it as the product without authorship. Furthermore my explanation for *The Cockfight*'s cultural force does not reside in the substitution of a formal equivalent for a grounded psychological process. Indeed if there is a flaw in the analysis, it runs the other way. Geertz himself jumps from his hermeneutic exegesis to presumptions on how the Balinese "read" or experience the cockfight.[49] Albeit with the backing of theory, I too have argued that particular traits of *The Cockfight* account for its attractive effects upon the subjectivity of scholarly readers. At the end of the day, this remains a hypothesis in need of validation. Nevertheless, the structural analysis, albeit as primitive as the Wright brothers' wing, provides modestly effective hermeneutic lift. It has moved us some few yards toward the analysis of meaning and experience and not just form. I have been able to talk of emotions, ambiguities, and textures. Readers will search in vain for diagrams with boxes and arrows or lists of binary oppositions.

Of course these features internal to the text do not explain everything we might wish to ask. We might reflect a little on the wider issue: Why Geertz? As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, here we might refer to his talent—whether manifest as eloquence, intelligence, knowledge, or wisdom—and to his institutional centrality. Perhaps in the early 1970s, there were a number of people saying similar things. A counterfactual *Cockfight* from different pen might have failed as a cultural performance, even if it exhibited similar structural properties. Monet painted just a little better than Bonnard. Some people tell a better story. We must also note how intellectual shifts subsequent to the writing of *The Cockfight* worked to its adaptive advantage. The environment of ideas changed in fortuitous ways for this particular mutation of Geertz's hermeneutics. In the early 1970s, the essays on religion and ideology as cultural systems were influential and much read in graduate school.

Within a few years, they began to look dated. They were a coded engagement with Parsonian systems theory and with the model of pattern variables. By the mid-1980s, Parsons was an irrelevance to all but a handful of systems theorists, many of them in places such as Germany, not Chicago or Princeton. These papers began to look as if they were tilting at windmills; worse at windmills that no longer stood. By contrast, as we have noted, *The Cockfight* was a transitional product that had an eye to the future as well as the past. As postpositivist and poststructural cultural theory moved forward and as the cultural turn started to approach its first apex, it became more, not less, central. It was an exemplar of another way of doing things, and whether read as a positive or negative one, it was propelled to the center of the attention space by virtue of its themes, concerns, and sensibilities—and indeed those entrenched and studied ambiguities. The essay on "thick description" also had the comparative benefit of this trend, a status amplified by the widespread myth that it lays out some general methodological principles exemplified in *The Cockfight*.[50] Finally, the subject matter of the paper was congruent with the interest in popular culture and everyday life that was central to the fast-rising cultural studies field. When no longer read as exotic ethnographic material, *The Cockfight* could provide a transposable template for writing about pool games, biker culture, football hooliganism, DJ-ing . . . in short, anything that was competitive, risky, transgressive, and expressive in some combination. Geertz had legitimated writing on the cockfight with reference to Shakespeare and Beethoven; now those uncomfortable with the idea of a Western canon could justify and think through their everyday, lowbrow materials with reference to the humble Balinese.

But let us give the last word at this point of my essay to the formalists rather than to the intellectual historians. Long ago Boris Tomashevsky observed, "The greater the talent of the author, the more difficult it is to resist the emotional directives, the more convincing the work."[51] *The Cockfight* confirms this insight. Its intuitive and intellectual appeal lies in more than a demonstrated mastery of data and interpretation. Form matters, even for a Prospero. Geertz used his partly mannered, partly instinctive talent for writing to conjure just once a perfect storm for iconicity in which structure, theme, voice, and emotion briefly touched.

THE AMBIGUOUS LEGACY OF GEERTZ

Having concluded our analysis of the structure and triumph of *The Cockfight*, we have arrived at a point where we can tell a story about the broader implications of both Geertz's text and my analysis for the direction and destiny of cultural sociology. Of course we own a large debt to Clifford Geertz. He opened up space for the cultural turn by demonstrating more clearly and persuasively than anyone before that social action should be considered as embedded in an implicit cultural text. In a way, he pulled off what Paul Ricoeur, following Dilthey, had only been able to demonstrate in the abstract. If Ricoeur was the greater theorist, Geertz was a better communicator—particularly to those without training in philosophical discourse. In both senses of the phrase, he "led by example." As I suggested in some passages above, this was important because the concrete plays a pivotal role in embedding ideas in the collective conscience—in this case that of an intellectual

community. Furthermore in pushing away from Parsons and Lévi-Strauss, Geertz made it acceptable for social science interpretation to become more fluid, sensitive to nuance and to the sensual surface textures of social life. The result was the opening up of a less wooden and self-consciously "scientific" mode of inquiry and writing, one that could better capture the emotive, ironic, fleeting, and fragmentary qualities of our experience. Finally, we might note that Geertz, like Victor Turner, developed an understanding of culture as the domain of the performative, expressive, and enacted. This introduced agency and contingency back into cultural theory, taking meaningful social life as an accomplishment rather than as a fait accompli. Now outcomes needed to be placed back on the agenda.

Yet there was a cost to this triumph for cultural inquiry. Geertz threw a snowball at the mountain of convention and thereby started an avalanche. Even the great interpreter could not control the direction of the subsequent relentless cascade. Ironies and unintended consequences abounded. He had made a critique of positivism: the vacuum was filled by relativistic standpoint epistemologies. He had argued that valid interpretation was difficult: others pushed the envelope, suggesting it was impossible. Geertz had shown that writing was important: scholars started to fixate on this, turning their attention to the study of representations. Geertz soon joined the throng with a brilliant book on style in anthropological writing, taking this too as a mode of performance.[52] By the early 1980s, the leading edge of cultural anthropology was a zone of crippling epistemological uncertainty, the malaise compounded by the emotional pressures of postcolonial guilt. Scholarship turned inward upon itself and (contra Geertz's original intent) became more, not less, theoretical. The writings of colonialist anthropologists could be explained away as the product of the political and economic situations in which they were embedded. The lesson could be all too easily extended to culture tout court—it was a reflection of power, not aesthetics or some quest for meaning.

Geertz had brilliantly insisted that culture was everywhere. For him, it was pervasive, ineffable, and irreducible—the point of origin of social life. A dozen years after the publication of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, this somewhat rich and complex vision had been passed over, to be replaced by a smorgasbord of offerings that saw culture as dependent and derivative. Then Geertz himself became cannon fodder. Far from being a sensitive and respectful observer engaged in a complex hermeneutical dialogue with other cultures, he was taken to be an imperialist observer and textual conjurer willfully imposing his arrogant ethnographic authority on subordinate peoples. What had gone wrong?

The fateful mistake was that Geertz rejected structuralism. As we have seen, Geertz's vision was of culture as local, flexible, and nuanced. It is but a short step from reading culture as flexible to seeing it as spineless and from reading it as local and nuanced to taking cultural analysis to be incompatible with broader agendas aimed at building transposable theory. The aestheticism of his approach did not lend itself to visions of a robust and self-supporting cultural system à la Lévi-Strauss but of feathers of meaning blown hither and thither by the winds of external social forces. In retrospect, the colonization and conquest of Geertz by the reductionist programs looks inevitable. Structuralism in his day, of course, was not without its own flaws. There could be the abstraction, aloofness, and grandiosity in its visions

that Geertz accurately skewered. Yet it also had virtues, which he might have well noticed. By using the formalists on Geertz's masterwork, I did not intend to ridicule or wrong-foot him. Rather the intent in this inquiry has been to suggest that structuralism might have more to offer than he cared to admit. If even sensitive cultural products written by a dedicated antiformalist can be shown to have a skeletal foundation, then perhaps understanding these anatomical regularities will improve rather than diminish our interpretative grasp. Looked at one way, the project of this chapter has been to analyze meaning's DNA and to build a sense of order back into Geertz's fleeting and experiential view of culture.[53]

How do we bring about this mixture of oil and water? Perhaps others see it differently, but my understanding is that Geertz offers a powerful inducement toward the refinement of the interpretative sensibility, draws attention to the cracks and fissures, pauses, and elisions in social life, and provides the model for a more subtle or suasive mode of academic writing. His is a light touch. There should be an effort toward the faithful tracking of the modes of culturally mediated experience, to the ways of feeling and of being human in any given here and now. This is a level of telling that is something more public and shared than a phenomenology, less abstracted and mathematical than a grand theory. It is perhaps not so very different from what we find in the product of the great novelists as they simultaneously represent and interpret the sensibilities and obsessions of particular times and places. From structuralism, we can take a raft of core analytic insights that have stood the test of time and proven themselves in the field: binary opposition and code, narrative and genre, hero and villain, plot and character, metaphor and metonym, purity and pollution, and so forth. If at first sight rather primitive, these have proven to be excellent scaffolding from which to construct solid and workable models of the cultural realm as a "culture-structure"—one that can and of logical necessity must stand on its own two feet. Such concepts offer a practicable way to make a first cut at the way that meanings play themselves out in discursive fields, public scandals, ritual crises, media events, and so forth. Put in terms that our statistically competent colleagues will understand, this kind of crude blocking out allows us to mop up quite a lot of the variance with considerable parsimony. It rescues us from the perils of naive psychology and explanatory subjectivism. Furthermore it also allows research findings to cumulate rather than scatter. We can predict what we will find in particular settings, which outcomes go with which cultural resolutions, and so move cultural sociology more closely into alignment with disciplinary norms about inferential reasoning and generalizable knowledge. It is vital, however, that this primitive architecture of meaning comes to life. Rather as the sculptor polishes up and rubs down the bronze, animation only arrives with attention to the delicate surface of cultural life. This, more than anything else, is why we need Clifford Geertz.

Some things, sadly, cannot be taught. Few are as skilled as Clifford Geertz when it comes to perception and this kind of life-giving interpretation. The great tragedy of his hermeneutics is that it is in many ways a personal gift. Like most scholars, he developed and justified a way of seeing and doing that played to his own strengths. The ability to read and write culture is not evenly distributed, and the nonsystematic method and style pioneered by Geertz is somewhat elusive and intuitive. As with physical beauty, it can be cultivated but only up to a point: It cannot be passed on by

the numbers nor given from one to another; it is neither egalitarian nor democratic at its fundament. So if much contemporary cultural sociology looks more structural than hermeneutic, this arguably says more about talent than about ambition. Still, if it manages to appear somewhat structural and somewhat hermeneutic, this could well be for a good reason.

NOTES

An earlier and slightly different version of this chapter appeared in *Cultural Sociology* 2, 2: 169–86. There I was more particularly concerned with the relationship of Geertz to the Yale Strong Program in cultural sociology.

1. Geertz, Clifford. 1973a. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York. Basic Books.; Geertz, Clifford. 1973d. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" pp. 412–53 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.
2. Geertz, Clifford. 1968. *Islam Observed*. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press.
3. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1984. *Theoretical Logic in Sociology, Vol. 4. The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Geertz, Clifford. 1973b. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture" pp. 3–30 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. p. 10.
5. Ibid., p. 18.
6. Ibid., p. 11.
7. Ibid., p. 25.
8. Ibid., p. 11.
9. Ibid., p. 14.
10. Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1962. *La pensée sauvage*. Paris. Plon.
11. Barthes, Roland. 1968. *Elements of Semiology*. New York. Hill and Wang.
12. Clifford, James. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority" *Representations* 1, 2: 118–46; Crapanzano, Vincent. 1986. "Hermes' Dilemma: the Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description" pp. 51–76 in James Clifford and George Marcus, ed., *Writing Culture*. Berkeley. University of California Press.
13. Alexander, Jeffrey. 1987. *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II*. New York. Columbia University Press.
14. When presenting earlier versions of this chapter, I was showered with very useful suggestions on later and more sophisticated structuralist scholars and literary critics who could help to explain this or that aspect of Geertz I had identified—ambiguity, irony, subject positions, and so forth. To make use of these authors would not doubt improve our grasp of how *The Cockfight* works, providing a fuller explanation of its properties as text and message. However, to pull out these more recent resources would be counterproductive as an intellectual strategy, given that the deeper aim of this chapter is not chiefly to explain *The Cockfight* but rather to challenge Geertz's vision of structuralism. Doing this with Stone Age tools is hard work, and this is precisely the point. If these flint arrowheads and axes from the early twentieth century can make some incisive cuts into a sophisticated, self-aware, and complex thinker, then we have serious grounds for a rethinking on the relative merits of structuralism and hermeneutics. The Titanic was sunk by nothing more complex than an iceberg, the Lusitania by a submarine. Thanks to a low-tech demise, the Titanic endures as an object lesson. Do you remember that film about the Lusitania?
15. Geertz 1973d, p. 419.

16. Ibid., p. 417.
17. Ibid., p. 419.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 420.
20. Ibid., pp. 423–4.
21. Ibid., p. 436.
22. Ibid., p. 437.
23. Ibid., p. 434.
24. Ibid., p. 448.
25. Ibid.
26. I cannot resist pointing out here that this explanatory move is entirely characteristic of no other person than that bête noire Claude Lévi-Strauss. His great myth analyses of Asdiwal, Oedipus, and so forth also culminate in statements to the effect that these are opaque metameditations upon the mysteries, contradictions, and ambiguities of life. Ironically Geertz's flight from structuralism has turned into a run around the block—and this has brought him back to the French master's street corner stall.
27. Tomashevsky, Boris. 1965. "Thematics" pp. 61–95 in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, ed., *Russian Formalist Criticism.* Lincoln, NB. University of Nebraska Press. pp. 62–3.
28. Ibid., p. 64.
29. Ibid.
30. Durkheim, Emile. 1912. *Les formes elémentaires de la vie religieuse.* Paris. Alcan.
31. Geertz 1973d, p. 450.
32. Tomashevsky 1965, p. 65.
33. Ibid., p. 66.
34. Geertz 1973a, p. 414.
35. Eichenbaum, Boris. 1971 [1925]. "O. Henry and the Theory of the Short Story" pp. 227–70 in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, ed., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Cambridge, MA. MIT Press. p. 231.
36. Ibid., p. 226.
37. Jakobson, Roman. 1971 [1935]. "The Dominant" pp. 82–7 in Matejka and Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics.*
38. Eichenbaum 1971.
39. Jakobson 1971.
40. Ibid.
41. As noted in Clifford 1983.
42. Geertz 1973b, p. 29.
43. Alexander 1987.
44. Geertz 1973d, p. 451.
45. Freud, Sigmund. 1955 [1914]. "The Moses of Michelangelo" pp. 211–36 in James Strachey, ed., *Sigmund Freud Standard Edition*. Vol. 13. London. Hogarth Press. pp. 211, 213.
46. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "The Cerebral Savage" pp. 345–59 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
47. Ibid., p. 355.
48. Geertz 1973d, p. 453.
49. Ibid., p. 450.
50. *The Cockfight* exhibits none of the formal qualities of "thick description," that is showing multiple, situated, local interpretations of an event, enabling people to detect true from parodic gestures, and so forth. It is better described as an exercise in

literary criticism applied to human action. The myth has arisen due to intellectual laziness, for the most part among textbook writers who tend to pair the two essays, taking one as an illustration of the other in action.

51. Tomashevsky 1965, p. 90.
52. Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press.
53. See also Alexander, Jeffrey, and Philip Smith. 2001. "The Strong Program in Cultural Theory: Elements of Structural Hermeneutics" pp. 135–50 in J. Turner, ed., *Handbook of Social Theory*. New York. Kluwer Academic Publishers.

CHAPTER 4

On Not Doing Systems

Joseph Errington

In 2002, Arun Micheelsen published an interview with Clifford Geertz under a title taken from a remark in his book *Available Light*: "I don't do systems."[1] Micheelsen asked Geertz about this statement in light of his influential articles on cultural "systems" of religion, ideology, common sense, and so on. Geertz replied that his recurring use of the term could be taken as evidence of Talcott Parsons' durable influence on him during his graduate work at Harvard.

In 2004, Geertz opened his James Frazer Lecture at Cambridge University—"Shifting Aims, Moving Targets: On the Anthropology of Religion"—by citing a "large and expanding set of precise and powerful speculative instruments . . . in the human sciences." These, he said, had brought anthropology, especially the anthropology of religion, into "the conceptually more complex and self-conscious context of contemporary linguistics, literary criticism, semiotics, psychology, sociology, and, most especially, philosophy."[2] He singled out four major figures who "seem to have, in their several ways, started . . . off . . . analysis of what, simply to have a covering term, we can call 'meaning systems,' or, as I came to prefer, 'cultural systems.'" These were Charles Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Gottlob Frege, and Roman Jakobson, all influential precisely for universalist, abstract, rigorously systematic approaches to semiosis and representation.

Perhaps Geertz made this remark *pour étonner les Anglais*, but what seems a striking dissonance or ambivalence might also illustrate Geertz's broader argument that meaning (here, of the word "system") is intrinsically loose and malleable, because construal of meaning is always situated and context dependent. Then we should interpret his use of "cultural system" and "meaning system" rather as Potter Stewart said he used the word "pornography": as a label not explicitly defined by requisite features, but grounded in a contextually valid intuition.

The Frazer lecture also showed that Geertz learned another important lesson from another of his Harvard teachers, Clyde Kluckhohn: being an anthropologist is having a license to poach. Geertz poached successfully enough, in fact, to make anthropology a major destination for poachers from other parts, which is one reason I open this essay with one terse remark. I will try to frame it to develop an angle of

vision on what might be distinctively anthropological about Geertz's interpretive style, particularly the powerful textualist dynamic he brought to ethnography.

I do this in three quick expository steps. First, I review the "interpretive turn" as Geertz introduced it to anthropology, and with an eye to his use of hermeneutic writings more directly involved with the question of symbolic systems. Then I consider "text," "culture," and "system" as terms which figure into distinctively anthropological styles of research, especially the dialectic of estrangement and intimacy (as Webb Keane calls it) Geertz thematized in his antiscientistic writings. Finally, I bring this background to two of Geertz's essays about Balinese culture, arguing by example that he did not need to "do" systems to use ideas of system, heuristically and descriptively, to create narrative and empirical coherence in his texts.

"Dialog" in Interpretive Anthropology

During the 1970s, Geertz drew his colleagues' attention to Paul Ricoeur's essay "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text." Beyond sloganistic uses of its title, this essay provided food for thought about the mediated, textual character of meaningful conduct and ethnographies that describe it. Relevant here, though, is the way Ricoeur's essay developed from his engagement with psychoanalysis and linguistics.

By the early 1960s, Ricoeur had reconstituted and responded to the basic insights of structural linguistics, most specifically in his reflections on the implications of lexical ambiguity for the work of textual interpretation. This followed on from his earlier engagement with psychoanalytic dialog as a privileged locus of symbolic ambiguity. In this way Freud contributed to this Ricoeur's hermeneutic project in ways that make it resonate with Geertz's style of interpretive ethnography. Geertz, like Ricoeur, sought methods, if not theories, that could "preside," in Ricoeur's words, "over an exegesis—that is, over the interpretation of a particular text, *or a group of signs that may be viewed as a text.*"[3]

Anthropological fieldwork, like psychoanalysis, grows from agonistic yet cooperative conditions of "dialog," shot through with questions of intention, ambiguity, and multiple interpretability. It is significant here that Geertz could transpose Ricoeur's inquiry into "social action as text," moving from psychoanalytically to ethnographically framed relationships between self and other.

Though Ricoeur was long engaged with linguists' abstract notions of "system," he clearly rejected a binarist understanding of "dialog" in "social action as text." He pointed to the limits of the "talking head" scenario that Saussure had introduced so as to abstract utterances away from the processes of speech that mediate between active "producer" and passive "receiver." For Ricouer this maximally simple model offered a point of entry to questions of system and event, and Geertz, in turn, articulated an account of the ways actions (like texts) only achieve purpose and meaningfulness when they "slip the psychological moorings" of an actor or an author.

Arguing in this way against privacy theories of meaning, Ricoeur helped Geertz critique, mutatis mutandis, two anthropological understandings of "cultural system" that were influential in the 1960s and 1970s. One emerged as Lévi-Strauss took over the very broadest notions of structure from linguistics to describe the

"primitive mind," although he later acknowledged these analogies to be misguided. More empirical and operationalized was the paradigm of "cognitive anthropology," centered on the premise that language and culture are closely imbricated enough that fine-grained descriptions of the former can guide accounts of the latter. This approach directly incorporated insights into language systems commonly credited to Roman Jakobson, invoked by Geertz in 2004 along with his intellectual ancestor, Saussure.

Geertz, on the other hand, argued that culture was not only intrinsically public, but also relatively autonomous with respect to either language systems or social institutions. Metaphors of text also resonated with the broadly relativist and aesthetic roots of anthropology's Romanticist origins, found also in work by another of his acknowledged ancestors, Edward Sapir.

Geertz had two kinds of influence on the following generation of cultural anthropologists that are worth noting here. One arises from his insistence on the irreducibility of the cultural to the cognitive. This is why ritual, like other aspects of culture, is "not just meaningful but effective because . . . meanings come about in a social rather than a cognitive space, a space in which individuals engage as cocreators of performance and not just as knowers."[4] The other arises from his emphasis on the metatextual reflexivity of ethnography, a reflexivity which becomes apparent when drawing parallels between "dialog" in ethnographic and analytic encounters along lines suggested by Ricoeur. As Michael Lambek, a contemporary ethnographer of spirit possession describes it, "fieldwork" involves

> a hesitant grappling of epistemological horns. If I were much the stronger, the Other would hold no interest for me; if the Other were much the stronger, I would have no independent perspective from which to report. What we create if we are both successful and interested is a mutually comprehensible dialogue, a fusion of horizons, the ground for further conversation, not a unified theory. The potential for self-deception is of course very high.[5]

Lambek may have intended to invoke Wilhelm Dilthey (Ricoeur's predecessor) with the phrase "fusion of horizons." But he uses it to emphasize what is distinctive about the hermeneutic of suspicion in fieldwork, directed at oneself as much as one's interactional and cultural others.

These two remarks help next to reconsider notions of "system," which lost visibility in the midst of a postcolonial crisis of representation that Geertz helped to create. As he attracted new interlocutors with his ethnographic rhetoric of "text," questions of "system" were left on the margins. Now they are worth reconsidering with an eye to distinctively anthropological versions of the dialectic between (symbolic) system and (interactional) event.

Fieldwork and Ethnography, Experience Near and Distant

To recast notions of "culture," "text," and "system" as they figure in anthropological ways of doing research ("fieldwork") and writing ("ethnography"), I return to

affinities between psychoanalytic and anthropological "dialog" noted earlier. These have been clear enough to anthropologists: Clyde Kluckhohn is reported to have said that in both one goes down deep, stays down long, and comes up dirty. Geertz, writing in this vein, refused the ethnographic persona of an impartial, detached scientist, choosing to thematize instead outsidedness as the distinctive, necessary, yet precarious condition of fieldwork.

Lambek's remark above helps to parse "participation/observation," a common label for this work, as it parallels psychoanalytic "dialog." Ricoeur distinguished two semiotic stances or modes of psychoanalytic engagement. When others' doings are intersubjectively transparent or self-evident, I "arrive . . . at understanding of a meaning addressed to me." When conduct is not transparent, it requires a broadly diagnostic stance in order to arrive at "a demystification, a reduction of illusion."[6] Then extrinsic knowledge and categories are needed to construe behavior symptomatically, figured into a context in which understanding is not directly "addressed to me."

Ricoeur's double engagement—with what is self-evident and intersubjectively apparent, or so opaque as to require "a step back"—corresponds to the doubleness of the phrase "participation/observation." "Participation" can be a rubric for what fieldworkers at least aspire to in sustained engagement with cultural otherness: an internalized, practical sense of how others live, along with presupposed categories, goals, and understandings. This reduction of the sense of outsidedness requires the self-transformative work Kluckhohn called "getting dirty": constant self-exposure to the "exotic everyday." "Observation," on the other hand, suggests the nonparticipatory stance of a professional or "permanent" bystander. "Outsidedness" exists as long as fieldworkers share no *umwelt* with others, and construe what they observe with recourse to the kinds of "norms," "rules," "patterns," and so on, that figure in their ethnographic writing. Fieldwork is by its nature unpredictable, as Lambek's comment implies, because it is less culturally bounded than psychoanalysis. Fieldworkers can neither entirely anticipate or control situations in which they must shift between these interpretive stances, nor be sure they have been successfully negotiated.

Geertz's version of this dichotomy used terms poached from another psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut. The anthropologist mediates, Geertz suggested, between what Kohut called the "experience near" and "experience distant." He or she oscillates between what I have distinguished here as meaning "addressed to me" (as participant) and meaning as it appears from a distanced, "demystifying" stance. Anthropologists never either "do science" or "go native," because they can only enter other cultures by deploying, disconfirming, and adjusting their own practical senses, replaying and reframing their experience in the primary genre of anthropological writing, called "field notes."

This dynamic's reflexive ground is worth recasting once more here with terms developed by Webb Keane, an anthropologist of religion whose critical hermeneutic stance owes much to Geertz. Keane argues that ethnography articulates a "dialectic of estrangement and intimacy" that is part of anthropology's "epistemological unconscious."[7] I prefer "estrangement" to what Geertz (after Kohut) called the "experience distant" because it captures better the immediacy of the feelings of immediate (not intimate) uncertainty, puzzlement, and anxiety that are commonplace in

fieldwork. "Intimacy," on the other hand, alludes to the sense of proximity or sharedness that anthropologists seek, but might not find, in the "experientially near" realm of what Alfred Schutz called consociateship. Keane's dialectic of estrangement and intimacy plays out in genres of ethnographic writing as it figures in fieldwork ("participation/observation"), and is mediated textually in field notes.

With these multiple versions of what counts as "dialog" as context, I turn now to the ways that notions of "system" helped Geertz to mediate between the experience near and experience distant in his ethnography.

Interpretation as Ethnography

Consider the ways that notions of "system" can figure, as a matter of practice, in fieldwork and its first written records, prior to the work of writing ethnography. They can help first develop the "demystifying" stances that anthropologists need to develop n order to grasp their surrounds before describing them, day-to-day. Arriving at situated understandings of connectedness between people and events takes intellectual work in which notions of system can have at least a practical role. To write coherently about what they experience and observe, as participant/observers, fieldworkers devise ideas about what in their experience constitutes what Ricoeur called "*. . . a group of signs [that] may be viewed as a text.*"

Field notes are thus not just "experience-distant" catalogs of facts but provisional scripts, written and rewritten, day by day, to help develop (what fieldworkers hope will be) comprehensible, perhaps intimate, dialogs in the future. Field notes, as Geertz took pains to make clear in his famous discussion of Malinowski's diary, require strategies for textually mediating experience somewhere between autobiographical and professional genres of writing.

To suggest that notions of "system" can figure in the making of these "first texts," before ethnographies are written at a greater intellectual, biographical, and generic remove, I offer quick, contrastive readings of two ethnographic essays Geertz wrote, drawing on the same fieldwork. Each tacitly incorporates a distinct notion of "system," and a broadly different hermeneutic stance (in Ricoeur's sense), just as it accounts for a distinct sphere of Balinese life.

"Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali," centered on terms for persons and days, illustrates Geertz's favored strategy of making "key terms" "light up a whole way of going at the world."[8] In other writings he developed parallel accounts of shifts and constancies in meanings of clusters (minimally pairs) of terms across contexts and thematic domains. Two such clusters of terms are at the ethnographic core of "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali." First, there are subclasses of terms used to and for persons: personal names, birth order names, kinship terms, teknonyms, status titles, and public titles. Geertz presents a contrastive sketch of social figures to and for whom these terms are used. It is plausible thanks to a shared understanding that there are transparent social/semiotic relationships between the system's mutually defining elements, on the one hand, and qualities of events and encounters those elements *typically* figure in, on the other. These systems offer a way for Geertz to frame his situated observations and anecdotes drawn from fieldwork. This is a linguistic substrate for a kind of grammar of Balinese interactional life, part of

an experience-distant account of the experience-near domain of "dialog" (recalling Ricoeur).

The other "key terms" in Geertz's account are Balinese names for days and multiple, overlapping weekly cycles. Because these are also presented in a systemic, experience-distant manner, the cultural sphere of temporal duration takes on a kind of semiotic commensurability with the sphere of social personhood. As comparably systemic accounts, then, they come together under the broader hermeneutic profile that allows Geertz to interpret both aspects of Balinese life as blunting the sense of time's passing, and blurring what count for "us" as phenomenologically relevant categories of consociates and contemporaries.

In this account, then, a system-centered hermeneutic (in Ricoeur's sense) frames ethnographic particulars in oppositional and complementary relationships, and then interprets them hermeneutically, as a *"group of signs that may be viewed as a text."* Suitably ethnographized, two kinds of seemingly semantic distinct systems and their seemingly distinct spheres of experience become each other's reference points in an interpretive account of a Balinese version of the human condition.

"Deep play: notes on a Balinese cockfight," Geertz's more famous article on Balinese culture, is heuristically and interpretively grounded in a distinct notion of system. This can be shown by reading the essay's ethnographic core with an eye to influential work by one of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, Victor Turner. Trained in the British tradition of anthropology, Turner analyzed what he called dominant symbols of ritual process, elaborating van Gennep's account of ritual liminality.[9]

Turner argued that dominant symbols are pivotal in rituals because they fuse meanings of two distinct modalities: their bipolar significata (as he called them) are both collective and individual. On the one hand, they are conventional, explicit signifiers of ritually relevant groups and distinctions: social collectives distinguished by gender, generation, descent, and so on. On the other hand,as physical objects they have sensory impact—through their colors, consistencies, shapes—on individuals participating or witnessing ritual action. These qualities endow them with power as highly condensed symbols, in Freud's sense, to set off chains of intrapsychic associations of bodily imagery (blood and semen, milk, spit, genitals, etc.). The power and immediacy of these experiences, especially in dangerous periods of liminality, can fuse the "whole" individual with others in collective ritual action.

Turner's early work, at least, can be read as oriented (in Durkheimian fashion) to questions about the ritual reproduction of social categories. By fusing the social and sensory dimensions of human condition, ritual symbols lend collective representations (in Durkheim's sense) the cathartic force of bodily experience. They enable ritual process to reinforce the very social categories that are dangerously attenuated in ritual's liminal moments.

The way Geertz describes the figure of "the cock" in "Deep Play's" ethnographically dense middle section corresponds broadly to Turner's account of dominant ritual symbols. This section presents correlations Geertz induced in his fieldwork between the size of bets made on fights, and bettors' proximity to owners of cocks as kinsmen in quasi-corporate patrilineal groups (called *dadia*). Geertz in this way portrays "the cockfight" as an arena for playing out agonistic and cooperative

relationships that join individuals as both participants in the event, and as members of *dadia*. Play becomes relatively "deeper" when cocks enter the ring as feathered, ambulatory symbols of relatively larger collectives.

Geertz combines this inductive account with anecdotes and examples to show Balinese males' broadly Freudian preoccupation with their "cocks," and why puns on this word translate so well between English and Balinese. Taken together these two ethnographic dimensions of the work suggest that, *in this section of the essay*, Geertz presents "the cock" as a dominant ritual symbol without framing it in the quasi-Durkheimian manner his account might have allowed. (An ethnographic note worth making here, that Geertz did not, is that ritually important cockfights are traditionally held at the dangerous southwest corners of temples, so as to distract demons when gods are summoned to possess the bodies of their human hosts within.)

It is worth noting, then, that this part of the essay, read on its own, appears to incorporate a system-centered hermeneutic (in Ricoeur's sense). Its coherence depends not on a language-like notion of "system," but a broadly organic sense of part/whole interconnectedness arising when key symbols figure in ritual process but also represent durable institutions. Without some such intuitions about coherence and continuity, Geertz could not have done the work of eliciting the relevant information and recording it, day by day, in the field notes which are the basis of his account. Before this sense of systemic relations became apparent in an ethnography about "them," written for "us," it developed with the sense of coherence Geertz sought and found in the doing of fieldwork. This same coherence licenses, in turn, his framing of the cockfight in a philosophical mode, with Bentham's notion of "Deep Play."

To read "Deep Play" in this way does not require that we consider Geertz a "functionalist" any more than my summary of his essay on Balinese personhood obliges us to consider him a Saussurean structuralist. Taken together, rather, this pair of essays show how different notions of "system" figure as hermeneutically useful means for shaping different kinds of particulars into ethnographic texts. Inscribed in each article is a different interpretive strategy for creating coherence in what Geertz noticed and wrote down about Balinese life.

So too both notions of system mediate the dialectic of estrangement and intimacy noted earlier. This can be seen when the cockfight analysis is reconsidered within the larger narrative that is responsible for "Deep Play's" fame. It begins with an eloquent autobiographical account of ethnographic "breakthrough": when the malarial, diffident, and maximally estranged Geertzes got a lucky (but risky) break, the author gained entrée to Balinese life. Thanks to one cockfight, Geertz achieved the intimacy he needed to observe and participate with others, and so describe accumulate facts and insights about "the cockfight."

After narrating this passage from estrangement to intimacy, and then setting out the ethnographic account discussed above, Geertz meditates in closing on cultural texts, "theirs" and "ours." Here he thematizes his mediating relationship between the Balinese and his readers, suggesting that we read "over his shoulder" as he read "over theirs." This analogy suggests that he is offering readers a version of his own "breakthrough" to intimacy, in textually mediated fashion.

The essay's power and popularity, read in this way, depends not just on ethnographic acuity but its overlapping coherences as an engagement—autobiographical, ethnographic, and philosophical—with cultural otherness. By figuring the cockfight as a kind of "cultural system," he makes the ethnographic core of the essay pivotal for a transition, narrated and performed, from initial estrangement in the field to the intimacy of the text.

On Using Systems

Like the terse remark it glosses at length, this essay might seem a bit passé. Twenty years ago, Geertz had already helped set in motion the critical movement that had thrown "the culture concept" into doubt by the time he gave his Frazer lecture. Thanks in part to Geertz, anthropology had begun to be affected by poachers who had appropriated ideas about culture for other uses in other arenas. Partly as a consequence anthropologists themselves increasingly sought new ethnographic modalities to describe "the cultural" in a fluid, pluritopic world.

But ethnographic work by Geertz that helped shape this movement is worth considering in light of his claim in 2002 not to have "done" cultural systems. I have argued that with this remark Geertz correctly signaled that he was writing against the grain of system-centered theories of culture, But I have also suggested that, as a matter of participant/observer practice, he made instrumental, recurring, sometimes tacit recourse to notions of "system," and that these likewise figured into the text-centered hermeneutic he introduced to his colleagues.

Ricoeur's analogy between social conduct and text helped Geertz because, in an indirect but important way, it brought structural linguistics into engagement with his text-centered approach to culture. Ricoeur helped Geertz to argue that "cultural systems" cannot be autonomous or ontologically distinct because cultural meaning is intrinsically contextual, open-ended, and public. Perhaps this was a lesson Geertz also took from Charles Peirce, one of the four intellectual ancestors he named in the Frazer lecture (but hardly cites in any of his works). Peirce offers one of the clearest (and abstract, almost metaphysical) accounts of "meaning" as intrinsically processual.

Ricoeur's and Kohut's psychoanalytic terms help foreground an instrumental notion of "system," that is, a means for responding to the intellectual and perhaps also existential challenges posed to participant/observers by fieldwork. Fully objectified or not, ideas about systems help the work of creating connections between first person experience and narratives of experience: first as written in field notes, then refigured in distanced, distancing ethnographic writing. In this context Ricoeur and Kohut speak to the uses of "experience-distant" or "diagnostic" stances to rescue (intellectual) coherence from experience.

No inconsistency or tension need exist between the notions of "system" I have read from two of Geertz's ethnographic essays about "Balinese culture." Each has coherence, thanks partly to the sense of "system" that helped transfer experience to field notes, and from field notes into ethnography. So too both notions helped sustain the dialectic of estrangement and intimacy as a constant of the ethnographic enterprise.

If Geertz did not find systems good to *do*, then, he did find them good to *think* for diagnosing and interpreting others' doings. In this way, they serve as what he called in 2004 "precise and powerful *speculative* instruments"[10] on loan from philosophers, semioticians, and linguists. To emphasize their practical utility is not to argue that these "speculative instruments" are only applied (by Geertz or others) at a distance from ethnographic objects. I have argued, to the contrary, that "systems" can figure into different ways of making sense of everyday life, feeding into and shaping the "common sense" anthropologists apply (and often misapply) in the field. This point aligns with Geertz's own argument that "common sense" is a "cultural system": it too figures into the dialectic of estrangement and intimacy, both enabling and misleading until it is bracketed for lack of fit with "their" common sense.

Geertz's argument leads finally, then, to a reflexive conundrum: at the same time "common sense" counts as a "cultural system," ethnographers can only describe cultural systems with recourse to their own common sense. Such reflexive blurrings of lines were common enough at the time Geertz gave his interview, but they had clear foreshadowings in his body of work and insistence that meaning, in life or ethnography, is never entirely consistent or univocal. In this context, "I don't do systems" can be interpreted not just as an assertion within or about his intellectual project, but also as being inscribed with an abiding stance Geertz helped to make a durable, defining part of anthropology.

Notes

Dedicated with respect and affection to Pete Becker, gentle critic of his own field and Geertz's most important linguist interlocutor.

1. Geertz, C. 2000. *Available light*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. x.
2. Geertz, C. 2005 [2004]. Shifting aims, moving targets: on the anthropology of religion. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (11:1). p. 4.
3. Ricoeur, P. 1970. *Freud and philosophy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. p. 8; emphasis mine.
4. Schieffelin, E. L. 1985. Performance and the cultural construction of reality. *American Ethnologist* (12:4). p. 707.
5. Lambek, M. 1993. *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte: local discourses of Islam, sorcery, and spirit possession*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. p. 27.
6. Ricoeur, 1970, p. 27.
7. Geertz, 2005 [2004], p. 59.
8. Geertz, C. 1976. "'From the native's point of view': on the nature of anthropological understanding." In Basso, K. and Selby, H. eds. *Meaning in anthropology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. p. 236.
9. Turner, V. 1967. *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
10. Geertz, 2005 [2004], p. 5; emphasis mine.

Part II

Geertz, Interpretation, and Meaning

CHAPTER 5

Geertzian Irony

Georgia Warnke

In his *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*,[1] Clifford Geertz offers a succinct account of what he learned about anthropology from his graduate student fieldwork. First, "the study of other peoples' cultures . . . involves discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing and to what end they think they are doing it." Second,

> To discover who people think they are, what they think they are doing and to what end they think they are doing it, it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives. This does not involve feeling anyone else's feelings, or thinking anyone else's thoughts, simple impossibilities. Nor does it involve going native, an impractical idea, inevitably bogus. It involves learning how, as a being from elsewhere, with a world of one's own, to live with them.[2]

Geertz also claims that his postgraduate studies of Bali were attempts to show that anthropology is an interpretive enterprise or, in other words, "that kinship, village form, the traditional state, calendars, law, and most infamously, the cockfight could be read as texts," by which he meant "enacted statements of . . . particular ways of being in the world."[3] Like Peter Winch, Charles Taylor, and others in the 1960s and 1970s, Geertz was concerned to separate the notion of interpretation from any association with ideas of empathy or conceptions of understanding a culture as a "native." A "working familiarity with the frameworks of meaning" within which others live their lives does not involve either transforming ourselves into them or resocializing ourselves as "natives" from the bottom up, as if we had not already been socialized and did not already have a world of our own. At the same time, Geertz has no interest in becoming a positivist or supposing that anthropology can do without a semiotics or interpretation of meaning. Nevertheless, it is not altogether clear what Geertz thinks an interpretation of meaning *does* involve. Nor is it clear that his statements about his anthropological practice are entirely consistent with one another or with that practice itself. Indeed, although he claims that

anthropology involves both learning to live with others and reading actions and practices as texts, these seem to be distinct enterprises. When we read a text, we are presumably trying to make sense of it, but we are not trying to learn how to live with its characters or its author. Conversely, learning how to live with others does not necessarily involve making sense of them. As those with children know, we can live with others without possessing the least idea of "who they think they are, what they think they are doing and to what end they think they are doing it." What, then, is anthropological interpretation as Geertz conceives of it, and is his conception of it consistent with his own anthropological practice? I want to begin to try to answer these questions by looking at his famous 1972 account of cockfighting in a Balinese village in 1958.[4]

Interpreting Interpretation

According to Geertz, if we are to understand Balinese cockfighting, we need to attend to two aspects of it: the cockfight itself and the two forms of betting involved in it. The cockfight itself consists, Geertz says, of "one chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits."[5] What gives this fight meaning is the two kinds of bets that go along with it, those in the center between the participants and their allies and those on the periphery between spectators. Although the latter bets involve short or long odds, the former are always even. Moreover, as Geertz understands these center bets, the task is to make them as large as possible. Doing so helps to guarantee, first, that the cocks will be evenly matched and excellent fighters and, second, that the outcome will be unpredictable. Very little is to be gained monetarily in the center bets while a great deal can potentially be lost. What then is their point?

Geertz claims that it is not that the Balinese do not care about money and are therefore willing to bet great amounts of it on matches between evenly matched competitors, the outcomes of which are unpredictable. Nor, however, he insists, are the bets simply irrational. Instead, cockfights and the betting they involve are affairs of honor. In them, the Balinese status hierarchy is rendered as a fight between cocks, where cocks have every bit of the double meaning they have in English. As Geertz writes,

> The cocks may be surrogates for their owners' personalities . . . but the cockfight is—or more exactly is made to be—a simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of cross-cutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups—villages, kin groups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, "castes"—in which its devotees live. And as prestige, the necessity to affirm it, defend it, celebrate it, justify it, and just plain bask in it . . . is perhaps the central driving force in the society, so also . . . is it of the cockfight.[6]

As it turns out, the cockfight is akin to poetry. The Balinese use it to express and see themselves because the status hierarchy that is so much of their society is enacted and reenacted in it. One cannot gain or lose actual social status through the cockfights. Nevertheless, they present a fleeting glimpse of what either would be like. Moreover, for a society that for the most part favors attributes of calmness and

composure, the cockfight allows for the feeling, expression, and display of all the emotions that attend success and failure. Geertz writes,

> What [the cockfight] does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, *Lear* and *Crime and Punishment* do: it catches up these themes—death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance—and ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature.[7]

In the years since Geertz's article on cockfighting was written, we have become more circumspect about referring to such things as essential natures, of course. Yet what is interesting about Geertz's article is the limitations it implicitly puts on interpretation, limitations that arguably not only assume a critique of essentialism but also employ that critique to undermine the very possibility of the account of Balinese cockfighting that he offers. The way in which Geertz works his way toward his understanding of Balinese cockfighting makes use of Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky, as well as Bentham, Aesop, and Auden. These references are part of a non-Balinese, Western tradition. Nonetheless, they help Geertz come to his interpretation of what the Balinese cockfight is, and they do so by supplying a direction for what its meaning might be or, put otherwise, a context within which to situate it. Geertz can make sense out of the cockfight because his literary and cultural tradition provides him with an orientation to it. Yet despite his appeal to familiar references, he also seems to think that Balinese and Western traditions remain firmly separate. "Attending cockfights and participating in them is," he says, "*for the Balinese*, a kind of sentimental education."[8] Moreover, he writes that

> if . . . we go to see *Macbeth* to learn what a man feels like after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul, Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof, a kind of moral autocosm, feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted and driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low.[9]

On the one hand, then, Geertz uses Western texts to get at the meaning of what he sees as a Balinese text. On the other hand, he implicitly presumes that Western texts work only for Westerners and that Balinese texts work only for the Balinese. While we go to *King Lear* to learn about death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, and chance, the Balinese go to a cockfight. While we are interested in finding out what it feels like to have won a kingdom and lost one's soul, the Balinese are interested in finding out what it feels like to be driven to the extremes of fury and then either to triumph or to be brought totally low. Yet if it is really the case that we have to go to *King Lear* to learn what the Balinese learn at a cockfight, it would be unclear how Geertz could have arrived at his insight that cockfighting constitutes a way of dealing with the themes with which he thinks Shakespeare's play deals as well. It would also be unclear how cockfighting can be a form of sentimental education, since the idea of this kind of education is one Geertz takes from his own, not a Balinese, tradition. In his ethnography of the cockfight, Geertz assumes that his literary and cultural tradition provides a direction for understanding it. In his

statements about this ethnography, however, he insists that his tradition cannot. What *Macbeth* and *King Lear* mean, they mean to Westerners; what a cockfight means, it means to the Balinese. But why should cockfighting be a form of "sentimental education" only for the Balinese? Moreover, why should *Macbeth* teach only Westerners what it feels like to have gained a kingdom and lost one's soul?

In concluding his account of Balinese cockfighting, Geertz notes that exercises in close reading allow one to begin anywhere in a text or a culture and discern the aspect of the text or culture that the starting point reveals. One can stay with one aspect, he says, or compare aspects within a culture.

> One can even compare forms from different cultures to define their character in reciprocal relief. But whatever the level at which one operates . . . the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them.[10]

If we attach this claim to Geertz's earlier references to Shakespeare and others in the Western canon, the composite suggests a kind of Winchean idea of anthropological interpretation. Certain texts and activities in one's own culture are supposed to serve as a relief or foil against which to define the character of similar forms in another.[11] Thus, Christian prayer serves Winch as a foil for understanding Zande rain dances. Like prayer, they express a sense of the contingencies of human existence. Yet Winch never entirely elucidates how this method is meant to work or why Christian prayer should be a better foil for defining the Zande rain dance than, say, Western science, whose value for understanding it he rejects.

The same holds for Geertz. He claims that the practice of cockfighting is a Balinese interpretation of Balinese society. Balinese society thus contains its own interpretation in the practice of cockfighting. He points out that the cockfight may not constitute the only Balinese interpretation of the Balinese status hierarchy and self-regard. He also notes that there may be other Balinese activities that interpret other facets of Balinese society. Nevertheless, if *King Lear* is meant to provide a foil for defining Balinese cockfighting, Geertz does not elucidate how or why it, in particular, should provide this foil instead of, say, *Love's Labours Lost*. Indeed Geertz compounds Winch's problem by making it unclear how either *King Lear* or *Love's Labours Lost* could provide a foil for cockfighting since he also implies that what they say, they say only to the West, and what cockfighting says, it says only to the Balinese.

In his 1973 article "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," which serves as the preface to *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz tries to clarify his notion of anthropological interpretation by elucidating the model of a textual reading that he invokes in his cockfighting article. One can, he says, analyze either the interactions between a Berber chieftain, a Jewish merchant, and a French soldier in 1912 Morocco or those between a provincial French doctor, his adulterous wife, and her "feckless" lover in *Madame Bovary*. The product is the same in both cases, namely, a construction. Moreover, the construction is what Geertz calls a second- and third-order one since "by definition only a 'native' makes first order ones; it's his culture."[12] An anthropological interpretation is thus "our own construction of other people's construction of what they and their compatriots are up to."[13]

Here Geertz suggests that the anthropologist fashions a second-order construction of the Balinese first-order construction of the cockfight or the French, Berber, or Jewish first-order construction of the sheep-stealing incident in Morocco in 1912. Yet clearly Geertz himself does something different: his interpretation of cockfighting is an interpretation of cockfighting and not an interpretation of what the Balinese themselves say about it. Likewise an interpretation of *Madame Bovary* is an interpretation of *Madame Bovary* and not an interpretation of its readers' or author's interpretation of it. In other words, it is a first-order construction just as is Geertz's interpretation of Balinese cockfighting. To be sure, we might be interested in understanding the interpretations the Berber chieftain, Jewish merchant, and French solider have of the sheep-stealing incident, just as we might be interested in Flaubert's interpretation of *Madame Bovary*. Nonetheless, in both cases, the results would be first-order interpretations of another's interpretation and not second-order interpretations of the incident or the novel itself. We might also be interested in comparing Flaubert's interpretation of *Madame Bovary* to our own understanding of the novel or contrasting the differing interpretations of the Berber chieftain, Jewish merchant, and French solider of the sheep-stealing incident. Yet neither of these exercises involves either second- or third-order construction. Instead, the former involves comparing a first-order construction of Flaubert's understanding with our own first-order construction of the novel, whereas the latter involves just what Geertz actually provides, namely, an interpretation of the first-order understandings in light of his own first-order understanding of the event.

Similar tensions with his own practice attend Geertz's account of the purpose of anthropological interpretation. This purpose, Geertz says, is neither to become "natives" nor to mimic them but instead "to converse with them"[14] and, indeed, to enlarge "the universe of human discourse."[15] As he writes,

> The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is . . . to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.[16]

It is not clear what Geertz means here by "some extended sense of the term." Nevertheless, his general supposition seems to be that to converse with members of another culture, we must first gain a familiarity with their conceptual universe. We need, as he also puts it, to "find our feet" in their world. But we might ask how we are to find our feet without conversing with those we are trying to understand. Instead of saying that

> the whole point of a semiotic approach is . . . to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them,

would it not make more sense to say that the whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is to aid us in dialogue or conversation, so that we can gain access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live? On this account, what we interpret is

what those we are trying to understand say—and, moreover, say to us—in their words and actions.

Geertz reminds us that his philosophical guides are Wittgenstein and Dewey, rather than members of the German hermeneutic tradition such as Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Moreover, he insists that the view of Wittgenstein's language games as self-enclosed monads is simply wrong. If cultures are language games, they are not independent fortresses impervious to interpretive penetration by those who come from elsewhere. Nor is what Geertz calls understanding "understandings not our own" a matter of leaping out of our own language game to land, tradition-free, in the language games of others. Nevertheless, in conceiving of anthropology in terms, first, of its product, namely, a construction that, as he puts it, "rescue[s] the 'said' of [social] discourse from its perishing occasions" and, second, its aim, namely, as he puts it, "another country heard from," Geertz neglects to tell us what he thinks the process of interpretation is. Indeed, he commits himself to an insider/outsider view of interpretation that it makes unclear how it is possible at all.

Geertz's later writings do, in fact, offer a rather pessimistic assessment of interpretive possibilities. Perhaps most interesting in this regard is his analysis of what he calls anthropological irony, which he distinguishes from dramatic, historical, literary, and Socratic ironies. Geertz defines dramatic irony as the contrast between what the characters in the play or novel take the situation they are in to be and what the audience "knows" it to be. Anthropological irony adds the converse as well: the contrast between what the audience or anthropologist takes the situation to be and what the character or subject "knows" it to be. Historical irony, according to Geertz, describes the difference between an actor's intentions and the results of his or her actions. In contrast, anthropological irony describes the difference between the anthropologist's predictions and his or her subjects' actions. Literary irony consists in a temporary conspiracy of author and reader against the self-deceptions of the everyday world. Yet no such conspiracy is possible between anthropologist and subject. Instead, the anthropological irony is that they inhabit "different moral universes." Finally, if Socratic irony reflects the way in which intellectual dissembling parodies intellectual pretension, what is parodied in anthropology, according to Geertz, is "the mere communication of thought" and what it is parodied by is "an all-too-earnest, almost grim effort at understanding."[17]

In Geertz's view, then, anthropology possesses four salient characteristics: a mutual deflation of anthropologist and those he or she is studying in which each sees through the other, a frequent inability on the part of the anthropologist to be able to predict the actions of his or her subjects, a gap between the anthropologist's moral universe and that of those he or she is studying, and a frequent failure to communicate. Geertz tries to protect himself from misunderstanding here. He does not think "that genuine human contact across cultural barriers is impossible." As he points out, had he not "experienced, now and then, a measure of [it], [his] work would have been insupportable."[18] Still, he thinks that such contact is difficult, by no means assured and at best approximated. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to suggest that Geertz's account of anthropological interpretation by no means does justice to his practice. Moreover, I want to contrast his account of anthropological interpretation with the account of interpretation that comes out

of the German hermeneutic tradition to suggest that the latter better accounts for what Geertz actually does.

Hermeneutic Interpretation

In his gloss on his account of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz claims that it shows that cockfights can be read as texts. Perhaps the key to the difference between his account of anthropological interpretation and that which stems from the German hermeneutic tradition is the different stresses the two put on this claim. For Geertz, the emphasis is on product. Ethnography results in constructions that "rescue the 'said' of discourse from its perishing occasions." For the German hermeneutic tradition, the emphasis is on process. How is it possible to read or understand the "'said' of discourse"? The answer for Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, of course, is the hermeneutic circle of whole and part. To understand a text, a work of art, or a text-analogue such as an action or a practice, we project a provisional account of its meaning that is based on our own experiences and historical cultural frame of reference, and we then use this account to work out the meaning of its various parts. Understanding, as Heidegger points out, is always understanding *as*.[19] We suppose that a particular text is a piece of philosophy, and we therefore approach its first sentence as the specification of a problem or the first step in an argument. Because of the way a certain novel begins, we situate it within the context of coming-of-age stories and read it with expectations of the protagonist's change and growth. Likewise, we suppose that a particular action is that of betting, and we therefore understand various acts, shouts, and altercations as part of the betting practice. The process of interpretation is then a process of working out or revising our assumptions and expectations as we read more of a text and become familiar with more parts of an action or practices. The criterion here is the determination as to whether our assumptions about the meaning of the whole of a text or activity are consistent with what we take to be its various parts and, vice versa, whether our understandings of the parts are consistent with the whole.

As Ronald Dworkin points out in his own appropriation of the hermeneutic tradition,[20] an interpretation need not integrate all of the parts of a text or activity. Instead part of the process of interpretation is deciding which parts are significant and need to be taken special account of in the interpretation and which are peripheral. Different interpretations may weigh the parts differently. The measure of the success of an interpretation, however, is whether it is able to reflect the text as a unity of meaning. Although more than one interpretation may be able to do so, interpretations can also fail. Our initial assumptions about the text or activity may leave too many parts out of the integrated whole, and our understanding of some of its parts may make it impossible to understand the role in the text of too many others. If so, we must revise our initial understandings and projections and continue attempting to fit the parts of the text or activity together with the whole until we succeed in achieving a unified account.

To be sure, Geertz himself refers to the hermeneutic circle. But he does so fleetingly and without a crucial aspect of it that Gadamer emphasizes. For Gadamer maintains that the condition of understanding a text or text-analogue is a relation to possible truth. If the process of interpreting involves integrating the parts and whole

of a text or text-analogue into a unified meaning and, importantly, if the process involves determining which parts are crucial to that unified meaning and which we may be able to downplay, then we need some standard for weighing their significance. And what could this standard be other than the possible validity of what the text or text-analogue says? Furthermore, against what can we measure the possible validity of what the text or text-analogue says other than our own previous view of the subject-matter? If we want to understand which parts are central to the meaning of *Madame Bovary* and which are peripheral parts of it, we must suppose that the novel has an overall point to make and, moreover, an overall point to make to us, so that we can assess the substance of that point. Likewise if we want to know what is central to cockfighting and what is not central to it, we must suppose that it too makes a point. Moreover, we can verify that it makes a point or, in other words, illuminates some subject-matter only if it illuminates it, not only for the Balinese, but also for us. Geertz claims that the center betting is the key to the cockfight because it determines whether the fight will be a "deep" one between excellent and well-matched fighters. Yet his interpretation of this centrality depends on his supposition that cockfighting responds to issues *he* takes seriously, namely, death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, and chance. For unless cockfighting is meant to respond to such issues, there is no reason to see a deep cockfight as its most authentic representation.

In short, then, if we want to understand a text or a practice, we must presuppose that it can speak to us, for unless we do so, we have no way of adjudicating the validity of our understanding of it. Yet if the condition of understanding cockfighting is the presumption that it has something to say to us by, at the very least, helping us to reflect on issues of importance to us, then understanding is dialogic. The understanding that Geertz has of Balinese cockfighting is the result of questions he asks of it in relation to issues he takes seriously. Moreover, it rests on questions he asks of it in relation to issues he takes seriously as Clifford Geertz and not as a Balinese. Geertz suggests that understanding Balinese cockfighting rests on constructing the Balinese construction of it. Yet since he is also clear that understanding the practices of another culture is not a question of empathy or leaving one's own world behind, it remains unclear why he moves to the idea of a second- or third-order construction. In his actual interpretation of Balinese cockfighting, he does something quite different: he asks questions of the betting and the cockfight that stem from his concerns and his cultural and literary experiences, so that the meaning he sees in Balinese cockfighting is a result of the particular dialogue he has with it.

To the extent that interpretation is thus dialogic, Geertz's account of rescuing the "'said' of discourse" is somewhat misleading. For if the meaning of texts and text-analogues is a result of particular dialogues, then the meaning that Balinese cockfighting has for Geertz may not be its only possible meaning. Instead, it may have other meanings as a result of other dialogues. To be sure, it cannot mean simply anything we may want it to. Although Balinese cockfighting may lend itself to some different sorts of dialogue, dialogues, for example, less about masculinity and more about the different ways human beings can value animals, it does not lend itself to all dialogues on any subject-matter with any conclusion. What Geertz understands of Balinese cockfighting may or may not mirror what a Balinese understands of it. The validity of Geertz's understanding, however, rests on its ability to unify parts

and whole where the ability to unify parts and whole in turn rests on the presumption that the text of test-analogue is possibly true.

Given this account of interpretation, Geertz's idea of understanding as a means or preparation for living with others is also misleading. For we already *do* live with others. Cultures are not even partially self-enclosed, and dialogue with the Balinese is no more or less difficult than dialogue with anyone else. The point here is not that, at bottom, all people are alike or that certain timeless truths hold for all of us. Rather it assumes that, as Gadamer puts the point, every language "despite its difference from other languages, can say everything it wants."[21] We ask certain questions of Balinese cockfighting, and our language learns how to express what we find there. Geertz's interpretation may differ from the one some or many Balinese have. It is, after all, an understanding that rests on questions he asks and references he makes as Clifford Geertz. But this condition means that the idea of separate moral universes, separate cultures, or an insider/outsider point of view makes no sense. What Balinese cockfighting is, it always is in response to certain questions that reveal certain dimensions it possesses. The same holds for *Macbeth*. The questions the Balinese ask of it may differ from the questions some of us ask of it. It may teach a Balinese something different than it teaches some of us or push him or her to reflect on different features of his or her life or society. Yet unless he or she assumes it has something to say to him or her, he or she cannot understand it at all.

What does this analysis do for Geertz's account of anthropological irony? For Geertz, the first ironic feature of anthropology lies in the situation that both interpreter and his or her subject think they know something that the others do not. From a more hermeneutic point of view, this situation is the starting point of interpretation and, indeed, its motive. We seek to know what others know that we do not, so we engage with them in a dialogue. We read books for insights they may have, and we engage in anthropological investigations not simply because we want to register "another country heard from" as Geertz puts it, but because we want to reflect on our own cultural and historical lives and because we can do so by learning from others. The same presumably holds for those who interact with anthropologists. What do we know that they do not and what do they know that we do not?

The second ironic feature of anthropology for Geertz is the interpreter's inability to predict the actions of his or her subjects. Presumably the irony here is that no matter how successful the interpreter thinks his or her ethnography is, it does not always allow him or her to foresee how his or her subjects will act. Of course, many anthropologists are less interested in predicting what their subject will do than in understanding what they have done or are doing. In any case, again, our incapacities with regard to prediction are the starting point for a hermeneutic approach. It is because our own and others' lives continually thwart our expectations that we find them interesting. Moreover, it is because our own and others' lives continually thwart our expectations that we raise questions about life and lives and hope our anthropological investigations will help us to answer them. Because the conclusion of an anthropological investigation is the answer to a question, we need not expect it to facilitate prediction. Instead, we can expect it to educate us.

The third and fourth ironies of anthropology according to Geertz involve the necessary deceptions that interpreters and subjects practice on one another because

they inhabit different universes and because their efforts at communication are, in his view, so grim. Yet for a hermeneuticist, the irony here is Geertzian. For what is ironic is that despite his claims about differences in worlds and failures of communication, he is able to learn from the Balinese and to communicate to us what he learns. Indeed, what Geertz gives us is what Gadamer would call a "fusion of horizons." Although he defines a horizon in historical terms, his claim holds for anthropology and is therefore worth quoting: "There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons that have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves."[22] By the same token, there is no more an isolated horizon of a culture than there are cultural horizons that have to be acquired. Rather, the meaning we understand when we understand is always a fusion. It is the meaning the action or practice has as a result of our sincere engagement with it, where sincere implies that we ask real questions of it and expect real answers.

NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
2. Geertz, "Passage and Accident: A Life of Learning" in *Available Light*, p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 17.
4. Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
5. Ibid., p. 449.
6. Ibid., p. 436.
7. Ibid., p. 443.
8. Ibid., p. 449.
9. Ibid., p. 450.
10. Ibid., p. 453.
11. See Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society" in Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy, *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 159–88.
12. Geertz, "Thick Description," in Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* , p. 15.
13. Ibid., p. 9
14. Ibid., p. 13.
15. Ibid., p. 14.
16. Ibid., p. 24.
17. Geertz, "Thinking as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of Anthropological Fieldwork in the New States" in *Available Light*, p. 30.
18. Ibid., p. 33.
19. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1996) trans. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press).
20. Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 66–7.
21. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960; revised and expanded edition, 1986) trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 402.
22. Ibid., p. 308.

Chapter 6

Clifford Geertz and the Strong Program: The Human Sciences and Cultural Sociology

Jeffrey C. Alexander

What did Clifford Geertz mean? What was his significance? What did he signify, crystallize, and make possible? These are contentious questions, have been, and will continue to be. There have been decades already of fighting about "Geertz." Such interpretive disputes are the lot of every exemplary figure. Interpreting is a way of positioning, of saying who we are, in relationship to an intellectual icon, placing ourselves alongside him, against him, or somewhere in between. Lack of agreement, not only about propositions but also about presuppositions, is the reality of intellectual life in the human sciences.

The Questions of Method: Structural Hermeneutics

It is critical that Geertz spoke out, articulately and persistently, for the idea of a human rather than a specifically social science. "Human sciences" represents the conventional translation of Wilhelm Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften*, literally the sciences of the spirit. Dilthey called his philosophical position "hermeneutics" (after Schleiermacher), pointing to the significance of interpretation as compared with observation. Interpretation is central for the human sciences because inner life is pivotal for social action and collective subjectivity alike. Dilthey believed that to concentrate on the outer, visible shell of human actions, as compared with the inner invisible spirit, is to mistakenly import into the human sciences concepts such as objective force and efficient cause. When the inner life of society becomes our focus,

we must give up on the project of a predictive science of laws. Our goal, however, should remain a generalized science that can establish models.

This deeply original and controversial Dilthey position was never systematically taken up in the modern social sciences, despite the ambivalent efforts of some Weberians and Parsonians to keep it alive. What developed, instead, was a split inside the human studies, a split that has produced the grand canyon between the humanities and the social sciences across which we peer today. Clifford Geertz was the most important postwar social thinker not only to build a bridge across this divide but also to undermine its very existence. In doing so, he took up the challenge that Dilthey had originally laid down. For four decades, Geertz adamantly asserted the humanistic nature of social science and its interpretive character, not only against the grain of entrenched disciplinary interests, but also against such an interdisciplinary thinker as the "incurable theorist" who was his teacher, Talcott Parsons himself.

Geertz evoked forthrightly the hermeneutical understanding of science. "What I am doing fits well enough under such a rubric," he writes in his introduction to *Local Knowledge*, adding only one significant proviso—"particularly if the word 'cultural' is affixed."[1] Indeed Geertz fit his anthropological work rather precisely into the hermeneutical circle. In "The Native's Point of View," he presents his empirical investigations as employing the part/whole method that Dilthey had pithily modeled:

> Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another.[2]

Such an understanding of Geertz's interpretive method allows us to challenge two rather hegemonic (mis)understandings. The first concerns local knowledge. The local is certainly part of the story, but not all of it. Knowledge, or meaning, is circular. On the one hand, it is experience dependent, or local. On the other hand, it is impersonal, or global. Pointing to "the characteristic intellectual movement, the inward conceptual rhythm" of his empirical analyses, Geertz draws attention to "a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view."[3] Local knowledge here plays the role of *part*, a part that must be placed against the "global" whole for its meaning to be understood.

If Geertz does, in fact, understand the local in terms of the distant—"the most global of global structure"—why, then, does he so often seem to make epistemological necessity into heroic ethnographic virtue? Why does he sometimes present his work as privileging local knowledge against more collective and more macrolevels of the social? This performative contradiction, along with others, will be an issue to which each of the chapters that follows returns. I will only suggest here that, in addressing this issue, matters of intellectual biography cannot be ignored. Geertz became "Geertz" by fighting against two authorities who loomed as the intellectual giants of his time, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Talcott Parsons. He overthrew them by characterizing their work, and perhaps also distorting it, as concerned only with the

global and far away, as promoting a mechanistic and deductive approach to meaning that a more hermeneutical cultural science would oppose.[4]

There is a second (mis)conception about Geertzian method that is challenged by this hermeneutical understanding. This is the idea that interpretive social science is actually, and merely, descriptive. Waving the Geertzian flag of "thick description," the cultural approach in social science is often equated simply with close and minute observation, with listening, and with a kind of sensitive and conscientious academic journalism. But this is decidedly what thickness is not. The description is thick, in Geertz's sense, when it is analytically informed and culturally contextualized. It is thick because deep meanings are "always already there" *before* any observation or social-scientific account. The parts, in other words, are always, even if unconsciously, seen against previously existing wholes. "Ethnographic descriptions" are so "extraordinarily 'thick,' " Geertz suggests in his introduction to *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined."[5] Observations may present themselves as descriptions, but actually they are not: they are meaning constructions. When social scientists offer thick descriptions, they are presenting hermeneutical *re*constructions built up from the circularity of part-whole relationships. Their aim is to discover not only actors' expressed motives, but also the cultural structures on which they depend, the "systematic unpackings of the conceptual world in which *condottiere*, Calvinists, or paranoids live."[6] Actors' interpretations and the culture structures on which they depend: these, not mechanisms and causes, are for Geertz the holy grail of a *human* science.

The hermeneutic idea of an interpretive (re)construction does not so much replace the goal of explanation as redefine it. "Interpretive explanation," Geertz assures us in "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," is "a form of explanation, not just exalted glossography." What is distinctive to hermeneutics is not that explanation is sought but where it is found. Interpretive explanation "issues not in laws like Boyle's, or even forces like Volta's, or mechanisms like Darwin's, but in constructions like Burkhardt's, Weber's, or Freud's."[7]

> Social events do have causes and social institutions effects; but it just may be that the road to discovering what we assert in asserting this lies less through postulating forces and measuring them than through noting expressions and inspecting them.[8]

It was inside this hermeneutic, not merely descriptive, methodological context that Geertz called for a "refiguration" of social theory, "a sea change in our notion not so much of what knowledge is but of what it is we want to know."[9] This appeal for transforming the relationship between social science and the humanities seemed rather rhetorical; it was, instead, the logical and ineluctable conclusion of Geertz's hermeneutic understanding. If, as he believed, it is convictions, feelings, ethics, dramas, and patterned texts of meaning that give life to society, then the proudly mechanistic techniques of a counting science can hardly help us find our way.

Why was Clifford Geertz able to so confidently articulate such a radically hermeneutic methodological position, when even his most culturally inclined predecessors

and contemporaries had largely been unable to do so? One might evoke the nature of Geertz's intellectual times. He was, for example, both personally and intellectually close to Thomas Kuhn, whose understandings of paradigm and exemplar for the first time laid out a powerfully hermeneutic approach to the philosophy and history of science. Here, however, I would like to explore a more intellectual reason for Geertz's self-confidence. It relates to a philosophical development that was more or less completed, though it was hardly well known, by the time Geertz had begun to write.

Geertz had a singular advantage over those who had earlier wondered how they could take up Dilthey's fallen staff. He wrote after the linguistic turn had transformed philosophy, semiotics, and literary method in the first half of the twentieth century. Before this turn, and before its significance was appreciated, Dilthey's hermeneutics had been misperceived as psychological and individualistic, as a method that focused on "consciousness." In fact, Dilthey's method was collective, structural, and textual. Dilthey used Hegel to historicize Kant; he understood the consciousness that was to be the object of his new hermeneutical science as an "objective *Geist*." It was this historically and sociologically situated (and thus "objective") geist—or cultural structure—that Dilthey offered as the subject of the human sciences.[10]

Geertz was able to understand Dilthey correctly because he was the beneficiary of the great philosophical movement from consciousness to language that marked the first half of the twentieth century. It was a movement that was generated, not only by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, but also by Saussure and Jakobson. It is because of this linguistic turn that Geertz can speak of human beings as "signifying" animals; that his language from the early 1960s onward is sprinkled with such concepts as "signs," "symbols," and "languages"; and that he manages so effectively, despite his earlier ties to Parsons, to slough off words such as "system" for ideas such as "structure" and "pattern."[11] This ability to transform the linguistic turn into social science is pivotal to Geertz's early statement, "Ideology as a Cultural System." He notes "the virtual absence in strain theory (or in interest theory either) of anything more than the most rudimentary conception of the process of symbolic formulation" and suggests that both theories "go directly from source analysis to consequence analysis without ever seriously examining ideologies as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings."[12]

The linguistic turn allowed Clifford Geertz to see through the conceit that had hobbled the subjectively oriented social science of his day, and which continues to confound our own as well. This is the idea that we can get into the heads of others. Geertz insisted, to the contrary, that our focus can only be on what Dilthey called *geisten* and which, after the linguistic turn, many contemporary cultural sociologists have taken to calling "culture structures." These are the social texts that are simultaneously the source of individual subjectivities and their expression. It is only these texts that are available. We do not have access to subjectivity or consciousness in itself. In "Deep Play," Geertz describes the Balinese cockfight as a "collectively sustained symbolic structure." It is because social forms have this status, he explains, that "the analysis of cultural forms" is "parallel with penetrating a literary text."[13]

THE QUESTIONS OF THEORY: CULTURAL REALITY AND STRUCTURAL INTERESTS

It is within these basic hermeneutical presuppositions that the core empirical propositions of Geertz's work are nested.

Proposition 1: *Social structures do not exist objectively*. Realism cannot be the job description of social science, in supposed contrast with the imaginative focus of the humanities and the arts. "In the study of culture," Geertz explains, "analysis penetrates into the very body of the object." As social scientists, in other words, we do not actually have "real objects" to work with. Rather "we begin with our *interpretations* of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those." The result is that "the line between (Moroccan) culture as a *natural* fact and (Moroccan) culture as a *theoretical* entity tends to get blurred." If the line between theoretical entity and natural fact is blurred, there can only be one conclusion, and Geertz is not afraid to draw it. "Anthropological writings are," he acknowledges, "fictions." Not fiction in the sense that they are false or *un*-factual, but in this sense: they are "*themselves* interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot."[14] Henry James once described the obligations of a novelist in much the same way. The fiction writer must convince readers that his third-order descriptions of consciousness are first- and second-order ones.[15]

And it was undoubtedly another Jamesian tenet, that art can be as truthful as science, that led Geertz, in his late *Works and Lives*, to warn against the mistake—"endemic in the West since Plato"—of confusing "the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false," of "making this out with making them up."[16] Social things are real, but realism is not. It is a genre.[17] The reality of social things is asserted; we may or may not take these assertions as true. Whether we do take them as real depends on whether we make them so. This depends on whether their dramatic presentation is convincing. Geertz explains all this very carefully in his extraordinary early essay on religion. A symbolic order works by "establishing powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men." It does this by "formulating conceptions" and "clothing" them "with such an aura of factuality" that they seem "uniquely realistic."[18]

Proposition 2: *Actors do not have "interests" as such*. Interests are realist constructions. They are performative achievements. This second theoretical proposition follows directly from the first.

Proposition 3: *Social structures are at the same time cultural structures*. Here are some of the phrases that Geertz employed to indicate cultural structure: public code, cultural category, stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures, structure of signification, pattern of interworking meanings, symbolic structure,[19] and symbolic form.[20]

Geertz specified this proposition about culture structure in three ways:

1. As semiotic constructions, these culture structures are composed of binary codes: "Values and disvalues," as Geertz once rather wryly described the

contents of Balinese culture,[21] or "symbolic expressions" and their "direct inversion," as he more earthily described the Balinese views of their cocks.[22]

2. These binary codes are at the heart of narratives, chronologically oriented "webs of significance."[23] It is no accident that Geertz and his subjects are always telling stories.
3. Codes and narratives, which operate semantically, are crystallized by rhetorical devices that work at more syntactic and pragmatic levels. Geertz's favorite rhetorical device is the metaphor.

Ambiguities and (Ir)resolutions

I conclude this thick but still necessarily thumbnail introduction to Clifford Geertz and cultural sociology by exploring some of the deep ambiguities his thinking displays. Although these ambiguities clearly energized Geertz, they also entrapped and often muddled him.

1. *Pattern versus process.* Despite his clear understanding that actors' interpretations are mediated by cultural structures, Geertz was reluctant to devote much conceptual or empirical energy to investigating the internal patterning of this structure, its architecture, whether global or local. In "Thick Description," for example, he writes that his subject is "the *informal* logic of social life"[24]; in the ideology essay, he suggests that we should focus on the "*processes* of symbolic formation"[25]; and in Deep Play, he wants to draw our attention to how the cockfight "*catches up* . . . themes," "*ordering* them *into* an encompassing structure."[26]

   Such passages can be read in a "weak" and not only in a "strong" way. I have earlier mentioned the allergy that Geertz experienced vis-à-vis both structuralism and functionalism, and how it can be traced, at least in some part, to intellectual-biographical concerns. With this in mind, it seems feasible to interpret such antistructural passages, not as arguing against the existence of culture structure, but as warning about the dangers of reification. Geertz wishes to make sure that, when we employ linguistic analogies, we do not see social life simply as grammar but also as speech. He embraced Wittgenstein's insistence on language-in-use, yet neither he nor Wittgenstein denied the prior existence of language games.

   Geertz is concerned about where and how he wants us to find structures and not whether or not they exist. "Whatever, or wherever, symbol systems 'in their own terms' may be," he warns, "we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns."[27] Another way to say this is that although Geertz wants social scientists to use the concepts and methods of the humanities, he nonetheless insists on a difference. We social scientists must do our research in the field rather than sit in our studies and read written texts. As compared with such avatars of the structuralist humanities as Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Hayden White, or Fredric Jameson, Geertz pursued his semiotic sensibility in situ. He was devoted to what he called "the 'Being There' effect,"[28] to doing ethnographic,

seat-of-the-pants empirical research. Even "the 'ethnographized' history that has recently become popular," Geertz once insisted, "importantly rests on such an effect, produced not, of course, by the authors' representing themselves as having literally 'been there,' but by their basing their analyses on the experiential disclosures of people who were."[29]

Though I would defend such a weak reading, I do not wish to deny that there is a troubling ambiguity surrounding "Geertz and structure." Undoubtedly, it was his discomfiture with just such a conjunctive relationship that explains why the idea of social drama began so forcefully to emerge in his middle to later work. It was, I believe, precisely to resolve the ambiguity of structure and agency that Geertz turned to Kenneth Burke's idea of "enactment," moving away from Erving Goffman's more strategic sense of games to Victor Turner's and Richard Schechner's idea of social drama.[30] It was this structural-cum-dramaturgical perspective that allowed him to create "Deep Play," his so-called notes on the Balinese cockfight that became the icon of late twentieth-century cultural science, much as Weber's *Protestant Ethic* was iconic for the earlier part of that century.

2. *The aesthetic versus the semiotic.* Geertz sought to end the great divide between social science and humanities, and he drew his most striking conceptual and methodological ideas explicitly from the arts. There is a parallel between art and social structure. Such social facts as events, institutions, and collective actions are like art in the sense that they do their work as art does—via the imagination. This analogy between art and life stretches from the early "cultural systems" essays all the way to *Works and Lives*. Geertz maintains that, in some large part, social meaning creates its effect and affect through the aesthetic dimension. The social has an impact on the senses by way of the arrangement of form.

   This proposition is, it seems to me, eminently defendable. The problem is that Geertz seems often to reduce culture structures *to* such aesthetic effects, posing the expressive *against* the moral and cognitive dimensions of meaning. In "Deep Play," for example, he writes that "what we are dealing with is an art form," an "aesthetic semblance," a construction of "sheer appearances" that makes social facts meaningful by making them "visible, tangible, [and] graspable," thus giving them "aesthetic power" via "dramatic shape."[31] Rather than intertwining the aesthetic dimension with the moral and cognitive, in other words, Geertz presents an either/or. One must choose between sensuous form and discursive signification. This dichotomizing demand is strikingly revealed by a passage in *Negara,* in which Geertz, ostensibly describing the Balinese, is actually presenting the theory he employs himself.

   > The Balinese, not only in court rituals but generally, cast their most comprehensive ideas of the way things ultimately are, and the way that men should therefore act, into immediately apprehended sensuous symbols—into a lexicon of carvings, flowers, dances, melodies, gestures, chants, ornaments, temples, postures, and masks—rather than into a discursively apprehended, ordered set of explicit "beliefs." This

> means of expression makes any attempt to summarize those ideas a dubious business.[32]

In another paean to the Balinese, Geertz quotes Auden in his elegy to Yeats: "Poetry makes nothing happen," but merely "survives in the valley of its own saying." In the status bloodbath of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz asserts, "no one's status really changes."[33] Would Geertz wish for social scientists also to accept such a meditative, aestheticist stance? If culture is purely aesthetic, does it simply provide form without having effect? Only a few pages later, Geertz writes that "art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they *pretend* only to display."[34] This would suggest that, rather than doing nothing, even the forms of art actually do a lot. The aesthetic is triggered by discursive subjectivities, and it affects them in turn.

This ambiguity is highlighted in a revealing passage from "Art as a Cultural System." First we encounter the strong statement that "nothing very measurable would happen to Yoruba society if carvers no longer concerned themselves with the fineness of line, or . . . even with carving." What follows just on from this is an assertion appreciably weaker. Without art, Geertz writes, Yoruba society "certainly . . . would not fall apart." We move finally to a significantly less aestheticized, more multidimensional logic: "Some things that were felt could not be said—and perhaps, after awhile, might no longer even be felt."[35] I think what Geertz ambivalently means to lead us to here is not the identity of art and life but the importance of their connection. He cautions that "the central connection between art and life does not lie on . . . an instrumental plane," and he immediately adds the caution that "it lies on a semiotic one." Semiotic suggests linguistic and discursive ideas and beliefs. What Geertz wishes to point out, in other words, is that semiotic meanings are often expressed through aesthetic form. Such forms "materialize a way of experiencing" and "bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects."[36]

3. *Theory is irrelevant.* The more Geertz became "Geertz," the more he denounced abstract theorizing. There "are enough general principles in the world already"; the idea of pursuing a general theory is "megalomanic."[37] This clear turning away from theory, if not turning thoroughly against it, was the animus for a critical essay I wrote on Geertz two decades ago.[38] When we look back over his own life and work, however, it is clear that in arguing against theory, Geertz is involved in a performative contradiction. The warp and woof of his anthropological corpus is enmeshed in theoretical ideas of the most exquisitely worked-over kind. His ethnographies are studded with references to the first, second, and third teams of Western intellectual history over the past 2,500 years. When he writes that "it is upon the capacity of theoretical ideas to set up effective analogies that their value depends," Geertz reveals his own understanding: theory is culture too.

NOTES

1. Geertz, C. 1983. *Local Knowledge.* New York: Basic Books, p. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 69.

3. Ibid.
4. For an account of Richard Rorty's work that interweaves the philosophical with the intellectual-biographical in an exemplary way, see Gross, N. 2008. *Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, p. 9.
6. Geertz 1983, p. 22.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 34.
9. Ibid.
10. For this perspective on Dilthey, and an earlier discussion of his relationship to Geertz, see Jeffrey C. Alexander 1987. *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press.
11. It seems only fair to note that Parsons himself employed both kinds of terms at the same time, pattern and system, objective force and sign, and language and efficient cause. In a personal note ruminating ironically on the long and ambiguous reach of Parsons's influence, Geertz once wrote to me that "we are all 'Parsnips.'" However, the influence actually went both ways. Despite his misgivings about Geertz's cultural turn in the early 1960s, Parsons invited Geertz to comment on the draft manuscript of his long essay on "Culture and Social System," which was the Introduction to Part IV of Parsons, Edward A. Shils, Kaspar D. Naegele, and Jesse R. Pitts, eds., *Theories of Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1961). Geertz was critical in his response, and the result was a much more linguistically and symbolically oriented conceptual essay.
12. Geertz 1973, p. 207.
13. Ibid., p. 448.
14. Ibid., p. 15, italics added.
15. In *The Year of Henry James*, David Lodge's apologia for his earlier *Author, Author*, the novelist and former literature professor quotes from the opening paragraph of James' *Wings of the Dove* "to demonstrate how novelistic discourse can overcome the first person/third person dichotomy through the device of [what James called] 'free indirect style,'" in which the inner voice of the point-of-view character is fused with the voice of a covert narrator:

    > She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that he had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him.

    Lodge, David. 2006. *The Year of Henry James: The Story of a Novel*. New York: Penguin.
16. Geertz, C. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 140.
17. Peter Brooks. 1976. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New York: Columbia University Press.
18. Geertz 1973, p. 90.
19. Ibid., pp. 6–7, 9, 207, 450.
20. Geertz 1983, p. 59.
21. Geertz 1973, p. 446.
22. Ibid., p. 419.
23. Ibid., p. 5.
24. Ibid., p. 17.
25. Ibid., p. 207.
26. Ibid., p. 443, all italics added.

27. Ibid., p. 17.
28. Geertz 1988, p. 144.
29. Ibid.
30. For example, Geertz 1983, pp. 27–30.
31. Geertz 1973, pp. 443–4.
32. Brooks 1976, p. 103.
33. Geertz 1973, p. 443.
34. Geertz 1973, p. 451, italics added.
35. Geertz 1983, p. 99.
36. Ibid.; in my own recent work on "iconic consciousness," I conceptualize this as a relationship between surface form and moral depth; Alexander. 2008. "Iconic Consciousness in Art and Life: Surface/Depth Beginning with Giacometti's *Standing Woman,*'" *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2008: 25(5): 1–19 and "Iconic Consciousness: The Material Feeling of Meaning" *Thesis Eleven* 2010: 103(1): 10–25.
37. Geertz 1983, pp. 4–5.
38. Alexander 1987.

CHAPTER 7

Maximal Interpretation in Clifford Geertz and the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Toward a New Epistemology

Isaac Ariail Reed

Culture and Interpretation

The defining epistemological tension of the "cultural turn" is the question as to whether culture should be brought in as one more cause in the study of society and history or whether culture constitutes a world unto itself whose study necessarily eschews explanation and invites or even demands interpretation instead. The strong program in cultural sociology is but one example of a mode of research and research in the human sciences that has forced itself to navigate, mitigate, or live with (and perhaps sublimate) this tension between explanation and interpretation. Insofar as the strong program as it was defined by Alexander and Smith[1] is proposed as a research program in the Lakatosian sense, and insofar as it intends to produce sociologists who present at annual meetings of sociological associations, address the discipline at large through publication in core sociological journals, and internalize the imperative to explain social behavior/action, then it necessarily takes on the burden of explanation and the problem of making clear to a set of scientistically inclined gatekeepers why "culture matters." However, insofar as the strong program is "strong" precisely in its willingness to put meaning, rather than social structure as it has usually been conceived in sociology, at the center of its program of study, it engages a series of influences and imperatives from hermeneutics, poststructuralist theory, and the more literary and humanistic disciplines that are of only passing

interest to most sociologists. And these influences have been known to claim, in a variety of ways, that the explanatory and systematic theoretical ambitions of social "science" are at best an illusion and at worst a pernicious addition to systems of domination.[2] Hence the tension that surrounds the sociological study of culture generally, and which the strong program makes explicit and acute.

In most cases, as sociologists influenced by the strong program pursue their object of research, they tend to mix methods of interpretation and thick description with theoretical claims about the importance of culture for explaining social outcomes. But compromise does not constitute clarity—what is required is a serious epistemological attempt to comprehend the status of knowledge claims executed by so-called "strong program" researchers. It is my position that such an epistemological attempt will require throwing into doubt the mutual exclusivity of interpretation and explanation and engaging the possibility that all explanations in social science—including those that explicitly exclude "culture"—involve, at some level, the interpretation of meaning. This means that to address the question of the strong program's knowledge claims, the question must be framed as a question concerning sociological knowledge generally speaking; it must be pushed further, that is, from "culture" to "interpretation."

In this chapter, I use an examination of the epistemological point of view of Clifford Geertz as a starting point for this argument, and I attempt to further it in the abstract by developing the idea of *maximal interpretations* as a type of interpretive maneuver, aimed at social life, that is theoretically driven and epistemologically risky and that claims to know more about human research subjects than they know about themselves. This form of interpretation, I argue, is achieved through the productive intersection of the investigator's context with that of her research subjects, an intersection that is of necessity constituted by a series of interpretations that reach beyond both established theory and gathered fact. This general perspective on sociological interpretation suggests, in turn, that the strong program should move beyond—though not abandon—the argument that "culture matters too" and push toward a consideration of economics, politics, and power, *from an interpretive perspective.*

Geertz's Epistemic Vision

In the opening pages of *Works and Lives*,[3] Geertz argues that it is neither the facts of the case nor the theories possessed by the anthropologist that constitute effective ethnography. Rather it is the sense of "being there" that we find convincing, which makes us think that we have understood something about social life. How, he asks, is this sense of "being there" constructed? Anthropologists not only have to "go there," but also have to provide an account that relates that which has, supposedly, been discovered, revealed, investigated, comprehended, or explained. And this account happens in a text, the construction of which then becomes the focus of Geertz's investigations. The rather splendid result is a thick description of the great anthropological ethnographers that carefully, and with appropriate hermeneutic sensitivity to context, decodes the meaning formations in which Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Benedict operated with such skill.

Works and Lives is, without a doubt, one of the most productive works in that often pained and overwrought, and sometimes sterile, genre of academic reflexivity. What I want to highlight, however, is the way in which the entire investigation is constructed as a question about the relationship between "being there"—in the field—and "being here"—communicating to colleagues and countrymen. For Geertz, at the moment that he gave the lectures that led to *Works and Lives*, "being here" also meant operating in the midst of anthropology's postmodern/postcolonial crisis of the 1980s, when the questions of knowledge that he had posed and reframed had spun radically out of his original intention or control. What Geertz tries to do, over the course of the work, is reconnect the theoretically turbulent "being here" of the Western academy with the subject of research, "being there"—whether "there" was Malinowski in Melanesia, Lévi-Strauss in Brazil, or—to take someone he was arguing against—Paul Rabinow in Morocco.

"Being here" and "being there" have an ontological ring to them and carry with them the specific project of ethnography. We might expand this reflexive account of the locations of knowledge by replacing "being here" with "the context of investigation" and "being there" with "the context of explanation," thus allowing for "there" to be the urban ghetto a few blocks from the sociologist's office or a historical period or event several hundred years past.[4] The context of investigation, then, would simply refer to the social and cultural world of the investigator, whereas the context of explanation would refer to the social and cultural world in which her subjects live and act and which contains that which the investigator wishes, in some sense to explain—a revolution, the practice of cockfighting, the increase or reduction of domestic violence, or, in the case of my own research, the Salem Witch Trials.[5] This distinction between contexts—so obvious in a certain sense—helps us frame different approaches to the problem of social-scientific knowledge.

In *Works and Lives* and elsewhere, Geertz repeatedly returned to the notion that both of these contexts were full of meaning, and thus that the relationship between them—whatever it aimed to be or thought it was—was indelibly, irreducibly, interpretive. Furthermore, these contexts were always intermingling with each other in the ongoing process by which social-scientific knowledge was constructed. This is, I believe, the ultimate import of Geertz's somewhat cryptic meditations on theory in his essay on thick description. Therein, Geertz insisted that we use theories to "ferret out the hidden import of things,"[6] and that "theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them."[7] What he was suggesting was that the production of knowledge results from an intersection between the context of investigation and the context of explanation. Neither the facts—an accumulated account of details from the context of explanation—nor the theories—those abstract meaning systems so important to the thoughts and actions of researchers—could provide compelling ethnography. Rather a process of interpretation that brought the two together—exemplified by Geertz's own empirical work—would produce a "thick description" that went beyond the facts of the case and indeed beyond the easy or immediate consciousness of either the researcher or her informant. Thus the contexts necessarily bleed into each other. In saying something of something, our second-order stories do claim, in a certain sense, to know our subjects better than they know themselves.

Yet simultaneously, we never "leave" the context of explanation without having shifted our own meaning-world. Because for Geertz the endpoint of investigation was not proving a theory, a hypothesis, or a conjecture true or false, but rather arriving at a comprehension of meaning in which the actions of others made some sort of sense. This necessarily transforms—as opposed to just falsifying or verifying—the context of investigation.

I want to take and develop this idea—about the intersection of the contexts—to think about the problems of sociological knowledge generally conceived and about the intersection between sociology and history. I want to suggest, following Geertz, that it is neither nomothetic theories nor ideographic facts that give us good explanations in the investigation of society and history, but something else—namely, the construction of what I will call *maximal interpretations*—interpretations that go beyond what can minimally be agreed on about the matter at hand. And I want to argue that sociological explanations are, of necessity, maximal interpretations.

I propose to replace the term "thick description" with that of "maximal interpretation," so as to avoid rejecting outright (as Geertz sometimes did) those more "scientific" forms of sociological explanation. Rather, I believe by developing the notion of maximal interpretation with an eye not only toward culture but also toward social explanation generally, we can read the epistemic status of social science in a new way. Cultural explanations, then, will be a subset of the larger category of maximal interpretations, whose meaning-based nature extends beyond what we usually, in this or that research situation, call "culture." The theoretical task, then, is to move from the interpretation of cultures to the interpretation of society.

Explaining/Interpreting Salem: An Example

At this point, an illustrative example will be useful. In the summer of 1692, the (white) people in Massachusetts Bay Colony had a lot to do. They needed to trade—Boston and Salem were both significant ports (and with the new charter from the king, Anglicans and Quakers were moving in). They needed to farm, and they needed to elect officers, pay taxes, and prepare for further war with the Indians (and maybe the French). And they had to go to church, and the women had to do all of the work that went with tending the colonial house—care of children, washing, cooking and cleaning, and so on. Nonetheless, the people of Massachusetts also found the time to lead the greatest witchhunt in American history, hanging 19 of their own after countless hearings and trials.

Why did they do it? Minimally, we can establish the facts of the case—the accusers, the accused, the judges, the executions, the eventual suspension of the trials in October—and furthermore, begin to speculate, based on journals, letters, and so on, what some of the people, some of the time, in Essex county in 1692, were thinking. But if we wanted to claim the epistemic status of explanation for our account of the trials, we would want more—we would push for a *deeper knowledge* about the Puritans and about this event. We would want to go beyond the minimal interpretation necessary to establish the actions that call out for explanation.[8] We would want to propose some more overarching scheme, some more profound grasp of the matter at hand, and some fuller picture of the forces at play. We would want to know not

only what can be minimally established as "the case," but also what can be maximally ventured as its ultimate reasons for going the way it did.

Now, in the standard epistemic musings and practices of sociohistorical inquiry, there are two ways to do this—the ideographic and the nomothetic. On the one hand, we could "go deeper" by pushing for more historical detail. We would want to know as much as possible about the people who were hung, the judges who pronounced their sentences, and those—in Salem or elsewhere—who desired their demise. What was the specific procession of actions that led to the action of hanging, and under what exact conditions did these events proceed? It would be useful to know, for example, that at the last minute the pretrial hearings were moved from Ingersoll's Tavern to the meetinghouse—that sacred space of town worship, which was also the site of town conflict. It would be useful to know that Samuel Parris—in whose home two girls first became "afflicted"—was a highly controversial and divisive minister in Salem Village, hated by some and liked by others, and that he pressed hard for the persecution of the supposed witches among those he disliked.[9] It would be useful to know that Cotton Mather had just recently published his *Memorable Providences*, dealing with such things as witchcraft, possession, spirits, and devils, and that he (and other Congregationalist ministers) had been preaching repeatedly of such things since 1689, and so on. We could thus argue that, if we could assemble a series of facts of this nature and select from them those most relevant for our question at hand, we could begin to answer the question of "why did the Salem Witch Trials happen?"

Yet already in the construction of my sentences about what would be useful to know, we can see the problem with this mode for the construction of explanations. It is only because we have a set of theoretical presuppositions—specifically, Durkheimian ones—that we find it interesting and perhaps essential that the trials were moved from Ingersoll's Tavern to the meetinghouse. And it is only because we have an implicit theory of political and religious conflict that we can read Parris's fiery sermons as directed against certain of his enemies, and so on. Beyond our immediate interest in the issue, such selective assimilation of "key preceding events" or "key facts about the participants" could only function insofar as we had some theoretical sense of what makes social actors act. So we bounce from the ideographic to the nomothetic.

"Theory" has many meanings, but in one meaning, theory indicates propositions of great generality and the capacity to organize data scientifically. And, indeed, in seeking an explanation of the witch trials, we could turn to scientific explanation, not in the sense of producing experiments that could be predicted and controlled, but in the sense of understanding what happened at Salem as an instance of a broader phenomenon that can be systematically mapped or construed. What, in general, are the social processes and tensions that produce witchhunts, or perhaps, even more broadly, that produce moral panics? What are the configurations of social hierarchy, political power, and lay belief that cause such a phenomenon, whether it was in Essex County, Massachusetts; in Essex, England; or, for that matter, in medieval Bavaria? Here the primary tool of the investigator is comparison, combined with a specific sort of theoretical abstraction that posits mechanisms and pathways of action *independent* of this or that sociohistorical context. Thus an explanation derived from

theory so understood might venture this interpretation[10]: under market pressures, people begin to break communal norms of charity and act more individualistically about their money or property. But they feel guilty about not giving to the poor and look for a way to allay this guilt by making the poor undeserving. If belief in witchcraft is widespread, then accusing the woman across town of witchcraft is a good way to assuage your guilt about not helping her during hard times and to make sure she does not come knocking again. Contained in this account of witch hunting are several social and psychological mechanisms that can be posited, in theory, as aspects of human social life *independent of context*. Then the empirical task is to verify that these mechanisms were present, triggered, and effective in a given case. A structure, a mechanism, an explanation; the glories of nomothetic analysis.

And yet . . . what does it mean to cite the empirical phenomenon of "widespread belief in witchcraft"? Presented as the superficial aspect of so many explanations of witchhunts, the discourse reached for in a pinch by social actors under pressure from the supposedly much deeper causes of market advancement and state building, it is in fact only by getting into witchcraft as part and parcel of the social imagination that one can begin to comprehend such basic facts as why so many more women were killed than men, which men were killed when they were killed, and why.[11] But in doing this, we quickly discover that this "language of witchcraft"[12] has its own structure, its own capacity to mold the interests and convictions of actors, and its own social and historical efficacy. And now we are really in trouble, as far our clean conception of "general" theory goes.

I believe that we can understand this conundrum in the terms of the context of investigation and the context of explanation. If we were to take the Geertzian, meaning-based, approach to the context of investigation seriously, we would frame the question this way: theories are their own particular kind of meaning system, which resonate with social scientists for all kinds of reasons (including, but perhaps not exclusively, "empirical fit," "problem solving," and "truth"). The problem with a theory of witchhunting is not that it is, unlike rational-choice theory, not a *really* universal theory. The problem is that it is much harder to *pretend* that belief in witchcraft is a universal structuring factor of social action than it is to pretend that instrumental rationality is, because there is more instrumental rationality in our context of investigation. To universalize such a precise and specific mechanism is to project it—sometimes appropriately, often inappropriately, to other places and other times.

We are approaching an uneasy place with this statement, however; many social scientists would identify in a position like this the specter of relativism. But I have not made an argument that social scientists are *inherently unable* to use the right theory at the right time. What I have done, rather, is to suggest that the clean distinction between general theory and specific data, subject and object, and hypothesis and test is inevitably blurred by the knowledge claims that social science puts together. Maximal interpretations do not belong, really, to either the context of explanation or the context of investigation. To posit a meaning-centered explanation of witch hunting—or any other social practice or event—usually results in Geertz's "low-hovering" theories. To which context would a theory of witchcraft and its persecution belong, exactly? It does not necessarily explain anything else, or

posit some universal structure or process, yet it clearly goes beyond the facts of the context of explanation, minimally understood.

The Contexts and the Philosophy of Social Science: Avoiding Interpretation?

The only way to really maintain this clean distinction between the contexts would be to admit that the theories extant in the context of investigation do not reference or make claims about, in any way, the context of explanation! And then, the explanations constructed from these theories can only be a sort of mechanistic adding together of theory and fact. This is, in fact, exactly how logical positivism proposed to unify the sciences and solve the problem of the contexts in social science. For Hempel and others, theories—understood as covering laws—were ultimately linguistic or mathematical constructs that did not make a claim about the deep, unobservable structure of the world but rather were generalizations, which, when combined with some empirically measurable conditions, enabled prediction. Hence for the positivists, explanation was post facto prediction—no less, but no more. The context of investigation did not have to make deep claims about the context of explanation to be able to "do" explanation—in fact it should avoid this at all costs, lest it enter into the messy world of invisible causes and underlying structures—what A. J. Ayer would have quickly dismissed as metaphysical language.[13]

However, insofar as we do *not* accept the positivist view of what theories and explanations do, then we are invested, in some sense, in the *interpretation* of the context of explanation—of inferring, from the facts of the case, something deeper about that context, which explains the facts of the case. And so, even an explanation that rejects locality, meaning, signification, and historical specificity—in other words an explanation that rejects the Geertzian sense of culture—must on some level be making a claim about the context of explanation and thus be proposing a *maximal interpretation*—an interpretation that goes beyond what can be minimally apprehended by observing, interviewing and recording, surveying and counting, or chronologically ordering the actions of, human subjects. Explanations, no matter how nomothetical or abstract, insofar as they claim to know the context of explanation, are proposing to *interpret* the facts of the case, because what they are proposing about them cannot be *derived with certainty* from those facts, but only inferred from them in a leap of imagination that involves proposing a set of moral motivations, structures of feeling, economic opportunities, or political imperatives that do not come bubbling up out of the archive fully formed.

Thus it is that all explanations that draw on theory—broadly defined as a systematic set of propositions for how the social tends to work—are, in this sense, maximal interpretations of the context of explanation. To explain Salem through the functional needs of the collectivity to affirm its solidarity by excluding deviants[14] or to explain Salem through the economic interests of the accusers[15]—one should say, though usually such explanations do not, the economic interests of the *fathers* of the accusers—is, ultimately, to make a more or less tendentious interpretation of the facts that, in its very tendentiousness, claims epistemic power. As far as I can tell, no one has ever observed and recorded an "economic interest." Many people

have, however, found evidence for the existence of economic interests and thus have been able to construct convincing maximal interpretations of this or that event or this or that social phenomenon in terms of these interests.

The trick with most social-scientific discourse, and the philosophical discourses mobilized to justify it, however, is that it wishes to find some way to not be an interpretation. Hence the massive intellectual anxieties around, and theoretical energies devoted to, the separation of explanation and understanding, even though Weber clearly claims that they must coconstitute each other. And hence the myriad attempts—bordering on an obsession—to ground explanations in something other than meaning—in pragmatic or rational actors, in material circumstances, in the timeless hierarchies of status and class, and so on. The largest culprit here—and the reigning one in the *pseudo*-recovery of rationality that goes by the name of scientific realism—is the hope that the positivist version of theory, fact, and explanation can be replaced by the new project of social ontology.[16] According to realist epistemology, the theories of the context of investigation do in fact reference the context of explanation—but only to establish, through the positing of the very nature of the social (i.e., ontology), that whatever their differences, all contexts of explanation can in fact brought into comparison as different cases of the same fundamental reality. And it is to this reality that explanations will point. So ultimately, then, for realism, maximal interpretations are to be done in a way that retains the separation of the contexts, with the caveat that the context of investigation contains a key to the universe in its theories, and thus can tell you about the underlying realities that explain both social facts and the misshapen ways people involved in them interpret them. Now, it is quite clear what Geertz thought about such ontological hopes for a single unified explanatory schema:

> Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there *are* true twitches) symbolic action—action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.[17]

In other words, ontology is not so much wrong as it is a question that will not help in the project of explaining what is going on in human social life, and thus if theory is going to have a use, it will not be as an ontological standard setter that skips over the meaningful aspects of the context of explanation so as to link the context of investigation directly into "the social" and thus avoid the deep problems of hermeneutics.

From Minimal to Maximal Interpretation

So, social science is interpretive. Does that make it relativist? Unable to establish social facts? Absolutely not. There is no doubt that setting up the "facts of the case"—getting an initial handle on the actions to be explained, the factual information that

the context of explanation offers up with relative ease, involves interpretive work as well. But this process is, with some very notorious exceptions, less controversial than the claims about what underlies and explains the facts. Just think of the French revolution—we know what happened on the night of August 4, 1789, and the night after that, and the year after that, and so on. It is the explanation-qua-maximal interpretation of these events that stirs the hearts, minds, and pens of intellectuals. To say that on August 4, 1789, feudal privileges were to a great degree eliminated is a minimal interpretation. To say that the French revolution was a social revolution with political consequences is a maximal interpretation. Most of our work in social science occurs somewhere in between, but if we did not have the maximal end of the spectrum, what, exactly, would we be doing?

In other words, in positing explanations that derive from, but extend beyond, our theories and our data, we are always taking the risk of maximal interpretation—intermingling our context with that of others, in an attempt to produce knowledge that may make both us and our subjects uncomfortable. To use a Geertzian metaphor, maximal interpretations are a form of epistemological "deep play" where, like with the cockfight, we can establish certain principles for this particular genre of activity[18]:

> FIRST: the more an interpretation attempts to go beyond the easy consciousness of informants, or the "data on the surface", the more maximal the interpretation.
>
> SECOND: The more an interpretation renders problematic the neatness of existing theoretical propositions, the more maximal the interpretation

And, therefore, the inverse proposition also holds:

> THIRD: the more maximal an interpretation, the more controversial it will be, for the exact reason that it does not directly, easily, or minimally derive from what can be established about the context of explanation and the context of investigation.

Finally I would add as a sort of corollary the possibility of metaconflict over the very place a statement occupies on the spectrum—the Hawaiians receiving Captain Cook as a God comes to mind.[19] The larger point, however, is that the explanatory goals of social science bring with them a set of interpretive problems, and as the goals get grander and the explanations get more powerful, the interpretive problems become controversies. Hence a set of human sciences as messy as the humans are.

The Consequences of Interpretation

Having attempted, quite briefly, to outline the idea of maximal interpretation, I now turn to the issue that, implicitly, I have been addressing all along. Namely, that the Geertzian epistemological point is not only that all explanations are maximal interpretations, but also that for a maximal interpretation to be a *good* interpretation, for it to arrive, indeed, at a deep explanation of a social phenomenon or historical outcome, it must deal in meaning, and therefore, to quote Geertz again, "how much difference difference makes."[20] The variety of ways in which humans can take from

meaning a sense of how to act in the world is fantastic and endless. Thus comparison is a constant and useful process, but not because underneath the variety of cultures lie some elemental factors that can be judged to be present or absent. Rather, the very positing of a meaning formation in the context of explanation is always already a comparison with the meanings, which surround and orient the subjectivity of the investigator, in her context of investigation.

This has two consequences. One is the one we are very familiar with from the polemics of the strong program, which is that, in opposition to the assumption of a set of economic interests that drove the Salem witch trials, one would have to dive into, not only the facts of the case, but also what those facts implied about the worldview, ethos, and sacred symbols of the Puritans. One would have to comprehend Puritan culture. If one does this, one finds that witchcraft—as an aspect of the Puritan imagination—was a nightmarish inversion of the proper order of patriarchal relationships, in which the structure of the household—the relationship of Puritan men to their families—mirrored the relationship of God to his elect. When one considers this in conjunction with internal tensions in Puritan religion in the last 30 years of the seventeenth century, one begins to understand why the bodies of screaming women, thrust into the public eye, would stir the colonists to violent action, in defense of an order both metaphysical and sexual.[21] And I imagine it is relatively clear to the reader how this shift would apply to all sorts of social-scientific problems.

The second consequence of the imperative to make maximal interpretations deep is a little less obvious. It is to recognize that the interpretation of culture and deep interpretation are not coextensive. In other words, we should interpret the economic, the political, and, ultimately, the *social*—as part of an explanation, considering very carefully the distribution of resources, the marshalling and pursuit of status and power, and so on, but from the perspective that they are not ontologically determined, but rather themselves local formations, possessed of their own compacted meanings. In other words, investigating Puritan economics is no more a matter of verifying general ontological theory than investigating Puritan culture is. In either case, our theories have to guide us to maximal interpretations, rather than setting forth the inevitable underlying structures in advance. Thus, in considering the Salem Witch Trials as an episode in the transformation of Early America, to turn back to the question of "Puritan economics" is *not* to turn back to the rational economic interests of the Puritans as a class, group, or whatever, but *rather* to consider the Puritan mode of conducting trade and material distribution, constituted as a meaning system that, in the Puritan case, was by no means separate from the religious one. It might be worth asking, especially in the context of studying Salem, who was willing to marshal what resources to see these folks executed and what exactly this willingness *meant.* Puritan women were dragged into court for dressing "beyond their station," for sexual acts outside marriage, and for witchcraft—there might be a connection.

The implication, then, is that "culture" in sociology must move beyond itself, via the method of interpretation, to embrace the multitude of determining social "factors" of action. The result, I believe, will be not only a more contextually sensitive sociology, but ultimately also a more theoretically powerful one. Because if maximal

interpretation is a necessary aspect of sociological practice, then meaning-centered maximal interpretation is how it can become "deep" or "strong," worthy of the praise lavished on a serious cockfighter, a brilliant dramatist, or a researcher with a penchant for grasping reality.

Notes

1. Alexander, J. and P. Smith (2003). The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York, Oxford University Press: 11–26.
2. For example, Rabinow, P. and W. M. Sullivan (1979). *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press; Jameson, F. (1987). The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate. *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*. P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press: 351–64.
3. Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press.
4. The language for this distinction, of course, derives from the distinction made by Hans Reichenbach (1938) and used extensively by Popper (2002) between the "context of discovery" and the "context of justification." In their case, the purpose was to separate the psychological and social parts of science—how the scientist came upon her discoveries—from the philosophically specifiable logic that enabled scientific theories to be objectively justified. In technical terms, what I am calling the context of investigation would include both the context of discovery and the context of justification—indeed, Thomas Kuhn (1970) suggested that these two were not so easily separable and argued that the context of investigation as a whole, in natural scientific activity, was unified by a paradigm. Reichenbach, H. (1938). *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of the Foundations and the Structure of Knowledge.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Popper, K. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery.* New York: Routledge; Kuhn, T. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Reed, I. (2007). "Why Salem Made Sense: Culture, Gender, and the Puritan Persecution of Witchcraft." *Cultural Sociology* 1(2): 209–34.
6. Geertz, C. (2000c). Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, Basic Books: 26.
7. Ibid., p. 25.
8. Perhaps our *interest* in explaining certain phenomena rather than others is conditioned by our values, as suggested by Weber. But this explains that social facts "demand" explanation and not how we go about explaining them, which is what concerns me here. Weber, M. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences.* New York: The Free Press.
9. Boyer, P. S. and S. Nissenbaum (1972). *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England*. Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Pub. Co.
10. Macfarlane, A. (1970). *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study*. New York, Harper & Row; Thomas, K. (1971). *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York, Scribner; Federici, S. (2003). *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York, London, Autonomedia Pluto.

11. Whitney, E. (1995). "International Trends: The Witch 'She'/The Historian 'He': Gender and the Historiography of the European Witch-Hunts." *Journal of Women's History* 7(3): 77–101; Reed 2007.
12. Clark, S. (1980). "Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft." *Past and Present* 87: 98–127; Clark, S. (1997). *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. New York, Oxford University Press; Clark, S., Ed. (2001). *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology, and Meaning*. New York, St. Martin's Press.
13. Ayer, A. J. (1947). *Language, Truth, and Logic*. London, V. Gollancz Ltd.
14. Erikson, K. (1966). *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York, Wiley.
15. Boyer and Nissenbaum 1972.
16. Benton, T. (1977). *Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies*. Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul; Bhaskar, R. (1979). *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press; Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Manicas, P. T. (2006). *A Realist Philosophy of Social Science: Explanation and Understanding*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Reed, I. (2008). "Justifying Sociological Knowledge: From Realism to Interpretation." *Sociological Theory* 26(2).
17. Geertz 2000c, p. 10.
18. Geertz, C. (2000b). Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 441.
19. Obeyesekere, G. (1992). *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press; Sahlins, M. D. (1995). *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
20. Geertz, C. (2000a). *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 197.
21. Reed 2007.

CHAPTER 8

Thick Description as a Cosmopolitan Practice: A Pragmatic Reading

Paul Lichterman

Clifford Geertz's classic essay on thick description[1] is deceptively simple. It is Geertz the raconteur, telling us that when he is in the field with his subjects, he really is just trying to figure out "what the devil they are up to." Relaxed, amused with himself and his subjects alike, he pokes light fun at his own delivery as he tries to explain how he figures those people out. Along the way, he spars with unnamed but easily divined anthropological competitors, lifts from old field notes a story about a dispute in Morocco over some sheep, pulls quotes from Wittgenstein and Ricoeur, and recites a parable about quizzical folk theories of the world that is now standard quip material in ethnography circles ("it's turtles all the way down"). It is all quite chatty, and upon first and often second readings too, the reader is not sure what thick description is, much less how to do it.

In fact the essay is rich and difficult. It is brilliantly conflicted because the interpretive practice it promotes is an exercise in living with tensions and uncertainties that cannot be resolved in any definitive way. Despite trenchant and compelling criticisms from the 1980s onward that have made a large swath of anthropology skeptical of Geertz's interpretive work, thick description still is worth engaging; the essay is worth reading closely. We can manage the tensions, even enjoy them, by starting with Geertz's maybe surprising call for scholars to "know" as well as understand the people we interpret. I take up Geertz's challenge by considering thick description as a deeply theoretical project and a kind of cosmopolitanism that we put into practice by the way we write as well as the way we theorize interpretation. Cosmopolitanism risks making thick description politically or morally unsavory, and that probably is one reason why alternative forms of interpretation in ethnography have been so compelling in social science.

I approach thick description as a sociologist looking in from outside the disciplinary conversations closest to it: sociologists have hosted far less debate on the

epistemology, rhetoric, or politics of thick description than have anthropologists.[2] At the same time, I argue that thick description potentially makes good on a pragmatist philosophical heritage[3] that some sociological ethnographers claim.[4] It should make sense, then, to appreciate Geertz's essay from a pragmatic point of view that highlights ordinary, everyday interaction; problem-solving; and the possibilities of a genuinely cocreating community.[5] Viewing thick description from this standpoint will allow me to revisit some canonical, Chicago-school understandings of ethnography in sociology, which are in some ways competing understandings of the interpretive enterprise. I will propose that thick description complements the aims of work carried out in that sociological tradition and enhances its grasp of meanings in social life.

Some critics would hold that Geertz's later works left thick description behind[6] and stopped trying to tell things from "the native's point of view," though Geertz used that signal phrase in an essay[7] written a decade after the one I treat here. Rather than ponder the question of Geertz's own methodological consistency, I start from the assumption that not all interpretation is "thick description"—nor need it be. If thick description is worth pursuing and the essay still worth reading, it is because thick description bids us interpret, and write, in a particular way that is alive to the tensions the essay leaves us. Let me review quickly the master tension and then explore the imaginative work of cosmopolitan citizenship that good thick description requires. Thick description turns out to involve a complex synthesis of a theorist's and playwright's skills, and I submit a brief example from my own work to portray just one way that the synthesis can take shape. Finally I suggest that bearing with thick description's uncertainties rewards us with a nuanced view of culture we would miss in selected other sociological approaches to everyday action that offer other goods but trade away interpretive depth.

Between Description and Theory

Though once in a while we can still hear thick description being defined as the use of colorful adjectives and concrete nouns in ethnographic writing, it is clear enough how Geertz intends its core characteristic. It is writing that preserves the meanings of particular people in a particular time and place. Yet immediately things get dicier. On the one hand, Geertz upholds the particularity of meaning against attempts at reconstructing systems of symbolic relationships without regard to concrete behavior and concrete sensibilities—the "hermetical approach," he calls it, which would only "lock cultural analysis away . . . from the informal logic of actual life."[8] He scorns the approaches that claim to "understand men without knowing them" as a combination of "intuitionism and alchemy."[9] On the other hand, thick description rescues the meaning of particular acts from their quickly "perishing occasions" to "fix it in perusable terms."[10] Already it sounds as if we are running after chimera, hard dichotomies shadowing our path. Appeals to "knowing" men sound awfully naïve even if we forgive the conventional sexism of the phrase; decades of psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and pragmatic skepticism about being able to know people in some thorough and unambiguous way may make us wary of the whole enterprise. And how does Geertz propose to get from

perishing occasions to perusable terms without locking us inside a "hermetical" straitjacket of pregiven analytic grids?

He turns, nimbly, to theory. It is not that thick description directly builds theory. Rather, theoretical concepts organize the writing we call thick description. It turns out that that writing entails a "double task"[11]: first we discover the cultural categories that inform the action we are studying; that is the core move of thick description. That is, we figure out how the people we study divide up their world conceptually, in everyday interaction, whether or not they refer explicitly to those rule-of-thumb concepts. But then, we hang our thick descriptions on theoretical scaffolding that shapes those little concepts into patterns, much as individual threads take shape in the spider's web of culture, to invoke Geertz's famous metaphor. We write fragmentary interpretations into a "system of analysis" that organizes the particular meanings[12]—but not too systematic, lest we lose touch with the informal logic of everyday life and lurch toward the hermetical systems (read "Lévi-Strauss" here) that Geertz spars with throughout *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz is saying that interpretation is theory all the way down—even if it also contains much more than academic theory along the way.[13]

We write thick descriptions with theoretical, academic concepts such as structure, group cohesion, or ritual that informed our search for actors' meanings to begin with. Maybe foremost among the theoretical concepts that inform our interpretive writing is a notion of culture itself. Geertz's notion is weightier than his defenses against hermetical systems make it seem. Geertz assumes that meanings come in webs of significance; they relate to one another. Culture is not a messy jumble of idiosyncratic, local meanings. Culture comes in webs. The trick is to represent both the meanings of particular acts in particular places and their relation to each other within some broader, but not to say universal or unitary or uniform, culture.

In the time since the thick description essay, many sociological concepts of culture have sprouted, nurtured by different theoretical traditions, and any of them might offer theoretical framing for the meanings we identify in everyday life.[14] Like Geertz's implicit understanding of culture, the bulk of these concepts focus attention on cultural patterns that exist beyond single acts or single group settings. They pull us away from the particularity of situated actions. What, then, can keep Geertz's theoretically informed interpretive work grounded enough in everyday action to avoid turning us back to the hermetical, abstract, cultural "systems" that his essay derides? To address that, we must ask what makes a good thick description.

Part of the answer is that a good thick description depends on a notion of culture that grasps the possibility of both widely shared cultural patterns and specific meanings and uses of those patterns. Recent work in cultural sociology proposes such a theory, in which we apprehend both the broad pattern and the specific, meaningful instantiation of the pattern in the same analysis.[15] Sociology's current collection of culture concepts—discourse or code or narrative or vocabulary—already help us start that interpretive work. But then the interpreter needs to be alert to what the vocabulary or code means in *specific settings*, where informal, shared understandings about who we are and what holds us together shape the very meaning of the cultural structure in the setting. A theory of culture in interaction, rather than culture in the abstract, helps us follow what Geertz called the informal logic of everyday life

without losing sight of the broad webs of meaning that give some larger shape to those informal understandings.

Geertz himself did not necessarily define the "native's point of view" as I am suggesting we define it, as a cultural complex filtered through interaction in a *concrete setting*. Locating the researched in a particular "time and place" could mean placing them in an historical era and a society or nation-state. I am bringing different theories of actor and setting into my thick description than Geertz brought to some of his own work. As Vincent Crapanzano pointed out about Geertz's "Deep Play" essay on the Balinese cockfight, printed in the same volume as "Thick Description," Geertz's rhetoric did not make a convincing case that readers were hearing the researched on their own terms[16]: Balinese cockfighters did not speak as people situated in a very particular time and a local place, but more as a single, corporate "they," who used strangely Western metaphors to characterize themselves. "Deep Play" sometimes is taken to represent Geertz's mode of interpretation tout court, and much as the essay is a compelling interpretive performance, it pursues a different mode of interpretation than what I think Geertz aims for in "Thick Description."

Armed with a notion of culture in interaction, we can do the theoretical work of thick description. Still that does not get us all the way to Geertz's goal unless we put writing as well as theory in its service.

Writing the Imagined Conversation into Thick Description

Good thick description aims to "reduce the puzzlement" about unfamiliar acts in unfamiliar places, by "bring[ing] us in touch with the lives of strangers,"[17] so that we might "converse with them."[18] In fact, Geertz says that this is what makes thick description worth doing. And here again is the appeal to *knowing* people, not simply understanding them. Of course Geertz does not mean that readers are very likely to talk to the people portrayed in thick descriptions, and as for "knowing" people, he warns against simple subjectivisms, observing that good thick description is not an exercise in long-distance mind reading. "Knowing people" ends up less embarrassing to high-modern or postmodern sensibilities than it may sound. Nor does a good thick description necessarily secure validation from the people thickly described. The politics of thick description frankly is less democratic than that, despite some sociologists' good-willed insistence on accommodating the criticisms of the researched to achieve a fairer ethnographic account.[19]

We have to look very closely at what we *do* when we write thick description, to get clearer on how to "know" people as Geertz bids. We need to start by adding a third term to the "double task" that Geertz defined as a combination of description and theory. Recall that in Geertz's view, theory informs the ethnographer's search for actors' "conceptual structures" and offers a scaffolding of academic concepts that bind together the practical concepts of everyday life that we may have spent months in the field trying to understand. Yet if the point is to "know" people beyond schematizing them, then writing thick description involves something like writing a play as well as writing theory, and that is where we need to go beyond the terms of Geertz's essay and introduce something such as "playwriting," to appreciate the essay's potential as an intellectually radical synthesis.

Anthropologists have pointed out that rhetorical devices secure the ethnographer's textual authority, the author's continuous and potentially overwhelming presence in the text. I do not disagree, and the insight would apply to playwriting as much as other devices with which an ethnographer writes. I want to go somewhere else and suggest something about what the practitioner of thick description does for readers with that authority. Some postmodern criticism of thick description is famously author-centered, eager to unmask the author's power, demystify the author's social status, and hold the author accountable for the account. Hence the ditty about the research subject who told the anthropologist, "Enough about you, let's talk about me now." My notion of thick description as playwriting means to be more audience-centered without letting the author fade back into a gray neutrality.

In my pragmatist rendition, thick-descriptive writing invites readers to a momentary, imagined conversation in which they have just heard the researched, and decide what they would say back. It asks readers to *imagine* the first two steps of a conversation with the researched: hearing them and then formulating a response. In all, the ethnographer's "double task," then, is to write the people researched into the ethnographer's world—the theoretical move—and to write the ethnographer and the people researched together into an imagined world. This does not mean asking readers to experience immediacy or oneness with the subjects of thick description. Nor do I mean simply that ethnographers need to represent live conversation in our field notes, articles, or books; good ethnographers do that routinely. I mean that we need to engage in some small bits of creative script writing, representing what the researched *would* say in their own words on some issue that matters for scholarly or other outsider's reasons to the reader. This is the playwriting move that bids reader's credulity by standards other than those of logic or empirical confirmation. It is where interpretation as social science dances with interpretation as art. This is the way that thick description ultimately asks readers to be cosmopolitans.

In my experience few readers find very helpful the example of thick description that Geertz included in his essay on the topic—the scenario of a twisted encounter in Morocco, between marauding Berbers, a Jewish trader, a sheikh, and some French sentries. Let me illustrate the playwriting step with a different example. It is not necessarily an exemplary one, is far less exotic to North Atlantic readers than Geertz's, and is far less telling about an entire society than Geertz often aimed his interpretations to be. It may, though, be more self-consciously informed by the thick description idea that Geertz was still working out after his field sorties were over.

The case is a group of suburban environmental activists publicizing health hazards foisted on their town by a local military contractor, Microtech, observed by the ethnographer from 1989 to 1991. Members of Airdale Citizens for Environmental Sanity (ACES) worked hard at enticing their fellow Airdalers into a public conversation about the dangers of the Microtech's proposed toxic waste incinerator, at town meetings and hearings sponsored by the state's environmental protection agency. ACES members cultivated public discussion as a good in itself. Sometimes their own, monthly meetings became open forums for discussing the bigger issues that the contractor posed for Airdale—the morality of risk analysis, the necessity of expensive weaponry, and the meaning of the Cold War. Here were thoughtful,

deliberative citizens engaged in perfectly legal, socially responsible, civic-minded activity.[20]

These surface descriptions yielded a puzzle: why did they spend so much time convincing one another that they really were just nice folks, not obnoxious "boat-rockers" or "monsters with two heads" as they feared other Airdalers perceived them? Why was citizenly expression so frightening to them that one member wore a "company scientist" costume with a big mask while escorting the ACES float in the annual parade, so that her friends would not recognize her? Most of all, why did these timid, earnest citizens articulate what they were doing in America's widespread moral language of expressive individualism? Repeatedly members said their activism was a matter of "personal empowerment." To question Microtech's practices they needed to "find their inner voice." If attendance was low at ACES' public forums, it was because Airdalers needed more "psychological development." This is the language that sociological critics have tended to disparage as narcissistic, privatizing, atomizing, all the things that ACES members so obviously were not.[21]

Like Geertz, I came to the field site with theories, about the cultural language of selfhood in America, the meaning of togetherness in suburbia, the power of social settings. These theories primed me to find the puzzles I found and primed me also to suppose that Airdale could not simply stand in for "America," yet was not an entirely unique site either. Other theories would have prepared another observer for other puzzles. Discovering the "culture in interaction," I found that individualist-sounding language did not necessarily always mean what sociologists assumed it meant in general. For the Airdale activists, individualist language did not imply selfish expression but rather the respectable, moral option of taking some individual space to speak out in a privatized, suburban community to which they felt very attached. Showing how the cultural language of individualism took on meaning in particular settings was the theory-laden part of my thick description. My own implicit theory of culture allowed me to see both the pattern—the personal empowerment talk—and what it actually did in ACES settings.

This alone, however, would not get us closely "in touch" with the Airdale activists, so it may not reduce puzzlement that much. The next step would be to imagine how we would *talk* to the ACES activists, *make sense* with them, how we would honor their own, unselfish kind of individualism and respect for privacy. The pragmatic approach wants us to ask how people would communicate, not only how they would think silently. Airdalers did not know they were speaking the "language of individualism," and probably would have been confused or offended if told that they were "individualists"; that reaction itself would be an important indicator of the meanings that thick description tries to expose. The theory-laden prose by itself, in pragmatic terms, would make a poor interpretation because it likely would fail the test of ordinary interaction.[22] Ethnographers are constantly subjected to these tests and can arrive at thick descriptions by trying things out in words and seeing what kinds of talk or what kinds of categories work in the settings under study. Embarrassing mistakes are great learning experiences in the process of writing a thick description. In my case, the mistake of bringing a homemade strawberry pie to an ACES get-together taught me a great deal about the group's understanding of itself; some of their gendered categories had somehow escaped me until then.

To move from theory to practical rhetoric then, the thick description adds that "personal empowerment talk, for Airdalers, was not conveying 'do your own thing' but rather 'it's ok to speak out.'" Returning to Geertz's distinction between understanding and knowing, in theory-driven terms we "understand" their use of individualist language, and as academics we can make interesting connections to others' use of the same language. But then, we "know" these activists more by informal dialogue ("it's ok to speak out") that the ethnographer wants to represent as ACES activists' words, spoken with their tone and sensibility in the imagined conversation that the ethnographer begins for us. At best, thick description can help readers have a better conversation with other readers about what they would say back to the researched in the time and place of the researched, if given the chance ("Do you think it's ok to speak out, then?"). It is not Shakespeare, but we can think of it as simple playwriting that finishes the interpretive work of thick description in a practical way, turning it into something communicable in public conversation.

Thick Description Compared with Alternatives from Sociology

Thick description bids readers accept some uncertainty and open-endedness even when the ethnographer grounds it in theory supported by past ethnographies. Readers themselves cannot know whether a thick description "works" unless they put it to a practical test and act in the place and time of the researched. Even on the rare chance that readers can do that, they would be working from thick descriptions that are already an ethnographer's condensation of the conceptual structures of the researched. There is plenty of room for slippage. Thick description results as a very provisional answer to an interactional problem that few readers of most ethnographies will have the opportunity to confront.

Sociology offers alternative modes of interpretation that also zero in on everyday interaction and reduce the uncertainty, too. But these would give readers less to go on in those imaginary conversations with the researched. They depend on theories that would show us less about broad cultural patterns that inflect local action. Erving Goffman is standard-bearer for one of those modes.

In a way, Goffman, like Geertz, had a semiotic theory of meaning. He plumbed the meaning of the most ordinary everyday gestures, the stage acts of everyday life.[23] Others have used dramaturgical metaphors that sound similar to Goffman's to highlight narrative and dense symbolism,[24] but Goffman did not turn to cultural theory for sensitizing questions as Geertz did. In some of Goffman's most widely read works, meaning is some sort of social refraction. In these works, interpretation becomes sociometry: we read gestures, expressions, or styles of conduct to find out who is up and who is down, or who is socially acceptable and who has lost face, who is trying to avoid or acknowledge whom, and how.

From this part of Goffman's legacy[25], we get a microdemystification of selfhood on the most penetrating everyday level. If Goffman's own work tells us that social life is an endless exercise in mutual enchantment, then this version of interpretation, brilliant as it is in its own right, tells us a lot more about how to see through the researched than how to converse with them. It is very hard to imagine a successful

conversation in which the reader tells the researched, "I bet you are trying to impress me right now."

For Goffman, meaning inheres in the setting. To the extent that a larger body of "culture" matters in his work, it is a kind of stable backdrop for the drama on stage. It does not enter *into* the drama of self-presentation whether in anonymous public spaces, routine encounters with friends, or total institutions such as mental hospitals. To use the example from Airdale, there would be no individualism, just activists who get together to do things they define as "empowering," which may be only randomly related to the self-empowering things other people say and do in psychotherapists' consulting rooms or on TV talk shows. With this implicit theory of culture, we get little empirical room for exploring the different things people do with culture in different places. That question is moot if we assume culture is the sum total of meanings in settings and any convergences between settings are random or uninteresting. Geertz, in contrast, wanted to reconstruct culture through "systematic" relationships between different, local concepts thickly described.

Geertz's approach also differs subtly but importantly from what is still the most well known if internally diverse school of sociological ethnography—an amalgam of techniques, tropes, and implicit normative assumptions canonized as the Chicago school.[26] Chicago school studies roughly from the 1920s to the early 1960s, and later works influenced by them, focus frequently on the status order of a locale or the bounded social world of an occupation. Goffman was one of the most prominent graduates of the "second" generation Chicago school[27] of the time between World War II and the early 1960s, yet sociologists less often associate his work with that tradition than other classic works that students still read in sociology courses on participant-observation, such as William Whyte's *Street Corner Society*[28] or Howard Becker's still vaguely prurient-sounding "Becoming a Marihuana User."[29] Of course these works do interpretations, interesting ones, in the sense of discovering what acts mean to the actors. Chicago-school-style studies of local communities and occupational life help highlight the contrasts between the Chicago school's most prominent concerns and Geertz's project of thick description.

William Kornblum's *Blue Collar Community*[30] is a good place to find classic Chicago-school themes of social organization and social ecology at work. Kornblum set out to understand how ethnic groups competed and compromised and otherwise jostled for status in southside Chicago's ward and union politics. Rather than replay the old question of "why no socialism in the U.S.," Kornblum focused on what working-class ethnics were doing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, rather than what some progressive observers may have wanted them to do.

The account has wonderful glimpses of everyday meanings and informal social logics at work on shop floors and in mill neighborhoods underneath the steel and concrete skyway that carries commuters northward into Chicago. Kornblum explains that "the first question addressed to a new man whose communal attachments are not obvious is what are you? meaning what is your ethnicity and where do you come from in the area.[*sic*]" On the same logic, "it is considered 'normal' for the Polish to defend their compatriots in a conflict, for Mexicans to prefer to work with other Mexicans."[31] People might say, "For a Pollack, he's no dummy." It is not surprising that Kornblum's writings come closest to thick description when

the author represents the words that South Chicagoans themselves use or would use to talk about a new worker in the steel mill, a closely contested union election, or a neighborhood's changing racial composition. Momentarily, here and there, we enter an imagined community with south Chicago steel workers. Still, Kornblum's undeniably valuable account leaves an interpretive researcher with some questions.

Kornblum's work relied ultimately on normative assumptions about local status orders and social-ecological niches to fill in the work that interpretation might otherwise do. What did it *mean* to Mexican-Americans that they experienced a slow, difficult road to power sharing in unions and ward politics in South Chicago? Did they see themselves as "victims of racism," or perhaps simply "unready to lead," or maybe "sold down the river by fair-weather friends" at election time? How did milltown workers place themselves in the larger world of American race relations—how did they *talk* about race relations? Did they think young protestors were bringing down America? We cannot know for sure. The study has only a vague and implicit theory of culture to guide any foray into thicker description of broader, shared meanings. The text preempts the question with its focus on ethnic groups' ongoing jockeying for local political status. Status, in Kornblum's account, *is* what difficult political campaigning and dealing mean. In Kornblum's account, culture ultimately is one's relative social position.

A different account might have investigated ethnic group identity with a framework alive to broader cultural patterns, discourses about race, or Americanism, that might shape the doing of ethnicity across American working-class populations.[32] Kornblum had other questions than the kind that cultural sociologists now often ask, and the study pursued them with bravery and depth. The study's framing rhetoric, however, outstrips the implicit cultural analysis in the study: it wants to assume there *is* a "blue-collar culture" that many different blue-collar ethnic and racial groups, and different settings, will come to share.[33] A fuller, thickly descriptive account as I have envisioned it would ask for more investigation of this blue-collar culture—its categories and logics and styles of action—and a more nuanced treatment of how that broad culture may play out in particular ways in south Chicago. It would grasp larger patterns, using them to highlight, not obscure, their specific inflections in local settings.

Switch scenes from gritty-mill neighborhoods to the lecture halls and dorms of the University of Kansas medical school, in Howard Becker and colleagues' classic ethnographic and interview study, *Boys in White*,[34] and we find similar mode of interpretation, albeit with different tropes. Becker's team discovered how medical students, flush with initially high idealism and altruism, face the rigors of medical education, the barrage of facts and techniques they must learn during their stay in medical school. Conceiving their problem initially as "what medical school did to medical students other than giving them a technical education,"[35] they arrived at a marvelously detailed, rigorously substantiated account of what medical training *means* to medical school students. They learned the ways students produce and channel their efforts, having begun with the sociological perspective that "levels of effort" are determined as much by social interaction in the medical school setting as by individual motivation or intelligence.[36] The authors began with a metatheory, influenced by George H. Mead, John Dewey, and Charles Cooley, that individual

consciousness and action are deeply shaped by participation in group life.[37] It is the theory sociologists since the 1950s routinely call symbolic interactionism.

Boys in White leaves aside the notions of ecological niche or moral order that figure large in Chicago community studies and uses the interactionist concept of perspective as its main theoretical scaffolding. The research team finds that as the students interact with their peers and bounce off of their faculty, they socialize each other: They collectively define perspectives, shared understandings of medical training that organize their way of responding to the school's demands. Together, they go from a shared idealism of "trying to learn it all" about medicine to a more strategic divining of "what they [faculty] want us to know" to pass the training. "Perspective" is a more culture-focused guiding concept than ecological niche, and it makes shared meanings more explicitly central in the study than they were in *Blue Collar Community*. The Becker team holds that perspectives tend to cohere with one another, forming a "student culture."[38] Student culture evolves through interaction in concrete settings, and it coheres, they say, because students occupy the same social position in an institution. A sound understanding of a distinct subculture, this approach pieces together culture from the bottom up and conceives the bounds of a culture as coextensive with a local social structure.

Yet what if some cultural forms are shared across local social structures? It is possible that Kansas medical school students shared with other graduate students, other white-collar Americans, or other Americans in general, understandings about the power of medical cures or the rationality of Western medical science that they instantiated in their own setting. It would be hard to investigate how, if at all, broader cultural forms like these shaped interaction in the medical school without a theory of culture that is sensitive to broadly shared symbolic patterns as well as particular, local, instantiations. The Becker team took for granted the functional differentiation of technical occupations rather than making an issue of the cultural assumptions behind a distinct, scientific, medical profession as part of its study.[39] The study bracketed the cultural fact of medical discourse, so fascinating and problematic to Foucaultian scholars of medical science.[40] That is not to say the Becker team did not learn a great deal from their study, and certainly not that Foucault's approach was more "Geertzian" than the Becker team's. It is only to show how the theory of culture and the interpretive practice in *Boys in White* worked together to produce a study different from the thick description that Geertz might have done.

Ethnographies identified with the Chicago school constitute a more diverse literature than several studies described here can illustrate. Broader, more structural understandings of culture are available if less common in the tradition as well.[41] We need not doubt that the subjects of Chicago-styled ethnographies care about status or about the right definition of the situation in their milieux. In the practical vein, reading these studies may help us figure out how to feel for the subjects—which would mean how to act like we are in their social position, on their side. We might not, however, learn a lot about the breadth of symbolic categories that organized subjects' everyday lives, the questions the subjects asked about the world, apart from the question of which social categories are honorable, which kinds of action are OK or not.

Chicago school ethnographers, in the main, had other work to do. It simply is not the only interpretive work one might do. Alternatives to Geertz's thick description give us more certainty, but also narrow the possibilities for both "understanding" cultural forms and imagining what it is like to "know" their communicants in practical terms. They are too sociologically reductive. Thick description complements and can enhance Chicago ethnography with its shared focus on local action and local logics alongside a broader, more systematic understanding of cultural forms that are as real and consequential for action as the status orders that Chicago ethnographers have investigated so powerfully. Empowered with a stronger culture concept, ethnographers may also reinvent the underlying, cosmopolitan mission of early Chicago school scholars. They wanted to "know" and not simply manage, nor simply affirm, the ethnic populations and status groups they considered perplexing in the sprawling industrial city of a century ago.[42] Although deeply shared culture may not always be necessary for cross-cultural interaction,[43] and people can do a variety of things with shared vocabularies or codes, few would argue that knowing the shared vocabularies or codes of socially distant people would systematically *hamper* our efforts to speak with them. Maybe it was Geertz's Parsonian intellectual roots that gave him implicit faith in the existence of shared cultural webs beyond the most situational meanings, but the sprawling and still growing field of cultural sociology has been corroborating this stronger notion of culture even for complex, inegalitarian, multicultural, and multireligious societies.[44]

Cosmopolitanism or Critique?

Early Chicago school writers and generations of ethnographers influenced by them often have focused on deviant social types, low-class and low-status ethnic groups. These sociologists have tried to render them as *people*, ordinary social beings with a sense of honor. In even more normative terms, the idea of early Chicago ethnographers was to symbolically rehabilitate their subjects as citizens who could control their own fates and participate in steering social development in a democratic society.[45] Their sociology of urban life was at the same time a theory of democracy.[46]

Since the 1970s, a somewhat different cultural politics of ethnography has become much more common. Some ethnographers come to "the field" in search of the right people, whose stories they can deploy for social criticism. Whether they mean to or not, they often end up giving short shrift to the "conceptual structures" that organize actors' relationships, spotlighting only those that help tell the story of injustice and bracketing or downplaying the ones that are inconvenient for social critique.[47] Their explanations ultimately are normative, not fully interpretive.[48] In Geertz's words, these studies want to "fix" meanings in the "perusable terms" of social-structural analysis.

In this critical genre, we have many fine studies of socially subordinated groups such as low-wage workers, African-American men in poor neighborhoods, and fashionably marginal people, all of whom the modal American sociologist wants to know or *should* want to know for reasons of either cultural politics or solidarity politics. And of course we should value these studies; mine is absolutely no argument against their importance, though we may critique the limits on interpretation that

the critical imperative sometimes imposes. Yet consider that we still have few ethnographic studies of evangelical Christians, securities traders, or even middle-brow, middle-class suburbanites in places such as Airdale—the people many American sociologists frankly would rather not have in their imagined community. We may not want to "know" these kinds of people and places badly enough to spend energy convincing readers of how they talk and act in their own place and time, let alone spend time talking with them.[49]

Thick description in Geertz's vein speaks to a different normative interest than that of critical ethnographies, and one not so different from that of early Chicago school writers, though it might substitute global and cosmopolitan in place of national, civic community. Whether or not Geertz's own writing always helped readers "know" their subjects in the way his thick description essay proposes, his project remains an exciting and timely one for sociologists to revisit and improve today.

Notes

1. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." pp. 3–30 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
2. For one of the earlier, signal contributions, see the essays in the Clifford, James and George Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
3. My reading is not completely idiosyncratic. Geertz's cognizance of John Dewey is evident in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), the collection that carries the thick description essay. See also Cefaï, Daniel and Isaac Joseph, eds. 2002. *L'Heritage du Pragmatisme: Conflits d'Urbanité et Epreuves de Civisme*. Paris: éditions de l'aube.
4. One primer on qualitative social research, for instance, associates John Dewey—maybe too facilely—with an ethnographic methodology that produces "grounded theory." See Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. 1991. *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
5. John Dewey's very demanding notion of a cocreating, mutually transforming community comes alive especially in Stavo-Debauge, Joan and Danny Trom. 2004. Le pragmatisme et son public à l'épreuve du terrain: Penser avec Dewey contre Dewey." In Karsenti, Bruno and Louis Quéré, eds. *La Croyance et l'enquete*. Raisons Pratiques, no. 15. Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS.
6. See Kuper, A. 1999. *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
7. Geertz, C. 1983. " 'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding." pp. 55–70 in *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.
8. Geertz, 1973. p. 17.
9. Ibid. p. 29.
10. Ibid. p. 20.
11. Ibid. p. 27.
12. Ibid. p. 27.
13. Ibid. p. 28.
14. For just three sources, see Alexander, Jeffrey. 2003. *The Meanings of Social Life*. New York: Oxford University Press; Jacobs, Mark and Nancy Hanrahan, eds. 2004. *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA:

Blackwell; or Alexander, Jeffrey and Steven Seidman, 1990. *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

15. Eliasoph, Nina and Paul Lichterman. 2003. "Culture in Interaction." *American Journal of Sociology* 108:735–94.
16. Crapanzano, Vincent. 1986. "Hermes'Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description." In J. Clifford and G. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
17. Geertz, 1973. p. 16.
18. Ibid. p. 13.
19. This concern for taking into account the critiques of the people researched is evident throughout an edited collection of student ethnographies, widely read among sociologist ethnographers. See Burawoy, Michael, et al. 1991. *Ethnography Unbound*. Berkeley: University of California Press. The ethnographers puzzled over whether and how to "show your paper" to the people studied. The same interest in making interpretation more democratic also characterized some prominent practitioners of feminist methodology in sociology in the 1970s and 1980s; see for instance, Krieger, Susan. 1981. *The Mirror Dance*: *Identity in a Women's Community*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Krieger, like other researchers, showed her manuscript to the people she studied, worried about their negative responses, and then went ahead exercising her prerogative as an academic to publish her account, having convinced herself that it was a decent one despite what some of the people researched said about it.
20. Lichterman, P. 1996. *The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003).
21. For the more common sociological stance on expressive individualism and its pop-psychology variants, see Bellah, Robert, et al. 1985. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press. or Rieff, Philip. 1966. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. London: Chatto and Windus. ; for an alternative understanding, see Lichterman, Paul. 1995. "Beyond the Seesaw Model: Public Commitment in a Culture of Self-Fulfillment." *Sociological Theory* 13(3):275–300.
22. See Cefai, Daniel and Isaac Joseph (2002).
23. For instance, Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday; Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Behavior in Public Places*. Glencoe: Free Press.
24. For two examples, see Alexander, Jeffrey. 2004. "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy." *Sociological Theory* 22(4):527–73; or Turner, Victor. 1974. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
25. Taken as a whole, Goffman's work offers more than one interpretive lens. This short essay focuses on one that is evident in a number of his widely read works and usefully contrasts with Geertz's thick description. A somewhat different focus on everyday meanings emerges in Goffman, Erving. 1986 [1974]. *Frame Analysis*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. This approach shares with the first a focus on local meanings bound by everyday settings. Neither would highlight symbolic patterns or meaningful practices that endure regularly across settings; both are focusing elsewhere.
26. See Platt, Jennifer. 1996. *A History of Sociological Research Methods in America 1920–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
27. Fine, Gary A. 1995. *A Second Chicago School?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

28. Whyte, William Foote. 1943. *Street Corner Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
29. Becker, Howard. 1953. "Becoming a Marihuana User." *American Journal of Sociology* 59:235–43.
30. Kornblum, William. 1974. *Blue Collar Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
31. Ibid. p. 41.
32. See, for instance, Horowitz, Ruth. 1983. *Honor and the American Dream*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
33. Kornblum, 1974. p. 228.
34. Becker, Howard, Blanche Geer, Everett C. Hughes, and Anselm Strauss. 1961. *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
35. Ibid. p. 17.
36. Ibid. p. 11.
37. Ibid. p. 19.
38. Ibid. p. 49.
39. Ibid. pp. 6–9.
40. See Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume one: an introduction*. trans. R. Hurley. New York: Pantheon. This idea of the dominant cultural assumptions behind the *Boys in White* study is indebted to conversations with Matthew Loveland, formerly a graduate student in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
41. See for instance Horowitz, Ruth. (1983). This study of Latino young people that shows how broad cultural "codes" work in a low-income Chicago neighborhood; it investigates something like "culture in interaction."
42. See Addams, Jane. 2002 [1902]). *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Fine, Gary Alan. 1995. *A Second Chicago School?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
43. Bender, Courtney. 2003. *Heaven's Kitchen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
44. See, for instance, Smelser, Neil, and Jeffrey Alexander, eds. 1999. *Diversity and its Discontents*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; or Williams, Rhys. 2007. "The Languages of the Public Sphere: Religious Pluralism, Institutional Logics, and Civil Society." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 612:42–61.
45. See Janowitz, Morris. 1975. "Sociological Theory and Social Control." *American Journal of Sociology* 81:82–108.
46. Cefai, Daniel. 2002. "Qu'est ce qu'une arene publique? Quelques pistes dans une perspective pragmatiste." pp. 51–82 in D. Cefai and I. Joseph, eds., *L'Heritage du Pragmatisme: Conflits d'Urbanité et Epreuves de Civisme*. Paris: éditions de l'aube.
47. This is the occupational hazard of the "extended case method." See Burawoy, Michael. 1998. "The Extended Case Method." *Sociological Theory* 16(1): 4-33; Lichterman, Paul. 2002. "Seeing Structure Happen: Theory-Driven Participant-Observation." pp. 118–45 in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, edited by Suzanne Staggenborg and Bert Klandermans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Like thick-descriptive interpretation, the extended case method brings preexisting theory to the field site rather than supposing that it is possible to describe the social world on a blank slate. With its emphasis on macrosocial determinants of everyday action, there always must be trade-offs between "thin" descriptions of people and places, "thick" description of meanings, and theoretical attention to social structures.

48. Reed, Isaac, this volume, and Reed, Isaac. forthcoming. *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
49. My own ethnographic work on religious volunteers responding to welfare reform puzzled some colleagues and students who wondered why I was out to interpret rather than criticize the groups and suspected something politically unsavory might be going on. See Lichterman, Paul. 2005. *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

CHAPTER 9

"Malarial and Diffident": The Vision of Clifford Geertz

Robin Wagner-Pacifici

The essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," famously appearing in Clifford Geertz's collection *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, is iconic, as evidenced by its ubiquity in this edited volume celebrating Geertz. But it is the opening sentence of the first section ("The Raid") of the essay that, more than any other aspect of its rich social and cultural exegesis, has stayed with me over the years: "Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study."[1] The specificities of time and place and protagonists immediately draw the reader in. But the *almost* parenthetical phrase, "malarial and diffident," just as immediately gives the reader pause. Of course, being malarial might well make one diffident—but there is clearly something more to the appearance and combination of these adjectives. There is something that merits a pause and a second look at the adjectives and the introduction in which they appear.

In their offhand way, adjectives do a lot of work in describing a particular stance. The several-page-long introductory autobiographical narrative of "Deep Play," that of Clifford Geertz and his wife attending a local cockfight and running away from the police, situates that stance within a dynamic and intimate ethnographic context. It also poses a classic ethnographic problem. By what mechanism does an anthropologist gain access to a community? How does one "get in?" And the answer given initially here is, despite one's diffidence and malaria, one runs with the masses.

But the narrative also assumes, and, in the essay to which the introduction is attached, attempts to resolve, the problem of taking a stance toward the objects of observation and analysis. The resolution relies on a sense of anthropology as a vocation. And a big part of that vocation for Geertz is the license, the mandate really, to use adjectives (i.e., to write well and descriptively). Decisions about and definitions

of good writing turn out to be important both stylistically and substantively. They anticipate readers attuned to particular kinds of genres. And they highlight desires and anxieties about those readers' reactions.

To make this point vivid, I need only refer to a self-conscious writerly strategy of the recent *9/11 Commission Report*. The *9/11 Commission Report* staff writers made the decision to eliminate adjectives from their narrative of the events leading up to and occurring on that fateful day in 2001. They did so to be, as they claimed, objective. The Harvard University history professor placed in charge of the actual writing of the *Report*, Ernest May, noted in an interview: "It was also possible to strip away interpretive language, even adjectives and adverbs, so as to assure the reader that we were just reciting the historical facts."[2] One can imagine Clifford Geertz countering that all language is interpretive, and this includes nouns and verbs, that meaning inheres in all symbol systems, language included. The larger point here is that any vocation that engages rhetorical practices to constitute its objects of analysis for anticipated readers must be open to assessments that focus on its rhetoric and its writerly ways. Interpretation and representation are simply at the heart of the anthropological and sociological vocations. And Clifford Geertz knew this better than most.

Social scientists have a long history of self-reflection about vocations, their own vocation included. Perhaps the most recent iteration of this in sociology is that of Michael Burawoy's "Public Sociology" program. But in the interest in staying with the Geertzian articulation of vocational diffidence, I want to return to earlier examinations of social-scientific, and political, vocations, those of Max Weber in his essays "Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation." I return to Weber for several reasons—not the least of which is Geertz's own genealogical link to Weberian analysis.

Clifford Geertz is explicit in "Deep Play" that he is one of Weber's heirs when he writes: "[T]o follow Weber rather than Bentham . . . the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence."[3] Surely the tracking of meaning through the symbolic systems of social, religious, and political life is at the heart of Geertz's sense of vocation. But it is not only the centrality of meaning as an analytical focus that aligns Geertz with Weber. It is also the stance toward the social-scientific vocation.

In his speeches about vocations, Weber ruminates about appropriate stances for specific vocational roles, the interplays of passion and reason that bring one to a vocation and carry one along in it, the demands of objectivity, and the inevitable undertows of subjectivity. He also, especially in "Politics as a Vocation," originally delivered as a speech to law students, does significant theoretical work in defining the regnant political leadership structure, that is, the state, and in examining the relationship between violence and legitimacy in politics. In fact, the speech does so much more than meditate on the correct (and nearly impossible) combining of character traits and stances toward the world required of a political vocation. To this day it remains a touchstone for sociological theorizing about the state. In doing all of this in his 1918 speech, Weber registers a kind of sober shock—the state, understood sociologically (i.e., from the point of view of *sociology* as a vocation), is defined by its means. And its unique and unavoidable means is the monopoly of (legitimate) violence over a given territory.

Why did I think so immediately of Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" speech on revisiting Geertz's cockfight essay? What could they have in common—a speech to law students about politics in a defeated Germany at the end of World War I and an anthropological essay published in the mid-twentieth-century United States about cockfights in Bali? The adoption of a position on the issue of vocations is key. But how, exactly?

In some ways, the two pieces of social-scientific writing are the obverse of each other—Geertz is trying to get in, to become real to those he is studying, to take shape so that the Balinese will talk to him and give him access to their thoughts and feelings. Weber is trying to stay out, to refrain from commentary about real-time politics, statecraft, and politicians in a historical moment of heightened anxiety and crisis. But in the end, these essays share the same vocational dilemma—how, as social scientists, to *get in and stay out at the same time*.

Let me explain by engaging in a bit of textual exegesis. I read Weber's speech as consisting essentially of three sections, corresponding, roughly, to three academic disciplines—sociology, history, and philosophy. Sociology defines the state in terms of its constitutive means. History brings case studies from several countries to light. And philosophy bores deep into questions of the relationship between good and evil, responsibility and ultimate ends, and human compromise and divine purity. I also read the speech as ultimately unsuccessful in keeping these disciplinary frameworks and perspectives separate. Their intrusions into each other mark their inevitable insufficiencies when confronting the very real existential dilemmas of the political and social lives of actual human beings in society. These intrusions certainly mark the insufficiency of sociology on its own. The first section belligerently asserts its sociological frame. Starting on a downbeat, assuring his audience that his lecture would disappoint them, that he would *not* speak on policy questions of the day, Weber writes that politics should be understood as the leadership of a political association, "hence today, of a *state*." And hewing firmly to a sociological point of view, he defines the state in terms of its means, specifically physical force. Thus, the state is "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." Several paragraphs later, a second definition reads, "a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence."[4]

Weber tries very hard to remain within the sociological ambit, but the parentheses appearing in the definitions mark a space of uncertainty or ambiguity about the relationship between violence and legitimacy, between legitimacy and success. For Weber, the state's monopoly of violence distinguishes its sociological existence. But his definition resists collapsing into a version of "might makes right" by the introduction of the concept of legitimacy. However, this introduction proves problematic because it appears to insinuate "ends" criteria into a "means-only" definition. The parentheses attempt to hold the means (violence) and ends apart, but they only serve to highlight the true pathos of the enterprise. This pathos haunts the entire speech, and Weber notes toward the end of the speech,

> The early Christians knew full well the world is governed by demons and that he who lets himself in for politics, that is for power and force as means, contracts with

> diabolical powers and for his action it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true.[5]

Those choosing the vocation of politics must be sobered, to say the least, to confront such a bleak vision of a profession.

All of Weber's worrying about the relationship of politics and violence and his despondence over the state of Germany at the end of World War I is found in the initial set of parentheses. The parentheses suggest several questions. Does successful monopolization of violence distinguish legitimate states from illegitimate contenders? Is legitimacy merely a function of success or does it absolutely depend on broad, collective resonance, suggested by the parenthetical "i.e. considered to be legitimate"? If such dependency is crucial, why is its articulation embedded in a parenthetical with the structure of a tautology? The parentheses provide Weber with a way to obliquely acknowledge these struggles between philosophy, history, politics, and sociology and provide a way into and out of the conditions he is studying at the same time. Parentheses function to make things appear and disappear simultaneously, and these parentheses mark Weber's struggle to adhere to the sociological vocation's commitment to objectivity in the face of deeply philosophical and political anguish about, precisely, these objective revelations.

Clifford Geertz's introduction to his "Deep Play" essay has some structural similarities to Weber's introductory section in "Politics as a Vocation," despite their very different foci and genres. And "Deep Play" also shares a deep substantive preoccupation with "Politics as a Vocation." Both pieces of writing focus on a sociological object of analysis that suffers from what Geertz calls "doubleness." This is a quality that he attributes to the cockfights that he comes to find so central in his Balinese ethnography: "This crosswise doubleness of an event which, taken as a fact of nature, is rage untrammeled and, taken as a fact of culture, is form perfected, defines the cockfight as a sociological entity."[6] In other words, the cockfight is an object of both nature and culture. The cockfight *suffers* from this doubleness, but it is precisely this dual quality that makes it sociological. The sheer animal violence at the center of the cockfight event and at the center of Geertz's essay has two faces, that of wildness and rage, and that of an elaborate field of social relationships and hierarchies. For Max Weber, the doubleness at issue is that of the state itself. The state consists of monopolized violence, yet it is simultaneously entwined in, and dependent on, the encumbering systems of legitimate authority that attempt to manage that violence on the other side. With all their careful, and deep, exegeses of the contexts and meanings of the violent entities under scrutiny, both Clifford Geertz and Max Weber nevertheless are boldly peering into their respective hearts of darkness. Still, they peer with a certain diffidence.

To get at this diffidence, it is important to return to the structures of the introductions. In the case of the introduction to "Deep Play," we find the simultaneous assertion and demurral of the narrator's particular identity—in this case malarial and diffident. And that identity is itself presented in an ambivalent key. Diffident might imply self-effacement: I am here but not intrusive, not presumptuous, and not certain about degrees or types of engagement with those I wish to study. Malarial might imply a self that is self-conscious about its bodily estrangement or sacrifice in

the service of knowledge: I am here, but under duress.[7] There is the expressed desire to see things clearly, that is, in this case, anthropologically. In "Deep Play," there is also the desire to be *seen* clearly, to be recognized, but again only to see others clearly. In the case of "Politics as a Vocation," we find a similar simultaneous assertion and demurral of identity. The great sociological theoretician is in demand as a speaker in a time of national political crisis, yet while he acknowledges that demand, the calling forth that brings him to the podium, Weber also seems to undermine it: "This lecture, which I give at your request, will necessarily disappoint you in a number of ways."[8] He will not speak to the issues of the day, the issues of such great concern to his audience of law students. A certain distance, then, a certain refusal to plunge into the heart of things, seems to pervade both introductions.

Mainly, though, the structural similarities between the two essays have to do with the way that the introduction of "Deep Play" and that of "Politics as a Vocation" function as miniature versions of the entire essays to come. Each functions as a mise en abyme. For "Deep Play," all of the eventually important elements and themes appear in combustible combinations in the initial scene of watching a cockfight and running away from the police: the importance of social institutions and their navigations, the theme of loyalty, the forms of social segmentation and social hierarchy, the meanings and consequences of crossing lines, confrontation with authorities, violence, and the role of illusion and reality in social organization. In the same way, Weber's "just the sociological facts" introduction to his "Politics as a Vocation" speech contains all the elements that will later be taken up—the relationship of violence to legitimacy, Weber's assertion of reticence about problems of the day, the dark state of politics (and the dark mood it causes in Weber), and its essential collusion with violence. And just as these philosophical, political, and historical urgencies enter into Weber's sociological introduction (thus compromising his sociological bulwarks), so do the urgencies and contradictions of the vocation of the anthropologist enter Geertz's introduction. However, just as Weber uses *parentheses* to insulate and embed the dilemmas and tautologies of success in monopolizing violence and the role of legitimacy, so too there is no *direct* communication between Geertz's narrative of anthropological metamorphosis and the ethnographic analysis of the phenomenon of cockfights that follows. Geertz's introduction functions as a parenthesis. After the flight from the police and the newfound recognition by the villagers, Geertz never looks back and does not, again, locate himself in the picture. The next section of the essay, "Of Cocks and Men," immediately turns to a more general discussion of cockfights.

It is precisely these inscriptions of diffidence in both Weber's and Geertz's writings that I want to focus on in the remainder of this essay. And I want to raise the question: does diffidence as an essential aspect of the social-scientific vocational stance preclude explicit and direct discursive reflexivity? And if so, is this necessarily a bad thing?

Before responding to this question, I want to first highlight the thematic pulse-points in Geertz's introductory narrative, pulse-points that become consequential in the ethnographic analysis later. Not only do they become consequential, there is a substantive significance in their structural parallelism. But it is important to note that it is not always the case that the manner in which Geertz, the cockfight

fugitive, experiences these themes, coincides with the manner in which Geertz, the cockfight analyst, assesses the consequences of these themes for the Balinese. However, these divergences are not explicitly reflected upon. The themes are as follows: (1) *Diffidence or shyness* as a peculiar or noteworthy human characteristic, albeit *temporary*, of both Geertz and the Balinese. Geertz quickly follows up his own self-description as "diffident" with a reference to Bateson and Mead's description of Balinese diffidence toward strangers, their quality of being "away." Geertz then notes that there is a "magic moment" when "[the Balinese individual] decides . . . that you are real, and then he becomes a warm, gay, sensitive, sympathetic, though, being Balinese, always precisely controlled, person."[9] (2) *The role of status group loyalty*. Geertz's own housing was organized by the provincial government, and he was staying in a compound in "one of the four major factions in village life." His landlord was the cousin and brother-in-law of the village chief. Nevertheless, during the initial scene of flight from the police, Geertz and his wife run in the opposite direction from that of his compound and tumble into the courtyard of a stranger who "became one of my best informants." As an interesting side note here, this phrase about the host becoming an informant actually appears in a *parenthesis*. As the issue of not crossing status group lines in the cockfight betting system becomes so important later on, it is interesting to think about the way Geertz, himself, may have switched patrilineal descent groups by diving into an unfamiliar compound. But beyond informing the reader that this move gave him access to someone he might never actually have come to know, we learn nothing about any possible ramifications of the encounter for his relationship with his own landlord. (3) *Relationships to authority*. The police arrive to break up the cockfight, and Geertz and his wife choose to run away with the villagers instead of showing their anthropological credentials to the police. The authority structures in the later analytical sections of the essay are embedded and crosscutting ones, and the essay makes note of the dilemmas posed for individuals with split or overlapping loyalties. These authorities include the state (often represented by Javanese policemen), individual villages, rural merchant groups who organize many of the cockfights, and "the involved system of cross-cutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups—villages, kingroups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, 'castes'—in which devotees live."[10] (4) *Violence*. When the police arrive they do so in dramatic fashion, swinging their guns around wildly, though they do not fire them. They appear in this introductory section as more Keystone Cops than postimperial brutes, but Geertz does note (with studied casualness) that occasionally, some cockfight participants are taken by the police and made into object lessons. They may be exposed to the sun for a day and "quite occasionally, the object dies."[11] The violence of the cockfight itself is suggested in the description of the frantic cocks running around in the ensuing chaos with their sharp steel spurs, "sharp enough to cut off a finger or run a hole through a foot."[12] Violence comes to play a significant role later on in the essay, as Geertz attempts to understand the extreme violence of the cockfight itself. And a footnote (a feature of punctuation like that of the parenthesis—allowing something to appear and disappear simultaneously) toward the end of the essay connects that violence with the 1965 massacre of Balinese in the unsuccessful coup in Djakarta, in a highly qualified statement about the general pattern of Balinese

life. (5) *Possibilities for real identity transformation*. The main point of the introductory narrative is that by running away from the police in tandem with all the other cockfight spectators and participants, Geertz has managed to become real to the villagers. He has found his way in. Thus, this act accomplishes a real transformation of identity for Geertz. In the later analysis of the status stakes for cockfight betting, Geertz analogizes the cockfight to poetry, an art form that "makes nothing happen." He writes,

> [N]o one's status really changes…All you can do is enjoy and savor, or suffer and withstand, the concocted sensation of drastic and momentary movement along an aesthetic semblance of that [status] ladder, a kind of behind-the-mirror status jump which has the look of mobility without its actuality.[13]

So, although Geertz's status *really* does change as a consequence of his behavior around the cockfight, cockfights themselves do not, according to Geertz, carry a real transformational mechanism.

What, then, is a cockfight? And what does it accomplish? In the complex and beautifully rendered analytical section, Geertz does indeed stay "within a single, more or less bounded form, and circle steadily within it." The cockfight is revealed to be many things simultaneously. It is a blood sacrifice offered to demons of darkness, through individual and collective identification with the cock; an aesthetic experience "so beautiful, as to be almost abstract, a Platonic concept of hate"; a focused gathering; a series of exchange relationships (with the caveat that "as the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence, that access of significance more than compensates for the economic costs involved"); a simulation of the social matrix; an

> art form…the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived.

And, finally,

> a meta-social commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks…Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.[14]

In analyses of social and cultural forms, blood sacrifices and Platonic concepts of hate are not usually theorized as cohabiting with focused gatherings, exchange relationships, and poetry (except, perhaps, in some of the ethnographic work of Bourdieu on symbolic violence). These diverse social activities seem to derive from diverse social registers—some are tragic, some comic, and so forth. But in "Deep Play," the organizing logics of the genres of romance and comedy and tragedy and melodrama come into and out of focus as Geertz attempts to get to the heart of the cockfight system. As I noted earlier, violence makes several appearances, but its

impact is kept at bay by its contiguity to the ludic (especially in the introduction) and by its exiling to the footnotes.

At first glance, the narrative structure of "Deep Play" may appear to be the inverse of Weber's in "Politics as a Vocation." Weber highlights state violence at the outset and keeps the ideal ends of the states, their legitimation claims, at bay. He writes,

> In today's lecture, all questions that refer to what policy and what content one should give one's political activity must be eliminated. For such questions have nothing to do with the general question of what politics as a vocation means and what it can mean.[15]

But Weber cannot carry through with his own program. He both comments on the actual historical situation he claimed sociological definitions of the state and politics must ignore and, by way of parentheses, inserts the dilemma of keeping means and ends of states separate in the very sociological definitions initially deployed. Diverse literary genres make surprising appearances in Weber's speech. Weber quotes from a Shakespearean sonnet about springtime and youth to explicitly contrast the current state of German politics. At other points, he sounds altogether Faustian in his assessment of the need for politicians to contract with demons and dark forces.

"Politics as a Vocation" and "Deep Play" actually resemble each other in their attempts to simultaneously *recognize* the work of violence in social and political formations and to *deflect* their own dismay at these recognitions. They manage this contradictory stance via a strategy of discursive marginalization. The apparently ludic introduction of "Deep Play," for example, belies its tragic core. But tragedy makes its appearance nevertheless. The cockfight is indeed a violent event, and if it does mirror Balinese social structure and constitute a "Balinese reading of Balinese experience," then this experience is deeply dark. What stance allows both Geertz and Weber to come close to these darknesses and yet avoid being swallowed up by them?

Conclusion

The vocations of sociologist and anthropologist require both proximity and distance. The subjects of analysis must be seen clearly and in a detailed manner (whatever the chosen methodology). But as Carlo Ginzburg has recently demonstrated in his book *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, it is not obvious how one should calibrate the proper distance to achieve objectivity and revelation and the proper perspective to achieve both a social topography and a thick description. Sympathy and defamiliarization may indeed pull in opposite directions. Diffident engagement, far from being an oxymoron, may be a solution to that dilemma. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines the contemporary usage of the word "diffident" as: "wanting in self-confidence; distrustful of oneself; not confident in disposition; timid, shy, modest, bashful." Although diffident seems here to register one's relationship to one's self, it inevitably also signifies one's way of relating to others. In fact, the first definition of "diffident" in the *OED* is "wanting confidence or trust (in); distrustful, mistrustful (of)." Diffidence in that regard may seem to indicate a temporary state—shyness in situations that are unfamiliar or untested—waiting

to be surpassed. But diffidence may also be a permanent state. One may simply be diffident in and of the word. Or one may adopt a permanently diffident stance as a vocational worldview. Diffident engagement as a permanent stance sustains a vocational distance that is as much about difference as it is about objectivity. That difference may be simply one of position—the vocational position. Returning to Geertz's opening narrative of "The Raid," with his moment of self-abandonment and his physically bold entrée into the life of the village, we do not, in fact, find a permanent sloughing off of diffidence as a vocational stance. Perhaps we find merely a momentary forgetting of it in emergencies.

There is engagement nevertheless. And it gestures in two directions, backward to the objects of observation and interpretation and forward to the eventual readers or listeners.[16] Weber gestures with his direct reference to his law student audience, full of aspiring politicians. He tells them he will disappoint them, but he acknowledges them nonetheless. Geertz gestures indirectly to his readers by crafting a readable, artful essay that moves its plot forward through a spiraling structure of recurring themes. But the gesture toward the reader is similarly diffident as the centrality of the violence at the center of the cockfight ring keeps slipping in and out of focus. And what about the other adjective describing Clifford Geertz's initial state in the village—malarial? Even with the lightest of touches and a ludic register, it is no insignificant thing to be "malarial." This word reminds the reader that the anthropologist is there, in that remote Balinese village, under duress. But just as quickly, this duress retreats to the sidelines in the ensuing symbolic anthropological analysis. Max Weber also delivers his speech to law students in Germany in 1918 under duress. He is the disillusioned monarchical nationalist staring into the chasm of German defeat, revolution, and reaction. In his case, duress retreats, or at least tries to, as sociology takes over the discussion of politics and the state. But the engagement of Weber becomes more anxious than diffident as the political darkness seems to overtake the essay at its end.

With all their structurally similar negotiations through troubling issues of violence and authority and meaning, Clifford Geertz and Max Weber both determine to end on a positive note, a note of *vocational triumph* over duress. After asserting that "Not summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now," Weber nevertheless ends with this exhortation to endurance, to a triumph over duress:

> Only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say 'In spite of all!' has the calling for politics.[17]

For his part, Geertz draws the astute reader's attention to the massacre of between 40,000 and 80,000 Balinese in the 1965 coup attempt on the second to the last page of his essay (in the footnote mentioned earlier). But then, he actually ends the essay with an appeal to anthropologists interested in the work of cultural interpretation. And his ending finally brings him, and the reader, back to the introduction: "[S]ocieties, like lives," he writes, "contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them."

Ambiguity and contradiction, "doubleness" in Geertz's terms, seem to be the name of the game. Different scholars have different reactions to this doubleness of social life. One reaction is what I have termed "diffident engagement," and this essay has attempted to trace its contours as laid out in exemplary fashion in Clifford Geertz's essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." As diffident engagement plays out in the practice of writing sociology or anthropology, it can actually be a good thing for highlighting ambiguities and letting the reader do the work. The reader must play the introductory sections of these writings against what follows, must force the different sections to confront each other. The reader must acknowledge the contradictions that are both highlighted and evaded by these two giant thinkers, must call attention when initial themes are reintroduced later on, but in a radically different key. In the end, the reader must pay tribute to these vocational endeavors. For what both Max Weber and Clifford Geertz teach us to do is to think clearly and deeply about structures of distance and proximity, about the contradictions of violence and social order, in dark times as well as in times more routine.

NOTES

1. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books. p. 412.
2. May, Ernest, "A Memoir of the 9/11 Commission. When Government Writes History," *The New Republic*, online version. May 16, 2005. p. 8.
3. Geertz 1973, p. 434.
4. Weber, Max. 1958. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology.* Eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 78, parentheses in original German.
5. Ibid., p. 123.
6. Geertz 1973, p. 424.
7. Thanks to Peter Brooks for these excellent suggestions about the meanings of these chosen terms.
8. Weber 1958, p. 77.
9. Geertz 1973, p. 413.
10. Ibid., p. 436.
11. Ibid., p. 414.
12. Ibid., p. 415.
13. Ibid., p. 443.
14. Ibid., pp. 420, 422, 436, 443, 448.
15. Weber 1958, p. 77.
16. I thank Michael Yarbrough for this brilliant insight about the duality of orientation in "Deep Play."
17. Weber 1958, p. 128.

Part III

Geertz and the Disciplines

CHAPTER 10

Thick Description, Thin History: Did Historians Always Understand Clifford Geertz?

Stuart Clark

In 2006, looking back over 40 years of the practice of history, Keith Thomas concluded that calls for greater use of theory had been "abundantly answered." He noted the delayed impact of the ideas of, among others, Marx, Durkheim, Freud, Kuhn, Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu, and Clifford Geertz. "This is unsurprising," he wrote, "for what happens in one generation in economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, or anthropology will usually be reflected in the history-writing of the next, even if its authors have never read a word by the theorists concerned." What was more significant was that historians had become much more self-conscious about their borrowings, scattering their writings with theoretical references and terms such as "discourse," "the public sphere," "path dependency," and "thick description."[1] Such remarks invite reexamination of a case such as Geertz's, if only because of their somewhat sardonic flavor.[2] Inevitably and quite legitimately, the concepts and vocabularies of theorists in other subject areas do work themselves into the practice and writing of history without historians always having to pay attention to exactly where or how they originate. Nevertheless, negative aspects of theory exchange in the human sciences are implied by the way some historians adopted Geertz's theory of culture, and there are strong indications that they ought to have worked harder at the interpretive principles lying behind it when frequently citing him in their footnotes. As Thomas noted, this was definitely not a case of theory seeping unattributed into history: Geertz was incessantly named. What emerges, alongside the more positive signs that he remarked on, are the difficulties experienced by historians in coming to terms properly with developments in social, critical, and cultural theory between the 1970s and the 1990s—a situation that can be attributed to deep and

lingering suspicions about "theory" and to theory incompetence, both of which, to an extent, remain in the profession.[3]

There can be no doubting Geertz's broad influence on history and historians from the 1970s onward, marked by a more and more fruitful general relationship between history and anthropology and, wider still, a historiographical "interpretive turn" that in some cases matched any undertaken elsewhere in the human sciences.[4] These developments have been very widely identified and commented on, not least by those looking to take historical practice beyond them.[5] Routine summaries of Geertz's ideas have appeared in the standard guides to historiography since the 1970s, and there has been virtually unanimous agreement on the key role that he had not only in the emergence to prominence of the new cultural history and subfields such as *Microstoria* and *Alltagsgeschichte* but also in the flourishing of New Historicism in literary studies, where he was hugely influential on historians at one remove.[6] Indeed, wherever the "text analogy" has been put to work in specific fields and styles of historical inquiry, Geertz is recommended as both source and model. In 1990, the medievalist Gabrielle Spiegel typically described him as "the dominant figure in promoting the use of semiotic models for the study of culture and history on the Anglo-American scene,"[7] and in 1992, Lawrence Stone, doyen of early modern historians but by then a critic of anthropology's influence on history, acknowledged that Geertz's brand of symbolic and social anthropology "has already had, and is continuing to have, a stunning effect upon historical scholarship."[8] Accolades of this sort are best summed up in Eric Hobsbawm's view that whereas after 1945 young historians turned for new ideas to Fernand Braudel, after 1968 they turned to Geertz.[9]

Many individual reactions to Clifford Geertz were also highly perceptive, theoretically sophisticated, and genuinely interdisciplinary. One thinks of the examples of Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, and William H. Sewell in the United States or of Roger Chartier, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and Jacques Le Goff in France, of Hans Medick in Germany, and of Peter Burke in the United Kingdom. Analysts of historical theory, such as Spiegel, or Geoff Eley, or Lynn Hunt, or Elizabeth Clark, can similarly not be faulted in grasping what has been at issue. And yet across the broad spectrum of "normal" historiography much of the citing of Geertz was superficial. One commentator says he was used as "window dressing."[10] Reference to him was voguish and not so much about naming as name-dropping—ceremonial citation, indeed. It was also highly selective, as if Geertz was the only anthropologist relevant to historians, and as if he wrote only one essay (possibly two): "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" and perhaps also "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." Historians ignored, or at least neglected, one of the most obviously historical of his works, *Negara*, as well as Geertz's related (and extremely perceptive) incursions into early modern English history on the subject of "symbolic centers."[11]

To illustrate these problems in the reception of Clifford Geertz by historians—and in theory exchange across the human sciences generally—we need go no farther than one of his most famous concepts (many historians did not get beyond it either). We may question, in particular, whether, even while committing themselves enthusiastically to "thick description," historians did not continue to write, or, at

least, think, "thin" history—for want of closer attention to what Geertz and Gilbert Ryle meant by the idea and its exact theoretical origins and implications.[12] It is even the case, however improbable this seems, that in many instances of Geertz citation, historians took "thick description" simply to mean more description, as if a thin description of human behavior could be rescued from its thinness simply by the addition of detail—or to put it another way, as if even the most detailed, indeed microscopic, thin description possible would not (from a Geertzian perspective) still completely miss the essence of what was being described. Imagine the length and complexity of an adequate account of the physiology and pneumatics involved in a person pumping up a bicycle tire, which would nevertheless ignore that person's "framing intentions [and] the culture within which those intentions acquire their significance."[13]

Many examples of this can be found in specific historical studies and also even in programmatic surveys of historical practice. Thus, Robert Berkhofer identifies "thick description" with historians' sense of the past "as plenitude" (a "full living past reality") and their desire to capture it in its fullness ("in its full complexity"); Gertrude Himmelfarb defines "thick description" as "the technique of bringing to bear upon a single episode or situation a mass of facts of every kind and subjecting them to intensive analysis so as to elicit every possible cultural implication"—this is immediately after she has remarked that the concept was "quoted so often and so inappropriately that [Geertz] must be heartily sick of it"; and Ludmilla Jordanova resorts simply to "detailed accounts of behaviour that serve as a starting point for deeper understanding."[14] There has clearly been a major conceptual confusion at work at the level of routine citations of Geertz's notion—what Aletta Biersack has called a confusion between semantic and material thickness[15]—and for this the descriptive empiricism that has continued to pervade historical practice can be blamed. Excused partially by Geertz's own potentially misleading retention of the word "description" to refer to what was in fact interpretation,[16] many historians simply assumed that they were getting backing from an influential, readable (and fashionable) theorist for what they already did and failed to look beyond the term, or the essay in which it appeared, to discover its full theoretical implications. Several commentators have noted how congenial Geertzian theory was to many historians in the 1970s and 1980s, who saw in his ideas and work many parallels and resonances with their own. According to James Sharpe, the intellectual problem raised by the technique of "thick description" was especially familiar to social historians—that of negotiating the two-way traffic between the "social event" and its "full cultural context," so that they could both be studied analytically and not merely descriptively.[17] But given the apparently painless absorption of Geertz, a doubt inevitably arises about whether the sense of recognition was not misleading. Geertz's allure may well have been deceptive both in camouflaging a demanding social theory and in dulling historians' appetite for further theoretical delving into what exactly they were committing themselves to.[18]

Other definitions of "thick description" have concentrated on what are actually its secondary characteristics, not its primary feature of semiotic interpretation. It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of the technique that the accounts of human behavior that result are detailed. But this same limitation applies to several of

"thick" description's other supposed characteristics: that it "should make the 'other' appear to the observer in his/her 'otherness' "[19]; that it is about the "texture" of historical writing, as in the statement that it offers "richly textured accounts which have the depth and the contours to permit substantial anthropological analysis"[20]; and, above all, that it concerns itself with "ritual." After failing to get mentioned in the first edition of John Tosh's widely used *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*,[21] "thick description" entered the second edition as the analysis of "social ritual."[22] In the fourth edition it is parked more encouragingly in the chapter on "Theories of Meaning," but it is still equated with the analysis of ritual or symbol and described as offering "cultural readings of very densely textured, concrete facts."[23]

* * *

There are two features of the "thin description" referred to by Geertz in his famous 1973 essay that seem to have been continued in normal historical thinking, despite historians ostensibly coming under his influence. Both are concerned with issues in the philosophy of action: the first with the relationship between action and meaning and the second with the ontology of action. By reconsidering these issues, it is possible to qualify the "Geertz effect" on historians and cast what has been called their "cultural turn" and Geertz's part in it in a more critical light.

First, there is the question of the relationship between action and meaning—in effect, the key to Geertz's semiotics of culture. In the essay, "thin" description, as we all know, is characterized in terms of its inability to tell the difference between a twitch and a wink because it identifies in both only a rapid contraction of the right eyelids—whereas a twitch is merely an involuntary bodily movement and a wink is an act of communication with (what Ryle called) potentially complex success-versus-failure conditions. But Geertz goes on to add a further comment; he says,

> As Ryle points out, the winker has not done two things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking.[24]

Moreover, when we return to the original essay by Ryle, based on a lecture given in 1968 and entitled "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is Le Penseur Doing?," we find that this additional point (the not doing of two things but only one) is, for Ryle, the crucial thing not just about the distinction between twitching and winking but also about human action in general and the action known as thought in particular. His argument, he says right at the outset, is about "the notion of doing something"—better rendered, for present purposes, as "the notion of doing *something*."[25] When the something being done is winking, the winking cannot be thought of as the second part of a twofold action of which contracting the eyelids is the first, simply because the two are inseparable. Winking is not separately doable from contracting the eyelids; there is, in fact, no such thing as the first without the

second. So far this takes the argument only as far as Geertz takes it: that is just what winking is. But Ryle then goes on to make the same point about other "main verbs" of action. Obeying, for example, also cannot be done by itself; it is not a "separately orderable action." Thus, "obey!" would be a meaningless thing to order someone to do. In effect, the verb "to obey" always has to be considered adverbially; it always requires the doing of something to be obedient (or disobedient) about, something we can or cannot do obediently. "The verb 'obeyed,' " says Ryle, "cannot be the sole verb in a non-elliptical report of what someone did."[26]

In fact, as Ryle's essay moves toward showing what kind of a "doing something" thinking is, it becomes clear that his argument centers entirely on such verbs—"constitutionally adverbial verbs," as he eventually calls them.[27] Among them are many associated with the original winking example: parodying, practicing, pretending, shamming, together with experimenting, demonstrating, canceling, and correcting; and others associated with the obeying example: complying with a request and keeping a promise. Ryle significantly adds "saying" to his examples (the thin description of which is voicing noises), together with a range of verbs with affinities to thinking: pondering, musing, reflecting, deliberating, meditating, and composing. But the important point is that, over and above the enumeration of particular examples, he expects full accounts of human action always to be couched adverbially, so to speak—as if what defines action in the first place is its capacity for adverbial description.[28]

This implies that what fails in a "thin" description of human behavior is its inability to account for it as *action*. In effect, there can be no such thing as a "thin" description of an action, since that ignores precisely what makes it the action that it is. In one of the very few examinations of Geertz's reading of Ryle by a nonphilosopher, Stephen Greenblatt reminds us that "thick description" for Ryle is giving an act "its place in a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings"—that it "entails an account of the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings." The point is that such a "network" endows an action with all the significance that is required for it to communicate its own meanings, leaving nothing for "thin description" but its "mute" exterior act.[29] It is not just that "thin description" misses the category of meaning; meaning, for its part, also exhausts what there is for the "thick" describer to describe. Ryle sometimes seems to suggest differently; he speaks as if there was some kind of continuum between thin and thick description and as if the best description of human action is the thickest one we can achieve (he speaks, for example, of thick description as "a many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by [the] thinnest description,"[30] and he also adopts the terminology of "high" and "low" descriptions). But it seems truer to his philosophy of action to say that this distinction is one of kind, not of degree; it is a distinction in which a view of action (of doing *something*) as constituted entirely by the meaning given to it adverbially rules out the thin description of any human action qua action.[31] Ryle specifically says that the action-describing verbs on which he concentrates "cannot also function as the verbs of bottom-level or thinnest action-reports or orders."[32] Thus, we might strive for the thickest possible description within what is meant here by "thick," but any thin description would reduce human action to mere behavior; it would bleach out,

or, in Ryle's terms, be "silent" or "elliptical" about, precisely those things that made it action, as opposed to mere behavior.

Ryle gave a fuller exposition of "adverbial verbs" in the second essay cited by Geertz in his "Thick Description" essay, entitled "Thinking and Reflecting" and originating in a Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture of 1966–1967. Again, the starting point is the paradox whereby some active, tensed verbs are not in fact verbs of doing after all—where "doing" means "performing an action, or doing *something*."[33] They refer not to any autonomous action or activity and cannot be the subject of autonomous commands; instead they are dependent on a context where they can function adverbially. In effect, they require the presence of other verbs that *are* autonomous verbs of doing, which they then qualify. Devoid of such qualifying, descriptions of autonomous activities must remain "thin" (contracting the eyelids); once qualified adverbially (contracting the eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal), they achieve "thickness"—that is by sharing inevitably in the significance given to them by the contexts in which they take place. The "it" of any thick description (winking) is again said to be impossible to identify other than in a unity of these verbal and adverbial forms.[34]

Whether Ryle ever gave a satisfactorily adverbial answer to the question of what Le Penseur is doing (thinking thinkingly?) remains in doubt. But in attempting to answer it, he did give several accounts of what he took thinking to be, all of them adverbial. In line with his famously anti-Cartesian philosophy of mind—itself called "an interpretative model" by his philosopher commentators but earlier expressed in terms of dispositionality rather than adverbiality[35]—he refused to see thought as additional to or apart from some other activity. As William Lyons puts it, for Ryle, thinking "was simply the modification of some quite ordinary public activity. It was merely the manner in which the public activity was done. To think was to do something thinkingly."[36] This, then, was why the not-doing-of-two-things-but-only-one-thing principle was so important to him, and why he was keen to start his argument with the twitching/winking example; the nonseparability of winking from rapidly contracting the eyelids in an appropriate manner was directly analogous to the nonseparability of thinking from acting in an appropriate manner. It must be assumed that Clifford Geertz too was fully aware of what he was committing himself to in citing Ryle and adding the sentence I quoted earlier about winking not being two things. He endorsed Ryle's theory of mind throughout his essays, notably in an epigraph to, and in the arguments of, possibly the most philosophical essay in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind," and when recruiting the "extrinsic theory of thought" in support of the idea of culture as a "traffic in significant symbols" in the essay "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali."[37] What is much less certain is whether some historians were fully aware of what they were committing themselves to in citing Geertz—that is to say, a fully fledged philosophy of action in which action properly so called is constituted entirely without remainder by (adverbially expressed) meanings, and a consequent view that, both in anthropology and in history (and in the human studies in general) any verb of doing not qualified by an adverb cannot be, as Ryle puts it, "the sole verb in a non-elliptical report of what someone did."

What Geertz did was to express the ordinary language philosophy lying behind "thick description" as a fully semioticized account of human action, an account in which human behavior becomes "symbolic action—action which . . . signifies" and is intelligible within the "imaginative universe[s]" in which "acts are signs."[38] The point is now a familiar one, but it is put with especial force by the anthropologist Sherry Ortner: it involves "refiguring the enterprise of anthropology [and we can add: history] around the idea of 'meaning,'" where this refers to "a set of culturally constructed and historically specific guides, frames, or models of and for human feeling, intention, and action. Meaning is what both defines life and gives it its purpose."[39] For the ethno-historian Nicholas Dirks, too, adopting a Geertzian framework involves working with the centrality of meaning, "with the way experience is construed rather than with some unmediated notion of experience itself." Yet very few of the myriad citations by historians of Geertz's 1973 essays show any thoroughgoing awareness of these implications. Across the field of historical practice, the idea that acts are signs has come to seem like a dangerous piece of "postmodernism," while textuality, in Dirks's words, "is seen less as a metaphor inviting a new range of critical interpretive practices than an invitation to nihilism and relativism."[40]

One possible long-term explanation for this situation may be the lack of interest shown by historians in some of Geertz's other main inspirations and in strands of historical theory with affinities to his style of anthropology. Chief among the former is Max Weber, despite his inclusion in Keith Thomas's list of historiographically influential theorists. The Weber who has been widely discussed in historical debates has been the Weber of the Protestantism/capitalism debate, and the Weber of the "disenchantment of the world" thesis, not the Weber who, in Geertz's much-quoted phrase, believed "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun."[41] Similarly, historians paid insufficient attention to those many antipositivist philosophers of history who, in the postwar decades, used Rylean dispositional analysis to defend the autonomy of historical explanation against Hempelian attempts to extend nomological-deductive models of explanation from the natural sciences to the sciences of man. These included Alan Donagan, John (J.W.N.) Watkins, Patrick Gardiner, William Dray, and Peter Winch, a number of whose arguments about the importance of the reasons and motives for action and of the agent's point of view clearly resemble Geertz's views.[42] Even R. G. Collingwood, who sounds remarkably pre-Geertzian on occasions, was often dismissed as an "idealist." In general terms, and despite the so-called "linguistic turn," the kind of ordinary language philosophy that sustained Rylean philosophy and led Geertz to an interest not just in text but in speech[43] has never inspired more than a handful of historians. One looks in vain in historical theory over the last few decades not just for the impact of Ryle but for the influence of John Austin (outside the history of ideas), Paul Ricoeur, and, above all, Wittgenstein.[44]

* * *

One of the things historians would have been committing themselves to if they had appreciated all the theoretical implications of "thick description" concerns what might be called the ontology of action—the way in which the truth or reality

attached to human action (the truth or reality of the something being done) must also always be a function of the meanings that constitute it as an action of a certain kind and must therefore always be local to, or relative to, those meanings (part of "local knowledge"). This brings us to a second area where doubts may be raised about some historians' understanding of the difference between "thick" and "thin" description. In his 1973 essay, Geertz says twice that the ethnography he is recommending makes ontological questions about human action irrelevant. First, he writes, "The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said."[45]

Here there is no exegesis to be made of any corresponding arguments in Ryle, only the drawing out of the implications of Ryle's account of giving a thick description of doing something like winking. The conditions that make it intelligible, Ryle and Geertz both urge, are not truth conditions but success-versus-failure conditions; it makes no sense to ask of winking (or even parodying winking, etc.) "is it true or false?" but only "does it succeed or fail" as the action it purports to be. In these terms, thick description would be ontologically neutral, whereas thin description would not. This is also brought out by what may be taken as Geertz's second reference to the issue, when he compares thin descriptions of human behavior to what "a camera, a radical behaviorist, or a believer in protocol sentences would record."[46] In 1973, of course, "protocol sentences" were recognizable as a term of art (*protokolsätze*) derived from logical positivism and the Vienna Circle, and believers in such sentences were those who, like Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlick, saw them as products of direct, unmediated observation of the world which, in their ability to correspond exactly with reality, could not be wrong (could not be corrigible). They argued, says the philosopher Anthony Grayling,

> that statements reporting immediate perceptual experience (basic or 'protocol' statements) are incorrigible and certain because they directly correspond to the facts; and that the truth of other (nonprotocol) statements can be determined by means of their logical relations to the basic statements.[47]

For Geertz to refer to protocol sentences in this way was, in effect, to say that thin description worked like an observation language that recognized in human behavior only those things about which incorrigibly true statements could, in principle, be made.

Whatever the consequences for anthropology, it is again not apparent that historians were fully aware of the ontological implications of "thick description." Did they become ontologically neutral in their own historical preferences, in the sense of paying equal—or at least symmetrical—attention to those aspects of past behavior that they would accept as corresponding with reality and those they would not? Did they free themselves from the temptation to approach historical sources as if protocol sentences or something very like them were the testimonies of choice—that is, as if historical witnesses who used observation language incorrigibly were to be preferred

to those who did not? If we allow Lawrence Stone to speak for them, as he clearly thought he was in his extraordinary proclamation on "History and Post-Modernism" in *Past and Present* in 1991, the answer seems to be "no." In a well-known article of 1979, Stone had previously singled out "thick description" and Geertz's Balinese cockfight essay as key contributors to a "revival of narrative" among "new" historians, as anthropology replaced sociology and economics as "the most influential of the social sciences." "Thick Description," he wrote admiringly, had taught historians

> how a whole social system and set of values can be brilliantly illuminated by the searchlight method of recording in elaborate detail a single event, provided that it is very carefully set in its total context and very carefully analysed for its cultural meaning.[48]

In 1991, by contrast, Stone claimed that historians were in "a crisis of self-confidence" and an "ever-narrowing trap" caused by "threats" from the "linguistics" of deconstruction, from "New Historicism," and from the anthropology of Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and others. And he singled out as the key element in this last threat Geertz's aphorism at the close of *Negara*: "The real is as imagined as the imaginary." "This presumably means," Stone added, not altogether confidently, "that both are merely a set of semiotic codes governing all representations of life; that the material is dissolved into meaning; and that the text is left unconnected with the context."[49] Stone, self-consciously standing in for his colleagues and acting in their defense, more or less ordered them to read Gabrielle Spiegel's 1990 essay "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages." But despite saying again that Geertz had deeply influenced him, he clearly found it impossible to accept that if, as Spiegel herself puts it, what is construed as real is itself a product of the imaginary, there can be no ontological difference between the imaginative and the real. This is all the more surprising given Stone's subsequent extolling of Geertz's influence on Inga Clendinnen's *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, a study that indeed brilliantly exemplifies the interpretive style of anthropological history in the Geertzian mold but explicitly aims to avoid—in what, given Clendinnen's materials, must surely be a defining case of this particular issue—"sorting false from putatively authentic consciousness."[50]

Stone's outburst was not the only sign of unease at the time. Both *Annales* and the *American Historical Review* had recently instigated debates on the challenges and threats facing historians, chief among them issues to do with the relationship between reality and representation. Geertz was not always singled out for attention, as he was by Stone. It is significant, however, that two of the contributors to these debates who negotiated them to best effect—John Toews in the United States and Roger Chartier in France—did so from recognizably Geertzian positions and by emphasizing the way historical reality was best seen in terms of the "thick" category of meaning.[51] This is in contrast to Speigel, who, in the essay recommended by Stone, expertly identified the "flight from 'reality' to language" (and its association with Geertz's semiotic concept of culture) but failed to make good her own aim of reclaiming that reality in the form of the "determinate social logic" possessed by all acts of language use—in effect, their social context (or site).[52] To have

succeeded here would have meant knowing how to distinguish discursive "textual" practices from nondiscursive "social" ones, precisely the distinction that semiotic theory called radically into question—and, it should be added, the distinction that informed, again problematically, the later, less Geertzian formulations of the relationship between language and practice adopted by Chartier.[53]

If one were to seek an explanation for this further failure to heed the implications of "thick description" it would probably lie again in historians' unwillingness to follow their own linguistic turn through to its theoretical conclusions. It was probably an exaggeration to say, as Georg Iggers did over a decade ago, that nowhere in social and cultural history "has the belief that language refers to reality been given up, as it was in the reinterpretation of Saussurean linguistic theory by Barthes, Derrida, and Lyotard."[54] Nevertheless, this does seem to have been the step that many historians found it hardest to take, as witnessed by the careful attempt made by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob to recruit "practical realism" for their arguments against "postmodern" relativism in history.[55] And as long as historians reserved some form of realism-in-general for their own practices, they inevitably found it odd not to accord it to the doings and sayings of historical agents—at a cost to any adoption of ontological neutrality. This was not the way to remove corrigibility from the conceptual language of history. A better option, and closer to the spirit of "thick description," would have been the "realism for us" position advocated by philosophers such as Hilary Putnam and (citing Geertz approvingly) Yehuda Elkana.[56]

* * *

The problems discussed so far seem to indicate the principal difficulties in Clifford Geertz's reception by historians intent on "thick description," but others might be worth considering. There is, for example, the issue of action's "aggregability"—that is to say, the question of whether "thick description" rules out as a kind of category error the use of the statistical and aggregative methods that have featured so prominently in historical practice but which appear to reduce that practice to the kind of observation that Geertz termed "phenomenalistic." Thus, the approach of the "protoindustrialization" historians at the Max Planck Institute for History in the 1980s seems in the end to differ from that of Geertz, despite their frequent tributes to him, because of its use of serial analysis and its deployment of vast quantities of "hard material and societal data."[57] There is also the issue of action's "readability"—the question of whether "thick description," since it rules out anything but an interpretive account of action, effectively resolves the debate about whether history, like anthropology, is or is not "fictional" (in the Geertzian sense of something made), an issue that historians—prompted not so much by Geertz but by Hayden White—have seriously fretted over but largely shelved. Just as historians cannot seem to avoid equating the imaginative with the imagined, so they seem unable to take poetry—as in the "poetics of culture" or the ethnographer as "inscriber"—in anything but a literal way. Yet as commentators have repeatedly noted, Geertz's "appropriation of 'the literary' " was inspired by hermeneutics not structuralism, by Ricoeur not Lévi-Strauss. It ought therefore to have been reassuring in this respect—not to say decisive.[58]

Indeed, a closer and more sophisticated attention to the theoretical implications of "thick description" might have benefited the relationship between history and anthropology in both directions: it might have helped historians to negotiate the anthropologically inspired "cultural (or interpretive) turn" less ambiguously and with long-lasting benefit, and it might therefore have helped them to bring to Geertz's anthropology precisely those things it was criticized for neglecting within anthropology itself—things that the philosophy of action at its core should, in principle, be capable of absorbing. At various times and in various places, Geertz was said to have paid insufficient attention to a range of things, including diachrony, issues to do with ideology, power, and social diversity and conflict, material interests, gender relations, and the functional and the instrumental in general.[59] Obviously none of these falls in principle outside the domain of interpretive or cultural analysis, and most of them have in fact been important to cultural history as recently practiced—if under the influence of theories, such as Foucault's, with different priorities to Geertz's. Here, potentially, historians have been in a powerful position to rectify the supposed weaknesses of "thick description" by thoroughly historicizing it—as Sherry Ortner has put it, by

> embedding cultural interpretation within larger (represented or implied) narratives of social and political existence—of people both gripped by circumstances and transforming them—[and] making culture do the kinds of work it does best: illuminating the complex motives and complex debates that are the stuff of real lives and struggles.[60]

Since Vico, the grand narrative of the methodology of history has been a series of theory wars between those who have attempted to assimilate historical thought to (what they considered to be) the style of enquiry of the natural sciences and those who have not.[61] The *Naturwissenschaften* tradition was by no means absent from the "new histories" of the 1920s to 1970s[62] but since the onset of the "interpretive turn" in the human sciences it has been in (perhaps terminal) retreat. Geertz made an immensely important contribution to its decline, and, whereas over the centuries the most effective defenders of history as *Geisteswissenschaft* had all been practicing historians themselves (rather than philosophers), he did so from outside the subject. At this level, however, the distinction is meaningless. For Isaiah Berlin, there was no difference between Geertz's "imaginative universe" in which the acts of historical agents became signs and the "conception of historical understanding of the past held by both Vico and Herder."[63] It is in terms of this very long trajectory of historical studies that the significance and use of "thick description" ought to be viewed.

NOTES

1. Thomas, Keith. 2006. "New Ways Revisited: How History's Borders have Expanded in the past Forty Years." *Times Literary Supplement*, October 13, 3; for Thomas's own use of Geertz from the early 1960s onward, see Burke. Peter. Harrison. Brian. and Slack. Paul. eds. 2000. *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9.

2. Compare Geertz's remarks on historians in Geertz, Clifford. 2000. "History and Anthropology." In *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 118–33; originally published 1990. *New Literary History*. 21: 321–35.
3. For illuminating comments parallel to Thomas's on historians and social theory, see Sewell, William H. Jr. 2005. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1–21.
4. On Geertz and historians, see Walters, Ronald G. 1980. "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and Historians." *Social Research*. 47: 537–56; Burke, Peter. 1992. *History and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 119; Appleby, Joyce. Hunt, Lynn, and Jacob, Margaret. 1994. *Telling the Truth about History*. New York: Norton, 217–23; Kuper, Adam. 1999. *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 118–19; Sewell, William H. Jr. 1999. "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation." In Ortner, Sherry B. ed. 1999. *The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 37–9; Reddy, William M. 2002. "Anthropology and the History of Culture." In Kramer, Lloyd, and Maza, Sarah, eds. *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell, 277–96; Clark, Elizabeth A. 2004. *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 149–55.
5. For example, Bonnell, Victoria E., and Hunt, Lynn, eds. 1999. *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1–31.
6. Iggers, Georg. 1997. *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 101–17 notes the important differences as well as affinities in the case of microhistory; cf. Levi, Giovanni. 1991. "On Microhistory." In Burke, Peter, ed. *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 98–105; on New Historicism see Mullaney, Steven. 1996. "Discursive Forums, Cultural Practices: History and Anthropology in Literary Studies." In McDonald, Terrence J., ed. *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 166–8.
7. Spiegel, Gabrielle M. 1990. "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages." *Speculum*. 65: 64, cf. 64–7 on Geertz's general influence; the essay is republished Ibid. 1999. *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 3–28.
8. Stone, Lawrence. 1992. "History and Post-Modernism." *Past and Present*. 135: 191.
9. Hobsbawm, Eric. 2002. *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*. London, Allen Lane, 294.
10. Walters. "Signs of the Times," 540.
11. Geertz, Clifford. 1980. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Geertz, Clifford. 1983. "Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power." Ibid. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 121–46; originally published in Ben-David, Joseph, and Clark, T. N., eds. 1977. *Culture and Its Creators*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 150–71. For some exceptions, see Elliott, John H. 1989. *Spain and Its World 1500-1700*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 146; Clark, Stuart. 1997. *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 646–50; Ben-Amos, Avner. 2000. *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France, 1789-1996*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 310, and 257–352, *passim*. On the selective "infatuation" of historians with Geertz, see Goodman, Jordan. 1997. "History

and Anthropology." In Bentley, Michael, ed. *Companion to Historiography*. London: Routledge, 783–804.

12. "Thick description" has, of course, become ubiquitous as a concept throughout the human sciences; in this essay I limit myself simply to historians' use and understanding of it.
13. The example is offered by Greenblatt, Stephen. 1999. "The Touch of the Real" In Ortner, ed. *Fate of "Culture,"* 17.
14. Berkhofer, Robert. 1988. "The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice." *Poetics Today*. 9: 437–8, and for more on "plenitude" see Berkhofer, Robert. 1995. *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 28–31; Himmelfarb, Gertrude. 1987. *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Appraisals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 96—my italics; Jordanova, Ludmilla. 2006. *History in Practice*. 2nd edn. London: Hodder Arnold, 204, note 29.
15. Biersack, Aletta. 1989. "Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond." In Hunt, Lynn, ed. *The New Cultural History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 74.
16. This is a confusion explored in sophisticated directions by Descombes, Vincent. 2002. "A Confusion of Tongues." *Anthropological Theory*. 2: 433–46.
17. Sharpe, James. 1991. "History from Below." In Burke, ed. *New Perspectives*, 35.
18. Walters. "Signs of the Times." 539ff.
19. Iggers. *Historiography*. 104, 116, but see also Iggers's fuller appreciation of "thick description" at 124–6.
20. Prins, Gwyn. 1991. "Oral History." In Burke, ed. *New Perspectives*. 134.
21. Tosh, John. 1984. *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. London: Longman.
22. Tosh, John. 1991. *Pursuit of History*. 2nd edn. 105–6.
23. Tosh, John. 2006. *Pursuit of History*. 4th edn with Lang, Seán. 296.
24. Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 6; author's emphasis.
25. Ryle, Gilbert. 1971. *Collected Papers*. 2 vols. London: Hutchinson, vol 2. 480.
26. Ibid., 481.
27. Ibid., 486.
28. I say "so to speak" because Ryle also says that his labelling of the verbs he discusses as adverbial verbs is "metaphorical": ibid., 467; cf. Ryle, Gilbert. 1979. *On Thinking*, ed. Kolenda, Konstantin. Preface by Warnock. G. J. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 17–31.
29. Greenblatt, "Touch of the Real," 15–16; cf. Kuper, *Culture*, 110.
30. Ryle, *Collected Papers*, vol 2. 482.
31. Here I differ from Descombes, "Confusion of Tongues," 435–7.
32. Ryle, *Collected Papers*, vol 2, 485; cf. the phrase: "active verbs that are not verbs for separately do-able, lowest-level doings," 486.
33. Ibid., 467; my italics.
34. Ibid., 466–70.
35. Ramoino, G. M. 2003. "Ryle Revisited: The Dispositional Model Fifty Years After." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. 11: 89–95; Lyons, William. 1980. *Gilbert Ryle: An Introduction to His Philosophy*. Brighton: Harvester, 182–95.
36. Lyons, William. 2001. *Matters of Mind*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 74.
37. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 55–83, 362; Descombes, "Confusion of Tongues," 439–45. Since he sees in Ryle an "organised complexity of levels of description"

in the manner of the sandwich, Descombes believes Geertz to have misused Ryle's analysis and arrived at a position "poles apart" from it. This arises, he says, from Geertz's attempt to link together "the analytical philosophy of action and hermeneutical phenomenology."

38. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10, 13.
39. Ortner, Sherry B. 1999. "Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering." In ibid., ed. *Fate of "Culture,"* 137.
40. Dirks, N. B. 1996. "Is Vice Versa? Historical Anthropologies and Anthropological Histories." In McDonald, ed. *Historic Turn*, 17, 33.
41. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 5; on Geertz and Weber, saying they go in "totally different" directions, see Iggers, *Historiography*, 123–4.
42. Ramoino, "Ryle Revisited," 95–101.
43. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 147.
44. On Geertz and Wittgenstein—and Greenblatt—see Schalkwyk, David. 2002. "Historicism in Purgatory." *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies*. 11: 75–92.
45. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.
46. Ibid., 7.
47. Grayling, A. C. 1982. *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*. Brighton: Harvester, 135–6, cf. 205, 270–1; cf. Creath, Richard. 1987. "Some Remarks on "Protocol Sentences"." *Noûs*. 21: 471–5.
48. Stone, Lawrence. 1979. "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History." *Past and Present*. 85: 13–14.
49. Stone, Lawrence. 1991. "History and Post-Modernism." *Past and Present*. 131: 217; Geertz, *Negara*, 136.
50. Clendinnen, Inga, 1991. *Aztecs: An Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 6, cf. 280–93, esp. 286.
51. Details in Clark, Stuart. 1997. "Le Goff, Annales and the "Future"." In Rubin, Miri, ed. *The Work of Jacques Le Goff and the Challenges of Medieval History*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 257–62.
52. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text," *passim*, quotations at pp. 60, 77; cf. Spiegel, Gabrielle M. 1992. "History and Post-Modernism." *Past and Present*. 135: 203–4.
53. Chartier, Roger. 1997. *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practice*. trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; Sewell, William H. Jr. 1998. "Language and Practice in Cultural History: Backing Away from the Edge of the Cliff." *French Historical Studies*. 21: 246–9; and see for "Practice Theory" generally, Spiegel, Gabrielle M., ed. 2005. *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*. New York: Routledge. Ironically, some commentators have not seen in Geertz himself the radical antirealism so unsettling to historians; see esp. Ortner, Sherry B. 1999. "Introduction." In ibid., ed. *Fate of "Culture,"* 3–4; Greenblatt, "Touch of the Real." 19–22, 28; Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 147–8.
54. Iggers, *Historiography*, 126.
55. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 247–53.
56. Novick, Peter. 1988. *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 539–40; Elkana, Yehuda. 1978. "Two-Tier-Thinking: Philosophical Realism and Historical Relativism." *Social Studies of Science*. 8: 309–26.
57. Iggers, *Historiography*, 105–8.

58. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 146–8; for an anthropologist showing the same reluctance, see Kuper, *Culture*, 105–6.
59. Summaries in Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History," 78–84; Sewell, "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History," 35–7; Reddy, "Anthropology and the History of Culture," 283–7.
60. Ortner, "Introduction," 11.
61. Haddock, Bruce A. 1980. *An Introduction to Historical Thought*. London: Arnold, *passim*.
62. Olábarri, Ignacio. 1995. ""New" New History: A *Longue Durée* Structure," *History and Theory*. 34: 1–29.
63. Berlin, Isaiah. 1981. "Note on Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought." In Pompa, Leon, and Dray, William H., eds. *Substance and Form in History: A Collection of Essays in Philosophy of History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 8–9.

CHAPTER 11

SCIENTIFIC CULTURES

PETER GALISON

WITH IT OR WITHOUT IT: THE CONCEPT OF SCIENTIFIC CULTURE

After Newton, physicists struggled against the concept of force. They hated it. What *was* the force law, $F = ma$, supposed to mean? Did it define force in terms of acceleration and mass? Or were force and acceleration intuitively satisfactory concepts, making the equation define mass? So detested was "force" that a perfectly plausible history of mechanics of the past 300 years could be written as one long battle to annihilate the very idea. Energy would take its place; or if not energy then the minimum laws of Lagrange, the equations of Hamilton, or the brackets of Poisson. There were notions of virtual displacement to supplant force; there were physical explanations of the concept and mathematical ones that seemed to capture its import without its substance. Anything to extirpate this dreadful idea that still stank of alchemy 200 years after Newton tried to clean off his own massive involvement with the Green Lion. And yet, despite all these displacements, substitutions, and buryings, the concept of force guided physics like a sextant across the sea changes of the discipline. Force was there in classical gravitation and mechanics, electrostatics, and electrodynamics; it was still present in the very names "weak force" and "strong nuclear force." In fact, force was just about everywhere in physics with the exception of general relativity and quantum field theory. Force is the worst of ideas and the best, detested, championed, ineliminable—an idea with embarrassing ancestors and enough adored illegitimate offspring to populate the sciences of modernity.[1]

"Culture" is to the interpretive side of anthropology and sociology what "force" has been to physics. We hate it; we cannot do without it.

For much of the nineteenth century, "culture" labeled something absolute, certainly not an entity that was different in different places (though one might have more or less of it). After the First World War, that changed; as Geertz put it: "Instead of just culture as such one had cultures—bounded, coherent, cohesive, and self-standing: social organisms, semiotical crystals, microworlds. Culture was what peoples had and held in common, Greeks or Navajos, Maoris or Puerto Ricans, each its own."[2]

What did Geertz want? I take it he was, throughout his work, rebelling on the one side against universalism, the view that—through a biologistic reductivism, a structural scientism, a sociological functionalism, or a layer-cake picture of human nature—one could obviate local culture. On the other side, he rejected a fragmentary nominalism that strips the world of meaning by refusing to acknowledge the systemic nature of meanings within local cultures.

> We do not know, really, how to handle this, how to deal with a world that is neither divided at the joints into ingredient sections nor a transcendent unity—economic, say, or psychological—obscured by surface contrasts, thin and concocted, and best set aside as inessential distractions.[3]

Against universalism and nominalism, Geertz has defended a going-togetherness of particulars, a finite set of connected meanings. In defending this locally holistic position, he built on a long tradition of interpretive social science, from Vico and Weber through his own studentship with Talcott Parsons. This tradition aimed for plausible cohesiveness, not logical necessity; its ideal was more that of a persuasive interpretation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in which the elements of the view held together than the axiomatic deduction of Euclid's *Book II*. What Geertz has added to this vision of culture (in my view) was a dramatic expansion of the domain of particulars to be understood: not just rituals, mythologies, and ceremonies as text, but also politics, history, and play. These issues matter for philosophy because philosophy shares these concerns and the debates that eddy around them. Geertz saw Thomas Kuhn as an ally and for good reason—Kuhn aimed to depict science in communities, to make commitments based on exemplars and not on axioms, and to expose the different ways the world was constituted through the paradigms articulated by Aristotle, Newton, or Einstein. These ways of seeking, these Kuhnian paradigms, are about as close as one can come to the scientific analogue of Geertzian, thickly described cultures. For Kuhn, participants in one paradigm pass another as if, as Kuhn liked to say, they lived in different worlds. Kuhn pitted his work against the view that science aimed for a single, unitary truth toward which theories progressed. He opposed universalizing schemes of falsification, verification, or confirmation. In the first instance, he fought against the universalism implied by protocol or observation sentences standing outside all theories and litigating among them. (After a long discussion about Carnap's neo-Kantianism and conventionalism, Kuhn once told me that he was glad that he had misinterpreted Carnap because otherwise he would not have written *the Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.)

Gananath Obeyesekere, in a sense, was the most recent apparition of the opponent Geertz has been sparring with for 40 years: the universalist. This time, however, the defense case for transcultural does not wear the robes of biology, psychology, linguistics, or structuralism, but rather those of a widely shared "practical reason." Practical reason, Obeyesekere has argued, cuts across lands and peoples. There is a universal capacity for reasoned judgments that Obeyesekere calls "practical rationality"; it is a rationality that is not coterminous with being a stakeholder in a particular set of beliefs (he has been perfectly happy to see practical rationality in magic, medicine, or spirit possession). No, it is instead a generalized capability to think in

certain ways, to engage in debate arguments and judgment formation. "The notion of practical rationality . . . I believe," says Obeyesekere, "links us as human beings to our common biological nature and to perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that are products thereof."[4] Geertz demurred; neither this attempt to formulate transcendental rules of comportment nor any of the other extratemporal, extraspatial counters to "cultures" persuaded him. They explained far too little about the Cook-epoch Hawaiians' world (or, so Geertz believed, our world) for that matter. Transcultural practical reason stands in opposition to Geertz's historicized cultures as Carnap's transtheoretical protocol sentences stand outside Kuhn's historicized paradigms. Or put another way: Obeyesekere's practical reason critique of autonomous cultures resembles the many more recent attempts of the science wars to shut down a perceived epistemological relativism by invoking a universal rationality that is not particular to place, time, or practitioner.

The conflicting intuitions behind the cultural specificity of ways of thinking and some form of practical universal reason are both clear—and in their own ways compelling. From Franz Boas to Geertz, there is a powerful desire to impart dignity and coherence to other people's ways of acting and seeing. Among historians, the idea has resonated powerfully, though their "peoples" are more usually less exotic and longer dead. To capture that "otherness" in a persuasive form is what much of the study of science has been after. Not just now in the work of science studies, but for the past decades—this is what Alexandre Koyre wanted to get at in his Newtonian and Galilean studies—the internal compelling logic of other systems of thought.

On the other side, there is an equally powerful desire to show that other peoples in other places and at other times were, at bottom, like us. "Otherness" (in the view of the universalists), far from setting peoples on an equal footing, inevitably relegates those others to a "native" inferiority. And the dignity that is due peoples (read in the present instance: scientists) of the past or in other traditions is best paid by acknowledging the fundamental similarity of ways of thinking, reasoning, and doing.

Boundaries, Thin and Thick

At the root of this divisive, long-running culture debate is, I believe, a dubious picture of sites and boundaries that is shared by both sides. In particular, there seems to lie behind the holistic picture of culture, the notion that it extends over a definite space and population and that there are well-defined and fixed boundaries that pick out its edge. Since this well definedness seems to individuate the cultures one by one, particular "scientific cultures" (Kuhnian paradigm-based communities) pick up metaphysical weight. "Living in different worlds" becomes a typical locution, a move adopted by a certain segment of science studies that accepts the Kuhn picture as phenomenologically accurate and takes it upon itself to ground each "world" on a functionally defined social basis.

Unfortunately, this hermetic, crystalline conception of scientific culture is historically, sociologically, and philosophically problematic. With or without the functional explanation of it, science studies does not need to assume that technical cultures are, each one, so strictly bounded and so purely ordered.

In particular, two problems emerge from the hermetic-crystalline conception of scientific culture. First, the airtightness of the picture makes change impossible except as a sudden and total flip. You cannot bend, stretch, or distend a diamond—you leave it as it is or you cleave it down a fault line. Second, the demand for purity makes the hybridization of scientific cultures impossible to understand. That is, even if we accept (and I do not) the supposedly disjunctive switch from phlogiston chemists to oxygen chemists, the assumption of crystalline ordering fails in any way to account for the emergence of mixed practices—biochemistry, chemical physics, physical chemistry, biophysics, bioinformatics, and nanoscience, to name but a few.

For historians of science, technical work does not typically splinter into sectors of pure and absolute autonomy. The movement in and out of Newtonianism strikes historians as not even approximately one of sudden transitions and long periods of inner stability. Sociologically, the "community" that is supposed to support a particular scientific program or paradigm—and the simplistic functionalism that takes the science to reflect a homogeneous "need" for this or that scientific object or theory—carries little weight among sociologists. Philosophically, even among the work classed as "Newtonian" (or "Einsteinian" or "Darwinian") there has never been a core set of tenets accepted that is common to all. More formally, there is no necessary and sufficient set of conditions that picks out all and only "Daltonian atomists," for example. There has not even been a single exemplar under whose sign all the work was conducted. There were relativity theorists who believed in the ether and those who did not, relativists who subscribed to the substantiality of space–time and those who refused it, and relativists who took cosmology as an example problem solution and those who utterly rejected it.

Considerations like these propelled me toward the study of fluctuating, dynamic boundaries, boundaries with substantive dynamics that not only can generate new disciplinary and argumentative structures, but also can rearrange the disciplines that nominally gave rise to them. This region of linguistic, argumentative, instrumental, and experimental hybridity is what I have called the trading zone. In this zone, things can be exchanged—that is scientific procedures, symbols, and materials can be traded. Local coordination is possible even when there is not the slightest gesture toward global agreement. If I hand you what for me is a salt shaker and you offer me a book, we do not at all have to agree on their full meanings and associations. We just have to agree to the coordination needed for the exchange. Bit by bit, such local agreements can expand. Just like jargons, pidgins, and creoles that mark everyday exchange languages in boundary regions the world over, so scientific groups are constantly forming local systems of exchange, working out ever more elaborate exchange languages, for example, to allow atomic physicists to be able to speak to surface chemists when they want to do something new with the rolling of carbon nanotubes.

Let me give two brief examples of trading zones that, I believe, illustrate both the usefulness of the culture idea *and* the necessity of altering it, so that it is not a structure frozen outside time. First, take the boundary between mathematics and physics. Up through the 1970s, almost all particle physicists took the contemporary discipline of mathematics to be skew to their concerns. Almost all of the mathematical tools needed by quantum field theorists had existed for a half century

or so—some elementary group theory, a few bits of the calculus such as Fourier and Laplace transforms, some linear algebra. These are, in fact, pretty simple bits that physics students master in the first two years of college. When the research fields of mathematics and physics touched during those years—in mathematical physics—the physicists took the mathematicians to be little more than a cleanup squad. Mathematical physicists returned the compliment, taking their occupation to be setting to rights and rigor the sloppy moves of their applied colleagues.

Then, for the several decades beginning in the mid-1980s, this mutual mistrust changed. From a sidebar to a central storyline of fundamental physics, string theory climbed to a position high on the prestige heap. Along the way, theorists struck an uneasy, immensely productive accord with the mathematicians. It was an accord that meant that a new field began to grow in the now very thick boundary between math and physics. But even more importantly, the new field then began to reshape the conduct and self-definition of physics even domains away from this widening boundary.

One can trace, in detail, how professional identities, values, demonstration strategies, and explanatory standards—even ways of speaking—have, bit by bit, been cobbled together into a subdiscipline of its own. Differing standards of proof, divisions over the definitions of specific terms, scientific jargons, pidgins, and creoles—welding together a hybrid form of reason was a long and difficult process. But that assemblage was not without cost.

When Ed Witten, string theory's clearly dominant voice, aimed to get a grant for an advanced joint education program combining physics and mathematics, *both* fields struck back. One prestigious referee from the National Science Foundation acknowledged the scientific importance of what Witten and his colleagues had done, but nonetheless shot this reply: "[M]y conscience would not rest if I did not record those doubts here, even though I am fully aware that my opinion is highly contrarian." The referee continued:

> I tend to think that the most conspicuous development of the last decade is the training of a generation of very bright young theorists who know and care more for geometry and topology than for the standard model and current experimental efforts to discover the next step beyond it. Since I am convinced that the key advances in physics emerge from physical rather than mathematical insight, I must view this as a negative development. I think that theoretical physics would be in better shape if this group of very capable people had been taught to practice research with better balance between physical fact and mathematical intuition.[5]

Ultimately, this evaluator's greatest concern was not for the mathematicians but rather for the physicists, especially "young ones," whom the program "would tend to subvert." Mathematicians, the referee continued, were a tool, but one that must be secondary to the concerns of a fundamental physical nature. Proposal rejected. One sees here very vividly why the idea of defending a "scientific culture" is by no means too strong a description—values were at stake and not just results. The training of the young, the tending of right intuitions, the balance of care directed in and out of the group's main concerns, the cultivation of a proper attitude toward data.

A mark of the importance of the new field: physicists were not the only ones to protest. One mathematical response to the unlocking of mirror symmetries (the details not important for our purposes here) and similar string theory successes was a full-tilt emulation by some senior mathematicians of physicists' style of work. It was a route, two math department chairmen cautioned, that was strewn with landmines. Imitation by mathematicians of physicists' habits had

> happened without the evolution of the community norms and standards for behavior which are required to make the new structures stable. Without rapid development and adoption of such "family values" the new relationship between mathematics and physics may well collapse. Physicists will go back to their traditional partners; rigorous mathematicians will be left with a mess to clean up; and mathematicians lured into a more theoretical mode by the physicists' example will be ignored as a result of the backlash.[6]

Here again, the signs of cultural concerns are strewn throughout the passage—it is not just about everyday rationality, it is about "family values" of mathematics and physics (cognitive), "standards of behavior." (With more time, we would do well to pause here at the "family" conceit.)

There is a rejection by physicists and mathematicians who considered themselves "*Pur sang*." But looked at historically, even the "parent" disciplines had themselves moved from hybridity to purity in historical time. Their names speak their biographies: quantum field theory, for example, wears its mixed lineage on its sleeve, coming as it did from an amalgam of turn-of-the-century classical electrodynamics and the nonrelativistic quantum theory of the 1920s. Algebraic geometry, currently perhaps *the* most central field of mathematics, was not too long ago itself an admixture of, as its name suggests, algebra and geometry.

A sign of culture in flux, these expressions of anxiety about disciplinary boundaries signal more than the presence of "scientific culture." They are signs of *changing* values, symbols, and procedures. It is a moment, a crucial moment, that is captured neither by calling in some protocol language nor by invoking universal practical reason. At the same time, we do no better to invoke the stability, boundedness, and autonomy of self-standing "microworlds." These are scientific worlds in transition, borrowing, exchanging, and mutating. I do not mind at all the use of "scientific cultures," but these cultures cannot be described, even approximately, as infinitely malleable unit ideas, utterances, or practices. Nor are they well captured by the plurihiolism of crystalline blocks delineated from each other by zero-width boundaries.

Dynamic, thick boundaries are important not only in the gestation of new fields (like string theory) but also to reconstruct even more established domains, like physics, where technical, philosophical, and scientific cultures cross. There is an old problem that had been bothering me for many, many years—it is this: from 1902–1909, Albert Einstein worked in a patent office on electromechanical devices—precisely the time of his most intense physics work. Were the two kinds of activities on coils and currents merely puns of one another—worlds apart, so to speak?

A full account would obviously be much more complex, but schematically there are three scientific-technical cultures in play. First, both Poincaré and Einstein's

workplaces were involved in technical work that bore directly on the coordination of time. Poincaré was a lead scientist in and by 1899 in charge of the French Bureau of Longitude. The bureau's principal job was to set clocks around the world (in place X) to be in sync with Paris, so that the Paris–X longitude difference could be calculated. It was a task both crucial to the administrative needs of empire (through the making of maps) and vital to the symbolic play for dominance among the Great Powers. Einstein at the Swiss Patent Office found himself in the midst of a surge in devices to send coordinated time down the railway tracks—so that passengers could coordinate their connections and trains could synchronize their watches well enough to coordinate traffic and avoid catastrophic collisions.

Second, both Poincaré and Einstein were powerfully drawn to scientific philosophy: Poincaré participated in and published in this nascent field along with a cluster of former polytechnicians; Einstein and his friends met together as the ambitiously named but modestly provisioned "Olympia Academy" (three guys, cheese, wine) where they analyzed many texts at the boundary between philosophy and science (including Poincaré's). Both scientists, the established Poincaré and the young Turk Einstein, were fascinated with a new scientific-philosophical account of the nature of time.

Third, both Poincaré and Einstein had plunged deeply into the physics of the electrodynamics of moving bodies. Since the day of James Clerk Maxwell, and even before, physicists had assumed that electric and magnetic forces existed in a universal bath of a scarce and difficult-to-perceive ether. How, both Poincaré and Einstein wanted to know, should one analyze the behavior of electric and magnetic fields when one is moving in that all-pervasive ether? Out of this brew of concerns—from the electrodynamic, the practical technological, and the philosophical—emerged a new concept of time.

Take Poincaré (the Einstein story carries some important structural parallels). In 1898, in an article about the philosophical foundations of time, he brought to bear the standard longitude-finder technique and concluded that simultaneity ought be *defined* this way: two events are simultaneous if they occur at the same time as measured by two distant, identical, and coordinated clocks borne by longitude finders. Coordination was to be done as the longitude finders, in fact, did it everyday in their far-flung work: by sending an electrical signal from one clock to another, taking into account the time the signal took to arrive. So if finder X sent finder Y a signal, and X's clock struck noon and the signal took a second to arrive at Y, then Y would set her clock at noon plus one second. Philosophically, the new concept was powerful: it offered the possibility of transforming the very idea of simultaneity from a metaphysical notion ("mathematical, true, absolute") to one that depended in its very core on a *procedure*, a protocol, that could be laid out with rulers, clocks, and signals. Practically (for longitude finders) the simultaneity procedure remained a tool—an essential tool deployed every day—but a tool nonetheless. But as of 1898, nothing in Poincaré's work indicated that he imagined the new time concept to demand changes in physics per se.

The exceptionalism of physics ended just a few years later when Poincaré realized that the signal-and-clock definition of simultaneity could make sense of recent work in the electrodynamics of moving bodies. Over the years that followed, Poincaré

shuttled between these different sites: the simultaneity procedure fitted into conferences and publications on cartography, electrodynamics, and philosophy. To the philosophers, the reformed simultaneity became an exemplar of a concept grounded in procedure. To physicists, after Einstein, it became a fundamental starting point for relativity theory. And to the practical folks, the pith-helmeted explorer soldiers who telegraphed time from the Andes to Paris and back, the procedure was their bread and butter.

This convention, this concept—simultaneity grounded in signal-based clock coordination—gives us a very concrete example of scientific exchange. Here is a simple procedure passed between domains that signified quite differently in each of its contexts. Was clock coordination *essentially* a piece of longitude finding, a piece of physics, or a piece of philosophy? The question is unacceptable. It was all three. In the heterogeneous cooperation that marks so much of scientific work, devices, procedures, and equations are mobile—but not infinitely so. Clock-coordinated simultaneity "worked" in this particular triple intersection. Would it have worked similarly in Newton's Cambridge back in the 1660s? Of course not. Einstein–Poincaré clock coordination would have corresponded not at all to a world without telegraphs, without the articulated problem of electrodynamics, and without a philosophy in motion toward the sciences.

This small but significant example of procedural simultaneity illustrates again how a scientific utterance, a procedure, can be finitely local—that is neither infinitely transportable nor locked in one microworld crystal. It shows how Geertzian coherence *does* help us understand how things fit together and, at the same time, pushes us toward a world of *finite* exchange, hybridity, and fragmentation.

Conclusion: Finite Exchange

The concept of a scientific culture can continue to serve us well—if we bear in mind its limits. Its single best function is to remind us insistently of the importance of interrelationships among practices and meanings, of the ways in which meanings, values, and symbols hold together in particular sites. Scientific culture leads us away from a fragmentary universalism, away from the ever-receding promise of a *characterstica universalis* that will unlock knowledge everywhere and for all time. But the pitfalls of the culture concept are equally clear; it is easy enough to reify a set of practices into something indelible, inevitable, to render a scientific subculture into a sealed microworld marked by fixity, holism, and cohesiveness and isolated from everything and everyone else by a mathematically thin but poreless boundary.

To treat science as made up of such island empires is to exclude *in advance* some of the most interesting features of science in its historical development—and present condition. It is not hyperbolic to say that all of the most productive domains of science today—domains as heterogeneous as nanotechnology, string theory, and bioinformatics—are fields where the boundaries between the older disciplines are thick and the whole is changing at an astonishing rate. To find the tools to handle science in flux is not the matter of a moment—perhaps it is not surprising that no single metaphor will do. Here might be the start of a series that could be of use: instead of limiting our imaginative space to heaps of sand *versus* ordered, isolated

crystals, we might reach deeper into the materials that have more recently proven of world-changing importance. Within any electronic device are bits of silicon—not in its pure crystal state, but in that condition that the condensed-matter physicists know as "amorphous semiconductors." These have two characteristics: *locally* they exhibit very strong order, but as one goes further from any particular spot, the ordering breaks down—a distant atom is *not* positioned as one expects (from crystal-like reasoning) relative to an atom nearby.

Perhaps scientific cultures are a bit like this. At any given disciplinary location, the world does indeed look quite Geertzian. Concepts, values, symbols, and meanings hold together. They are not mere assemblages. But as one moves further away in the space of practices, conformity to the structure breaks down. All sorts of exchanges are constantly in motion; purity is post hoc dream.

Now, as a very old proverb has it, no metaphor ever walks on all four legs, and this one is no exception. Order parameters are very simple in physical space—compared with the immense complexity of the space of symbols and meanings that we have in view as we confront human activity. But perhaps these starting ideas, ideas of exchange languages, trading zones, and local order might prove of use.

Having learned much from the anthropology of Clifford Geertz, the study of science might pay back, in some small measure a debt long due. If it can, that would be a great pleasure. I miss Cliff. I wish he were here.

NOTES

1. Early versions of this essay were presented as a comment on Clifford Geertz's *Available Light* (unpublished), APA, San Francisco, March 30, 2001 and at the American Sociological Association, August 17, 2003.
2. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, reprinted 2001), pp. 248–49.
3. Ibid., p. 250.
4 Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 20–21.
5. Referee Reports for NSF DMS 9505939. For more extensive discussion of the string example, see Peter Galison, "Mirror Symmetry" in M. Norton Wise, ed., *Growing Explanations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 23–64.
6. Jaffe and Quinn, A theoretical mathematics. *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*, Volume 29, Number 1, July 1993, pp. 1–13.

CHAPTER 12

Geertz's Legacy Beyond the Modes of Cultural Analysis of His Time: Speculative Notes and Queries in Remembrance

George E. Marcus

As I sit in Paris attempting to revise the talk that I presented at the "Clifford Geertz in the Human Sciences" conference at Yale, I am temporarily distracted from my main task of working on an ethnographic project to study the secretariat of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva.[1] But in this, I do not feel far from Geertz: his influence on our (it is a collaboration) anticipations is undeniable. Will we be able to accumulate fieldwork cases, anecdotes, and incidents among the bureaucrats, diplomats, negotiators, and delegations in the virtual global spaces of the WTO as effective and as telling as the cockfight among the Balinese? Will we be able to satisfy the sorts of data and ethnographic knowing that the evocation of thick description entails, when what we closely observe and record must somehow end by informing already-constituted discourses of the activist on ethics, inequalities, and justice, and of the economist and lawyer on the classic liberal doctrine of comparative advantage in trade? When (bureaucratic) culture is resolutely thin in the way that it is presented, and when critique trumps the merely interpretative, as is the case in the milieus of so many projects of anthropological research today, what is left in such projects of Geertz among the Balinese, Javanese, or Moroccans? I want to argue that his style haunts, especially his evocation of fieldwork and its requirements as the defining practice of anthropology, the many new contexts of research where anthropologists no longer go up river "where they still do it,"[2] but immerse themselves in scenes of fieldwork concerned with everyday lives implicated

in webs of media, science, technology, finance, trade, war, epidemic, nongovernmental organizations, and international organizations (a terrain of global flows that Arjun Appadurai famously evoked in the Public Culture project[3]). Anthropologists nowadays participate in the multisited everyday to ultimately say something about the technical, the abstract, and the already densely represented, narrated, and interpreted.

I am interested in the nature of Geertz's legacy within the ambitions and such sites of anthropological research today, particularly among younger anthropologists who have come of age professionally after the 1980s, unlike my own generation, who made the transition from area studies and ethnographic specialization in which we grew up on Geertz prominently, among others, to the present milieu of research caught up in processes of global scale and in the midst of new technologies and social movements. Foucault and Latour, for example, are much more likely to be cited than Geertz (or any other famous anthropologist of his era) in many current projects, but Geertz's influence, I believe, remains indelible and will be for some time.

But in what senses beyond his powerful evocations of fieldwork? Indeed, Geertz's most read writings reflect the last best expression of cultural analysis embedded in an anthropological tradition of research reaching back more than a century. Yet few younger anthropologists read much of his scholarly work other than certain essays that have come to stand for him, not just in anthropology but in far-reaching interdisciplinary contexts (in particular the "Deep Play" and "Thick Description" essays, which constitute the focus of a number of the essays in this volume).[4] So, rather than focus directly and lineally on the legacy of his ideas in writing, I want to take a more oblique or lateral approach here to how he continues to have influence beyond the arenas in which his scholarship most clearly had impact during his lifetime.[5] How is Geertz reflected in, through, and now certainly beyond the so-called postmodern turn in the study of culture, which has so complicated and displaced theoretically the ideas of culture on which anthropological research had theretofore been based,[6] and about which Geertz himself expressed mixed judgments?[7] And more importantly, how is his influence reflected in domains of study in which he had little direct or obvious influence through his writings? These domains, such as feminism, science studies, media studies, and the study of globalization, which I view as importantly shaped by theoretical approaches to critique carried in and around the so-called postmodern turn, even though the latter term is now virtually discredited, are very much beyond the sort of focus on the idea of culture that created the conceptual space on which Geertz's originality depended.

It is well to recall here that Geertz's scholarship was shaped within the influential and near-dominant Parsonian categories of a golden age of expansion of the social sciences after World War II, which gave culture a niche, even though Geertz was far from a Parsonian in his own intellectual style. There is no such well-defined niche within an overarching and influential scheme now. Culture must make its way in a very different and fragmented terrain of social thought after the 1980s,[8] and Geertz repeatedly acknowledged this.[9]

So, the legacy of Geertz in which I am interested leaves little register in his best-known and most-cited essays but is probably best accessed by how he is remembered from particular conversations and particular years at the Institute for Advanced

Study. I am concerned with his effects in arenas with which he is not explicitly associated, especially the critical studies of science and technology here, but which he clearly patronized. This is about Geertz in the ecology of his ideas rather than their lineage, shaped by his role at the Institute for Advanced Study. Such is the influence of a patron—and in this case a reluctant, though generous and responsible one, having not built a school as such but rather who remained deeply and foremost committed to an approach, that of interpretation, as the major aesthetic, rather than narrowly methodological, modality of social inquiry. It was a general tendency that Geertz so agilely promoted across a number of interdisciplinary arenas from the 1970s through the turn of the century. Marked by his famous essay collections (there were three: 1973, 1983, and 2000[10]), Geertz's ideas were developed in changing ecologies of topics that were reflected on an annual basis in the organized foci of fellowship invitations at the Institute. His continuing influence is most effectively accessed by addressing this context. How is his legacy experienced in such areas where his influence was thus lateral rather than direct?

In considering his patron role at the Institute, this chapter is built around a speculative reference to one key issue and set of events,[11] that is, Geertz's interest and work in making a final appointment in the school that he founded, around the time of his formal retirement in 1998. This was not an effort to fill a position with an anthropologist or a scholar in non-Western area studies but rather a sustained, politically difficult, and eventually failed attempt to appoint a prominent scholar in the field of science studies.[12] This choice within the context of Institute patronage, I believe, registers a certain wager on Geertz's part about the most promising near future for the brand of interpretative social science that he nurtured beyond anthropology and its particular concepts and projects, though he remained personally devoted to these.[13]

Notes and Queries on Geertz at the Institute for Advanced Study

By the time Geertz reached the Institute in 1972, he was Geertz of the essays (although one great work on Bali[14] remained to be finished as well as a book-length memoir[15]), and these rendered judgments perhaps on projects he grew within (Parsons) and worlds in which his fieldwork took place (that of development studies of the 1950s and 1960s in all of their complexity and hope—quite different from the same project in the 1970s and 1980s).[16] More than any other comparable figure of distinction in anthropology, of whom I know, Geertz produced a remarkable array of reflective writing and career retrospective, nearing and postretirement [the memoir, *After the Fact*; the essay collection, *Available Light*; an essay in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*; an essay in a series of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS); and a response essay within a festschrift]. He was very clear about the changed conditions today for doing the kind of anthropology to which he had been drawn during the 1950s, referring to that postwar build-up of anthropology programs and opportunities as a golden age.

In perspective, Geertz of the essays might be seen as an effort to keep the fragments of a once more ambitious project of cultural anthropology together, to lend

them elements of coherence if only by dint of style and rhetoric. His own framing discourse for practicing interpretive anthropology is comparative, sweepingly historical in scope. The development/modernization paradigm of his early career created the possible practical conditions for such a comparative project in anthropology, producing bodies of grounded fieldwork research, well funded, in many places. Geertz himself materialized this comparative imaginary that he evoked repeatedly in his essays in a masterful short work from his Yale Terry lectures, *Islam Observed*.[17] But anthropology, even then and in more recent times, has produced few such works of comparative scale and ambition. Furthermore, the development/modernization paradigm, and the funding behind it, was in ruins by the 1970s. The turn by anthropologists to history in the 1980s preserved something of the framing comparative perspective into which ethnography might fit, but the vision of a collective project of interpretive ethnography of peoples and places (of "cultures") serving comparative ends was much diminished.

In his career retrospective writings, Geertz acknowledges epochal change or the mood of epochal change in the world, in disciplines, but his entire mode was to deflate its grandeur or grandiosity without denying pathos or the drama of human events. In terms of classic tropes of writing about history or one's times,[18] Geertz operated in the trope of comedy rather than tragedy—and indeed the former is far more appropriate to the scale on which anthropologists experience or see big events.[19] With a certain humor, sometimes stinging, Geertz would never let himself overemphasize the epochal importance of certain acts, his own or others. This could disappoint those who expected something grander, more operatic, and in the trope of tragedy, by such an important thinker on the scope of human events. But how someone in the comedy mode has influence or effect is to create an environment, a mise-en-scene, a sensibility for later thinking—rather than resources, concepts, specific ideas, techniques—in short, "theory"—for paradigms or fashions. And Geertz's legacy—the Geertz of the essays and the Institute—is in providing this zone of comfort, this brand of humanism, in changing terrains of research. In this way, I think that his end-of-career reflective writings will be the most important and most enduring. Commensurately, I think that his effective role as an open-minded patron, strongly committed to nudging interpretive inquiry along wherever it had opportunities, is where the longer-term "Geertz effect" will reside after his writings have ceased to be routinely cited.[20]

Permanent positions at the Institute for Advanced Study confer the role of patron on its eminent appointees, offering the potential of school building, of founding research paradigms as an asset, whether it is happily received or not. Geertz assumed this role ambivalently and even diffidently[21]—he did not want to tell others what to do or think—but merely the annual task of permanent members of the Institute to invite groups of visiting scholars for year-long stays around particular themes in broader discussion or fashion defines a certain burden of influence and agenda shaping in the American (and even European) social sciences. And for many years, the prestige of cultural anthropology itself was carried along with the performance of this annual function at the Institute.

So, once at the Institute, Geertz's ideas were very much defined by their changing ecology or context in relation to ideas, trends, and fashions, but not in a simple

interdisciplinary sense. Rather the power of the Institute's programs was, as noted, to define topics and to produce cohorts and to do so with such a personal stamp. None of the few other comparable elite research centers in the United States (such as the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford) dispense patronage with such a personal mark as the Institute in Princeton. Over the years, Geertz's ideas have been reflected in the kinds of topics around which he himself and his two or three colleagues have gathered groups of the most prominent and relevant scholars. He did this broadly, with consultation, openness, and curiosity. The one agenda was to preserve and further the style of interpretive social science that he had pioneered.

For example, during my year there, 1982–1983, the topic focus was cognitive science, which at the time was the most ascendant form of the challenge of science—in the sense of the natural sciences—within the social sciences. Geertz, I think, was always interested in having this conversation with the sciences—interpretive approaches versus (and within) the grounds of natural science and the positivist ambitions of the social sciences—and he often imported it, but those permanent colleagues in the established sciences (mathematics and physics, mostly) at the Institute were not conducive to this interest, and at least suspicious of it. As such, the Institute remained a place cold to these discussions, which inevitably seemed critical of, or even subversive to, the practice of science within the other schools, culminating in the failed process of trying to recruit a science studies scholar congenial to a cultural approach near the end of Geertz's tenure.[22]

So, after Geertz went to the Institute, and after the fragmentations of the worlds of social science friendly to Geertzian interpretavism, and the waning of it as a fashion in historical scholarship, his legacy today has to be understood in the different sorts of ecologies of ideas in which it in fact operates. While continuing to value, in his own work and that of others, the classic, careful comparativism embodied in the best area studies scholarship of the so-called golden age, he knew, I think, that it was in the changing and emerging arenas like science studies that novel thinking and theory in the kind of social science to which he was devoted would be possible.

And this brings us to Geertz's sustained investment in time, energy, and prestige in trying to make an appointment in science studies that might ensure an interpretive legacy at the Institute in the very heart of its own major historic self-definition and prestige. This was an effort that failed, at least partly because of a visceral institutional politics that resembled Geertz's famous failed attempt at the beginning of his tenure to bring the sociologist Robert Bellah to the Institute as the first appointment after himself in the School of Social Science (note that all permanent appointments involve the votes of all the members of the Institute across its schools). Although the science studies appointment story was less scandalous and more complicated in its details and stages, it nonetheless reflected the constraints and vulnerabilities of the interpretive social science that Geertz nurtured at the Institute.

The brief outline of the story, as I understand it, is that three scholars at various times were in contention for the position. Two were historians of science and the third was the French scholar, Bruno Latour, whose work in the social studies of science since the 1980s, has had immense influence in the United States and

elsewhere.[23] All were congenial to the style of social science that Geertz had championed. One of the historians was judged not acceptable and his candidacy was not pursued further. A second historian was strongly approved, Peter Galison, but he declined the appointment.[24] Latour's candidacy was the most controversial—his were among the key writings that fed the critical tendencies within the postmodern turn that led to the burgeoning of science studies. It appeared that he would be appointed and that he would accept, but his candidacy was eventually and successfully opposed late in the process.

Maybe the most significant point in this story is that Geertz did not work to appoint an anthropologist or an area studies scholar (certainly, to have done so would not have in principle elicited the same level of sensitivity as proposing a science studies scholar did). This "road not taken" stimulates some concluding speculations indeed about Geertz's relation to anthropology, developed in the last section of this chapter. As an alternative, a science studies scholar, congenial to his commitment to interpretive approaches, which entailed a politics of knowledge he cared very much about, seemed a wise, even obvious, move. He perhaps might not have held the Institute in as much esteem as others did; it was a free but difficult place for him to work. By working for the Latour candidacy—which, expectedly or not, evoked the Bellah affair—there might have been a hint of resentment, perhaps even of a slightly aggressive act, being the most effective way to establish a critique of and within the Institute for the long term, to sustain the edge of the sort of conversation between interpretation and science that had been difficult to foster over the years. The rise of science studies and within that, Latour, signaled opportunity in institutionalizing this conversation in which Geertz had been interested. That is one speculation, and it suggests exploring a little further what Geertz wrote about science studies in his last works as well as aspects of his current reception especially among younger scholars in this field whose training has in part been in anthropology.[25]

GEERTZ AND SCIENCE STUDIES, FOR EXAMPLE

In *Available Light*, Geertz wrote,

> Of all the sorts of work that go on under the general rubric of the human sciences, those that devote themselves to clarifying the forms of life lived out . . . in connection with linear accelerators, neuroendocrinological labs, the demonstration rooms of the Royal Society, astronomical observations, marine biology field stations, or the planning committees of NASA, are the least likely to conceive their task as limited to making out the intersubjective worlds of persons. Machines, objects, tools, artifacts, instruments are too close at hand to be taken as external to what is going on; so much apparatus, free of meaning. These mere "things" have to be incorporated into the story, and when they are the story takes on a heteroclite form—human agents and nonhuman ones bound together in interpretavist narratives.
>
> After cautiously acknowledging the "ill-formed and variable, uncertain probes in an . . . ill-marked enquiry," he notes, "Sciences, physical, biological, human, or whatever, change not only in their content or their social impact (though do, of course, do that . . .) but in their character as a form of life, a way of being in the world.[26]

These comments seem the most explicit indication in his writings of Geertz's positive disposition to science studies. Certainly, they reflect his enthusiasm for Bruno Latour's most influential approach, commonly labeled as actor-network theory. As Michael Fischer, anthropologist and former director of the graduate program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT, comments,

> It is [Peter] Galison's book *Image and Logic* (of all his works to date) that comes closest to exemplifying Geertz's point: "Sciences . . . change not only in their content or their social impact (though they do, of course, do that . . .) but in their character as a form of life, a way of being in the world." One thinks not only of the ways in which 19th century research tools for natural turbulence (cloud chambers in the Alps; tropical volcanoes) morphed into early bubble chambers for particle physics research, bringing very different scientific styles into interaction, but also Galison's tracing of the competing intuitive "forms of life or ways of being in the world" between those who were in search of a visible "golden event" picture of particles, and those who dismissed flashes and traces in favor of statistically validated truths of the unseen. "Emergent forms of life," in my usage (Fischer 2004), are socialities, new biologies, and new knowledge configurations . . . Geertz probably sensed that Galison or Latour while still constituting "ill-formed and variable, uncertain opening probes in an . . . ill marked enquiry" nonetheless were nudging things in the right direction of reinvigorating the human sciences by refusing to exclude or make untouchable those transformations in perception and judgment associated with the sciences and technologies. (personal communication)

Can a legacy for Geertz (and for the mode of classic cultural analysis which he came to dominate) be otherwise perceived today in this newer arena of interdisciplinary research, in which anthropology participates? I interviewed two science studies scholars trained in anthropology over the past decade and a half, who were very familiar with some of Geertz's essays as well as his reflective career writings, and their primary interest was in what comes after culture in the Geertzian mode—as one said, "In science studies, what is culture in the Geertzian mode a proxy for?" The short answer was cultures or communities of knowledge production, in which Geertz of the essays was thought through in relation most often to Michel Foucault, who became, in a sense, the most important successor to Geertz in providing a framework for what succeeded cultural analysis before the 1980s in anthropology.

After the 1980s, none of the totalizing frameworks of cultural analysis, which indeed were the milieu of Geertz's anthropology, could be sustained in the growing research arenas, like science studies, in which critical theories of culture had become influential. The interpretive program, which I believe had priority over the specific significance of the culture concept in Geertz's commitments at the Institute, needed other terms and informing concepts, and by his preretirement years, these perhaps were most encouragingly being forged in science studies. As noted, science studies scholars were quite agilely changing the terms of Geertz's interpretavism that did not substantively depend on the notion of culture, or cultural system, for the prospering of this field; culture was brought along with objects that focused around, for example, emergent forms of life[27] or open-source software and commons.[28] To be sure, anthropology in science studies was to include the study of the distinctive

cultures of scientists, but it was after much more as well, evoked in the above cited passages of *After the Fact*.

As historians of science, congenial to Geertz's thought (such as Galison, Latour, Thomas Kuhn, Steven Shapin, Donna Haraway, Karin Knorr Cetina, and Hans Jorg Rheinberger, among others) have, and are, showing, the interpretive itself is deeply a part of the most resolute and precise projects of science. The struggle with outdated doctrines and working ideologies of positivism goes on, but the possibility of transcending this old debate is powerfully developed in science studies research today and thus was for Geertz the most promising legacy for interpretavism—not in the heart of the study of culture, but in that of science. This was an attractive successor arena in which to establish a legacy, and worth investing in. Many of the most prominent historians of science and science studies scholars, who had fellowships at the Institute over the years, experienced Geertz's thought as the symbolic and effective work of a patron of interpretavism in a challenging environment.

This legacy of Geertz in science studies suggests one final topic of speculation—what Geertz's investment in science studies might have reflected about his orientation to anthropology, beyond that dimension of it in which he specialized and distinguished himself. Science studies, consistent with interpretavism, might have suggested a way to revive the blocked science project of anthropology itself (signaled by the fragmentation of its historic four-field holism) through the emergence of anthropology in science studies. Science studies, at first enveloping of Geertz's anthropology, after the 1980s, thus becomes potentially enveloped by the historic anthropological project.

GEERTZ AND THE PROJECT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, FINALLY

If Geertz had tried to engineer the appointment of an anthropologist at the Institute, that person would probably have worked on ethnic conflict, the effects of violence, and social trauma in one of the areas of the world that anthropologists of Geertz's generation, and himself perhaps being the most distinguished, would have researched in an environment of development, decolonization, and modernization—traditional societies into new states. So much of the continuing work of anthropologists in this tradition now occurs in the ruins of those progressive models and the new, less hopeful conditions for change in those places. Anthropology has stayed tied to peoples and places specializations but contemporary history inflects on them differently now, and in ways that make anthropological research still relevant, but perhaps not according to the project that it was supposed to be in its postwar golden age of which Geertz was a shining product.

But he did not make that choice. Although he admired and respected many contemporaries and younger anthropologists, he perhaps made the judgment that there was no one suitable in anthropology or area research to carry on at the Institute the tradition he most cared about (interpretavism, rather than anthropology itself) in a prestigious and edgy, effective way. So, in light of this inferred judgment, what were his investments in anthropology as such from the beginning to the end of his career?

Geertz valued self-making, and a discipline that provided the means to produce interesting and singular minds. Recall that *Works and Lives* was about

distinctive "signatures." (The chapter on the *Writing Culture* writers, "The Children of Malinowski," was perhaps so acerbic because Geertz perceived that these critics undermined this general possibility of self-making in the basic practice of the discipline that he so valued, precisely by their critical literary dissection of ethnography—from a field of general license for self-making in ethnography, hence forward anthropologists would become critics, whereas only a few great ones could be writers). So, Geertz valued anthropology, I think, because it let such interesting and singular minds develop themselves in their own expression with a broad range of opportunity built into the discipline's signature method. He fostered this environment for others; he cared about the state of anthropology but only as a member of the community. He was always comfortable as an anthropologist apart (many anthropologists are this way). Finally, he thought perhaps that after the 1980s, its most creative future was no longer along the tracks of the kind of tradition that allowed him to make himself.

There was indeed something of the old school holistic or generalist anthropologist in Geertz, and not just one who specialized on culture. Though he worked through the modality of specific histories—knowing the human through the species capacity to produce meaning-making symbol systems as historic cultures—he also never lost sight of the universalist agenda of anthropology. There is an ever-present backbeat rhetoric in many of his essays that evokes the humanly universal, the general, in effect, *anthropos*. Several essays address directly the large questions of human development and evolution in the classic generalizing, four-field schema of anthropology. So we can perhaps understand Geertz's attempt at projecting anthropology (of his sort—cultural anthropology in the interpretavist mode) into science studies at the Institute through a strategic appointment as actually the best way to preserve holism in the present era of deep fragmentation among anthropology's historic four fields.

Anthropos, then, more than culture, reenters the picture by pushing the most vibrant research project of the discipline—the interpretavist tradition in the study of cultures—into science studies—especially the biosciences, genomics, and postgenomics (earlier the most promising candidate might have been cognitive sciences)—as a way of moving anthropology back to its holistic ambitions. Finally, by this move of resuturing effectively major fault lines of the classic four fields together (e.g., anthropos as biological and cultural), cultural anthropology, by strengthening its entrée into science studies, might become, once again, more than the ethnography and comparative analysis of peoples and places. In short, the present and coming big questions of science studies become a means for the present and future to return coherently and in terms of substantive research projects to the big questions of anthropology. For the kind of classical anthropologist that Geertz was, science studies would thus be a solution to the shift of cultural anthropology to predominantly being only a distinctive chronicler of contemporary and emergent global social change.

Reprise and Envoi

The critical impulses within the so-called postmodern turn effectively fractured traditional notions of culture in anthropology, for which Geertz was perhaps the last

great articulator, yet without losing the cultural as a conceptual resource, and opened anthropologists to a variety of interdisciplinary arenas, most notably in this essay, science studies, for which Geertz was equally a patron in his influential founder position of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study. Geertz struggled over the years for a place for the cultural (more broadly construed as interpretavism) in the Institute's intellectual environment, overwhelmingly defined by its distinction in mathematics and the natural sciences, by engaging the scientific as something that includes the interpretive (or cultural). The emergence of science studies from the 1990s forward (itself, one of the products of the perturbations stirred by the so-called postmodern) provided perhaps the most promising opportunity for a legacy for interpretavism. As I have argued, this was expressed less in adding to a distinguished corpus of writing than by a final act and concerted effort of the patron to make a permanent appointment.

More speculatively, this final major act of the patron might be understood as also an act not only to nurture the prospects of cultural analysis (interpretavism) by installing it symbolically and substantively at the Institute for the future in its most encouraging and controversial arena of research participation, but finally, in so doing, to reset as well the interpretavist project within, and thereby, to reinvigorate, the historic generalist project of anthropology, from which he never cleaved.

NOTES

1. This three-year project, organized by Professor Marc Abeles of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales please add accent marks over the 'e's' in Abeles –first acute, second grave, and acute accents over first 'e';s in Ecole and Etudes and funded by the French government, is composed of an international group of eight senior and younger anthropologists with unusual and developing access to the processes of the WTO. Characteristic of anthropology, each ethnographer is pursuing his or her own topics, hunches, and lines of inquiry but in the frame of a collaborative project (not, incidentally, unlike Geertz himself whose major researches in Java and Morocco were themselves developed through his membership in ambitious collective projects). I am finding my way in and around the WTO by trying to identify social forms of critical reflexivity within its highly bureaucratic process, but frankly I am as interested in documenting the substantive collaborative modalities that our group of highly individualistic ethnographers will generate (see Marcus, George E., Collaborative Options and Pedagogical Experiment in Anthropological Research on Experts and Policy Processes. *Anthropology in Action* 2008;15(2):47–57.), for some thoughts on how collaborative research contexts affect ethnography differently today).
2. This expression became a sort of half-serious "code" for the long-standing quest and practice of anthropology, employed during several lunchtime discussions at which Geertz, among other visiting fellows, was present during my year of residence at the Institute for Advanced Study, during 1982–1983. The *Writing Culture* textual critique of this traditional disciplinary orientation was taking shape at that time. It was also the period when Geertz was writing the essays that were to compose *Works and Lives* (1988). It was very clear to Geertz and others at these discussions that the critique in formation marked definitively the changing nature of the game of anthropology. The essential interest in the objects that had defined anthropology—kinship, ritual, and exchange—"where they still do it" were at risk. The history of this transition is of course more complex and multifaceted, but it seemed like a rupture at the time.

3. Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
4. The average anthropologist of my generation would know Geertz through some familiarity with his work on modernization (new nations), symbolic anthropology, Java/Bali/Morocco, and the Geertz of the essays. The anthropologist of younger generations (1990s to the present) would primarily know Geertz of the essays only (at most this is what is on the reading list of courses)—and this is how ideas aphoristically associated with Geertz play out in certain ecologies of current topics. This is a rather gross but important way that Geertz through his writings has influence these days and will into the future.
5. These were the reconstitution of the central intellectual tradition of American cultural anthropology in terms of his leadership in defining first, symbolic analysis, and then interpretation as the primary modality in the study of culture; his influence in giving shape to area studies and social history; and his early contributions to the development/modernization paradigm of the 1960s.
6. When postmodernism was in fashion across a number of fields, it was fairly vulnerable to criticisms of excess, such as hyperreflexivity, self-indulgence, and scholarly irresponsibility, but it also effectively created an environment for the substantive reception of critiques of established concepts and their replacement by interdisciplinary theoretical work and analytic styles that shaped the ideas of critical social science and analysis, at least in the United States, that remain influential, even foundational, today (hybridity, the association of culture with identity and identity politic, etc.). In anthropology, culture has been of course a key concept. Michael Fischer ("Culture and Cultural Analysis as Experimental Systems." *Cultural Anthropology* 2007;22(1):1–65.) has written a long view of the transformation of this term in anthropology through the period of postmodernism.
7. See especially Geertz, C. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. London: Polity Press.
8. See Fischer, M., 2007.
9. Most notably in Geertz, C. 1995. *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
10. Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books; Geertz, C. 1983. *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books; Geertz, C. 2000. *Available Light*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
11. Research could be done on this—I did not do it. I recall some conversations of my own with Geertz during this period, and in preparation for this chapter, I consulted three people who had direct knowledge of Geertz's thinking about the repeated effort to appoint a science studies scholar in the School of Social Science at the Institute. But this remains an exercise in rumination and speculation, welcoming and open to correction and amendment by those who know more.
12. Its outcome evoked ironically the famous failure to bring the sociologist Robert Bellah against fierce opposition by the members of the other established schools of the Institute at the beginning of his tenure in 1972.
13. Interestingly, around the time of that effort in which he was proposing science studies scholar, in 1998, I recall my discussion with Geertz in which he was seeking ideas for possible candidates for an Institute position among anthropologists, or at least a scholar involved in non-Western research, and he seemed personally at a loss to come up with someone. If this was the case, I think that that in itself is significant in assessing a future that would keep interpretative approaches growing.
14. Geertz, C. 1976. *Negara: Theater State in Bali*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

15. 2002 in original, but citation seems to be Geertz 1995.
16. The 1960s massacres in Indonesia and their aftermath had a considerable impact on how he thought of Western research projects in Indonesia, about which he intended to write but never did to my knowledge (e.g., he informally discussed these plans in 1972 with graduate students at Harvard, of whom I was one). He had a more complicated relationship to the protests against the Vietnam War, about which I have no personal knowledge.
17. Geertz, C. 1971. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
18. See White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore, MD: JHU Press.
19. Writing in the trope of comedy, in my opinion, became especially characteristic of his later writing on Indonesia. Certainly this mode characterizes *Negara* (1976) in its basic concept (as "theater state") and narrative, and it also pervades his recent, trenchant commentaries on post-Suharto political developments in Indonesia, published in the *New York Review of Books.* ("Indonesia: Starting Over." May 11, 2000).
20. It was certainly not that Geertz could not make up his mind or that he vacillated on positions that were important to him, but his rhetorical style was rigorously undogmatic, nonreductionist, in pursuing a definite intellectual course that left room for others—or surprises. The title of a 1980s essay, written for presentation at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association and intervening in one of the discipline's perennial and signature debates, epitomizes this rhetorical style: "Anti-anti-relativism" (1984).
21. Geertz did not perform his role indifferently; he remained a career-long patron for many of us who first knew him from a year visiting at the Institute (e.g., he was a diligent and quite care-taking source of recommending and letter writing; and in fewer cases, an endorser of books). But also he was resolutely not a "school"-builder either.
22. I was not invited that year with reference to the chosen topic. Rather I was invited because Geertz was interested in my early writing on ethnography (Marcus and Cushman 1982); he himself was writing the essays—Stanford Lectures—that would become *Works and Lives* (1988). Also for me during that year, the most exciting discussions were about world political economy—Charles Sabel was writing the *Second Industrial Divide* (Piore and Sabel 1983), and there were debates involving George Kennan on Reagan, his military build-up, the thinkability of nuclear war, and war in Central America. For a number of reasons that early foray of anthropology into science studies, as cognitive science that year, was not working as well as these other arenas in terms of discussion and interaction, in my opinion.
23. Latour had early connections to anthropology and sometimes evoked it in his writing (e.g., most notably, Latour 1987), but he was a thoroughly interdisciplinary scholar shaped by the liberties on the fringes of French academia and in the 1980s at the center of American disciplines concerned with the study of culture in its multiple senses. In the second wave of the taste for French thought in American universities (after Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, etc.), Latour was at the forefront.
24. According to Michael Fischer, Galison was the historian of science who perhaps did most among his generational cohort in the United States to create a rapprochement with anthropologists—from his conference organizing at Stanford to his hires at Harvard's Department of the History of Science.
25. Prominent graduate programs in science studies for which cultural anthropology is an important component are at MIT, RPI,Cornell, University of California at Santa

Cruz, University of California at Davis, and in the several departments of anthropology today that are producing PhDs in this field.

26. Geertz 2000, p. 154.
27. Fischer, Michael M. J. 2003. *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
28. Kelty, Christopher M. 2008. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

CHAPTER 13

"To locate in the tenor of their setting the sources of their spell": Clifford Geertz and the "Strong" Program in Cultural Sociology

Mats Trondman

Introduction

In their formulation of "the 'strong' program in cultural sociology," Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith state that sociology "for most of its history" has been dominated by "culturally unmusical scholars."[1] In trying to understand the transformations and crises of modern society, sociologists "emptied" rather than focused "the world of meaning."[2] Even if there were glimmers from the classics,[3] sociology, both as theory and method, came to suffer "from a numbness toward meaning."[4]

The cultural analyst who probably more than anyone else came to practice this demand for "cultural musicality" by making people's meaning-making the prime issue in social analysis was Clifford Geertz. Under the headline "Changing the Subject" in "A Life of Learning," his Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1999, Geertz shared with the audiences the "lessons" learned from his work with "a seven-hundred page thesis (Professor DuBois was appalled) squashed down to a four-hundred page book."[5] "The point" of these lessons, he told the audience, was that "the study of other people's cultures . . . involves discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it."[6] It also "involves learning how, as being from elsewhere with a world of one's own, to live with them."[7] And to really learn from that living, Geertz found it "necessary to gain a working familiarity with *the frames of meaning within which they enact their*

lives."[8] Hence he brought the musicality of meaning back to the analysis of structures, interactions, and actions. "The rest," Geertz concludes in the Haskins lecture, is "postscript."[9] At the age of 72, he had spent more than 10 years in the field and another 30, as he puts it himself, "attempting to communicate its charms in print."[10] This statement is, I will argue, to make something up out of a whole cloth.

After four decades of "postscript," his cultural analysis of, in his own vocabulary, "particular ways of being in the world"[11]—that is, the meaning of phenomena such as religion in Java, cockfights on Bali, or Islamic oral poets in Morocco—was referred to by Alexander and Smith as "a springboard for a 'strong' program in cultural analysis."[12] Hence this *turn toward meaning*, this "interpretative anthropology," the label Geertz preferred himself,[13] "changed both the subject pursued and the subject pursuing it."[14] That is, not only parts of anthropology, but also parts of sociology.

But, as Geertz puts it himself in the Haskins lecture, "not all this happened without the usual quota of fear and loathing."[15] "After the turns," he tells us, "there came the wars"[16]—the wars on culture, politics, epistemology, history, values, gender, and so on, that is, "the wars of," using Geertz labels, "the paleos" and "the posties."[17] For some he went too far, for others not far enough. Geertz's "meaning turn" was thus not only celebrated in some quarters, but also harshly criticized in several others. In the mid-1980s, Alexander did both things at the same time. Not because Geertz went too far *and* not far enough, but because he did not hang on to his initial formulation of the "meaning turn." "Nobody in the postwar period has taught us more about the case for a "strong" cultural theory than Geertz," Alexander states in his *Twenty Lectures*.[18] However, this definite consecration of Geertz as a cultural sociologist[19] is preceded by the following request from Alexander: "We must ourselves turn reluctantly away from Geertz."[20] My contribution to this volume is an examination of that reluctant turn.

What Geertz knew or thought about Alexander's averted face in, as I will understand it, "theoretical" anger, I do not know. What I do know is that Geertz himself, according to his own self-presentation, lacked "the wit to commit" in the "wars" due to being "shy of polemic."[21] He preferred to leave, he says in the Haskins lecture, "the rough stuff" and "howling debates" to "persons more interested in themselves than their work."[22] To me, this does not sound like a statement from a shy person not wanting wars.

However, Geertz's comments on "wars" are *not* about Alexander's reluctant turn. They are rather addressed to "the paleos" and "the posties" critiquing the turn toward meaning. Hence, the Alexander–versus–Geertz case is in no way, to paraphrase a well known and often, rightly so, debated worldview, a question of a clash *between* civilizations. It is rather a clash *within* the "strong" program in cultural sociology. And that later clash, this is my *aim*, is to be resolved by way of civil repair[23] and multidimensional thinking,[24] that is, by way of what I consider to be the two most decisive logics, politically and theoretically, in Alexander's own work.

Accordingly I am not on a warpath. Rather, in the spirit of Alexander's own work, I will take on the role of the *repairman* offering a tailor-made *logic of reconciliation*. In one sense, this repair, of course, is nothing but a symbolic gesture made after the fact. As far as I know, Alexander and Geertz, as human individuals,

were reconciled. And it did not take me to make it happen. So if someone, rightly so, wants to turn me into a do-gooder too late for arrival, I will have to live with that. Much harder to deal with, though, is the accusation from "the posties": to be marked down, as a representative of an old, scruffy and ought-to-be-bypassed school of cultural sociology—to stand and unfold oneself as the cultural lag personified. This is probably so due to my stay in the cultural studies' camp for too long.[25] So, to start from somewhere, here is my solution as poetry in motion: like an angel in post-postmodern times, I will try to move backward into the future of a cultural sociology still, legitimately so, informed by Geertz's "old" turn toward meaning *and* Alexander's critique of how that meaning seemingly got lost in how Geertz's own project developed. Hence, while moving backward into the future, I need to take on three tasks. First I will have to reconstruct the intention, true nature, and importance of the Geertz's "early" turn toward meaning. I will do it with the help of his mid-1960s essay "Religion as a Cultural System."[26] This is Geertz as, in the Kuhnian sense, "exemplar." This is "the sing"[27] of cultural sociologists also prefeaturing, I dare to say, Alexander and Smith and their program in cultural sociology.[28] I will then have to make explicit the reasons for Alexander's reluctant turn from Geertz as a cultural sociologist. This is my reconstruction of Alexander's mid-1980s critique of Geertz's "later" and mostly programmatic thinking. I will reconstruct this critique in terms of "sliding areas" within Geertz's own meaning system. Third I need to argue why Alexander's critique of Geertz has both its valid and invalid ways. We should not turn, not even reluctantly, away from Geertz. I will try my very best to explain why. The most important part of that argument is my *post* (not *de*)-construction, of one of Geertz's most powerful cultural analyses: the oral Islamic poets in Morocco so thickly described and deeply interpreted in the mid-1970s essay "Art as a Cultural System." Together with the more programmatic essay "Religion as a Cultural System," this is, to me, Geertz at his best.

Now, taking on these three tasks by moving backward into the future to repair and reconcile, I will, energized by Bob Dylan's "talking-war-blues," have to give answers to three interrelated and only seemingly paradoxical questions: how can Geertz's "cultural musicality"—as a "springboard" for a "strong" program in cultural sociology, and against Dylan's, or Lincoln's, statement—be *all* right *all* the time? Why is Alexander's critique of Geertz *part* right *all* of the time? And why are the sayings and doings of Geertz *all* right *part* of the time? Answering these questions by way of multidimensional thinking is the civil repair. Accepting them is the reconciliation.[29]

Geertz's Invention: The Turn Toward Meaning

In "Religion as a Cultural System,"[30] Geertz starts out by stating that he will confine his effort to develop what he refers to as "the cultural dimension of religious analysis."[31] It is the more generalized significance of this *cultural dimension*—not religion per se—that is at stake here. With the intention of defining this dimension, that is, Geertz's "meaning turn," I have reconstructed five interdependent analytical aspects. The first one concerns Geertz's *conceptualization of culture*. He refined and reframed the need, meaning, and use of culture as an analytic dimension in its

own right.[32] In "A Life of Learning," the Haskins lecture again, Geertz reminds his audience about Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn's "171 definitions" of culture, "sortable into thirteen categories."[33] "I took it as my task," he says, "to cut the idea of culture down in size, to turn it into a less expansive affair."[34] The reframing of culture, or, rather, cultural analysis, as Geertz formulates it in *Interpretation of Cultures*, "boils down to one question: how to frame an analysis of meaning," that is, "the conceptual structures" humans "use to construe experience."[35] Thus, the study of phenomena as religion, ideology, or the arts as cultural systems cannot be reduced to, respectively, descriptions of religious belief, political coups, and institutions or pieces of art. In other words, Geertz's conceptualization of culture is *not* "cults and customs," *but* "the structures of meaning" "through" which humans "give shapes to their experience."[36]

The second interdependent aspect concerns *culture as symbol's meaning* because, quoting Geertz, "it is symbols that signify meanings."[37] And this approach could be "used for any object, act, event, quality, or relation."[38] It "serves as a vehicle for conception," and this conception is "the symbol's meaning." And all symbols, "or at least symbolic elements,"[39] are, quoting Geertz, "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs."[40]

Complexes of symbols and their abstracted meanings make "cultural patterns."[41] These patterns "lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism."[42] They are "that inter-subjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born, in which they pursue their separate careers, and which they leave persisting behind them after they die."[43] However, these patterns are not only extrinsic sources "objectively" out there as "blueprints" or "templates"[44] to think with, act by, and leave behind. They are also, as long as we live, intrinsic meaning systems, often "highly generalized" within us.[45] Hence, human beings "do not only give conceptual form to social and psychological reality by shaping themselves to these patterns, they are also shaping these patterns to themselves."[46] It is these humanly produced out-there-as-facts *cultural structures*, more or less internalized and shared, with reshaping capacity that make up the third defining aspect of the cultural dimension.

At the same time, as there are more generalized cultural structures, more or less widely shared in society, there are also more specific cultural systems with *internal structures* of their own. Systems of religion, politics, and the arts might have their own more or less demarcated cultural structures. What, as an example, religion as cultural system brings to ordinary life "varies with the religion involved."[47] Thus, quoting Geertz, what one "'learns' about the pattern of life from a sorcery rite and from a commensal meal will have rather diverse effects on social and psychological functioning."[48]

There are, of course, complex relations between wider symbolic structures and more specified internal ones. Sometimes, as with religion, its concepts and ways of understanding the world can "spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework or general ideal in terms of which a wide range of experience—intellectual, emotional, moral—can be given meaningful form."[49] This is what Geertz calls the "model *of* aspect." But symbolic structures also work as

"rooted" "mental" dispositions," that is, as "models *for* aspect."[50] The importance of religion, politics, or art as cultural systems then lies in their capacities "to serve," for individuals or for groups, "as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them."[51]

Accordingly, meaningful symbolic structures provide, in Geertz's own words, a "mode of action through which it can be expressed, being expressed understood, and being understood endured."[52] Thus *cultural acts*, the fourth interdependent aspect of the cultural dimension, are "the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms."[53] That is, they are social acts or events with meaning that "resist the challenge of emotional meaninglessness."[54] In other words, the social and the cultural are not the same thing. "The symbolic dimension of social events is . . . itself theoretically abstractable from those events as empirical totalities."[55]

Now, culture as meaning, meaning as symbol's meaning, complex of symbolic meanings as symbolic structure, and cultural acts enacted within systems of meaning are also embodied in human individuals as *moods and motivations*. This makes the fifth and last aspect of defining the cultural dimension. Motivations are not "acts" or "feelings" "but liabilities to perform particular classes of acts or have particular classes of feelings."[56] Motivations represent "a persisting tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations."[57] To be motivated by religion is what it means to be religious. And, hence, the same goes for ideologies or the arts. Moods are yet another aspect of what it means to be religious. These moods that sacred myths, symbols, and rituals "induce, at different times and places, range from exultation to melancholy, from self-confidence to self-pity, from an incorrigible playfulness to bland listlessness."[58] Motivations have "directional casts" they move, have an "overall course," and gravitate toward something, like consummations.[59] Moods, though, "they go nowhere,"[60] they only "vary as to intensity."[61] They are, using one of Geertz's metaphors, "like fogs, they just settle and lift."[62] And fogs, they are there or not there, "merely recur," "with greater or lesser frequency."[63] And when present, "they are totalistic."[64] One can hardly be playful and listless at the same time. Motivations are "made meaningful" with reference to the ends toward which they are conceived to conduce."[65] Someone is "industrious" because she or he "wishes to succeed."[66] Moods, on the contrary, are "made meaningful with reference to the conditions from which they are conceived to spring."[67] Someone is "worried" about being aware of the hanging threat of a lover who might leave.

The Presuppositional Status of the Turn toward Meaning

With his mid-1960s analysis of religion, Geertz undoubtedly embarked on a strong version of cultural sociology. His cultural dimension was, Alexander states, "just where sociological theory ought to go."[68] Informed by the theoretical logic of Alexander's sociology,[69] there are at least four interrelated reasons, I would argue, for the seminal status of Geertz's analysis of "Religion as a Cultural System." Taken together, I consider them to define the presuppositional status of Geertz's turn toward meaning. The first reason is its strong emphasis on *the autonomy of the cultural dimension* focusing "the meanings of life."[70] Geertz took as his task to develop

"an anthropological theory"[71] that, in Alexander's words, "forcefully could describe the autonomy of cultural elements."[72] In other words, "the cultural" is a dimension in its own needed right and cannot be left out of the analysis. There are, of course, other dimensions, such as the "social," the "material," and the "personal," but culture "cannot be reduced to them."[73] Accordingly, we should not put other distinctive dimensions up against "the cultural." The autonomy of the cultural dimension "is secured, then, because meaning is taken to be central."[74] It is so central because human beings depend on symbols and symbolic systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for their, in Geertz words, "creatural viability."[75] Or as Alexander formulates it, Geertz is "giving cultural systems something distinctively 'cultural' to do."[76]

The second reason for the seminal status of Geertz's turn toward meaning is its easily recognized *theoretical awareness*. And this is a theory understood as, in Alexander's formulation, "abstraction separated from concrete base" and "generalization separated from particulars."[77] It means that the theoretical understanding of the cultural dimension "cannot be built without facts," that is, in Geertz's terms, "thick descriptions,"[78] but it "cannot be built on them only either."[79] Data cannot collect, organize, and analyze itself. Hence all scientific data cannot be but "theoretically informed."[80] That is why the problem is not whether we should stick to data or theory. Both are interdependent "unavoidables."[81] And, accordingly, Geertz starts his article on religion with a straightforward demand for theory. "Since the Second World War," he states, work on religion, has "made no theoretical advances of major importance."[82] And in the very last sentence of the same article, he concludes that only when we have a "theoretical analysis" of the cultural dimension "we will be able to cope effectively with those aspects of social and psychological life in which religion (or art, or science, or ideology) plays a determined role."[83] It was, following Alexander, by "making meaning more central" that Geertz "made culture more important," and this "new importance made it essential to find a stronger cultural theory."[84]

The third reason for the seminal character of Geertz's article on religion is that it avoids any possible form of reductionism. It is not a question of choosing between "society" and "culture," "material" and "cultural" structures, "external" and "internal" structures, "environment" and "action," "social" and "cultural" action, "rational" and "nonrational actions," "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" processes, *or* "cognitive" and "emotional" forms. Neither is it a choice between "understanding" and "explaining" such phenomena. It means that explanations cannot be done without understanding meaning, and meanings, for instance, as symbolic structures, can explain social acts as cultural acts with the specific moods and motivations enacted, shaped, or reshaped, within those structures.[85] The conceptualization of the cultural dimension is thus informed by *multidimensional thinking*. And this particular form of thinking cannot be done without the autonomy of that dimension and the development of, according to Alexander again, "a strong theory of culture" "integrated with a multidimensional analysis."[86]

The fourth interrelated reason is to be found in the way Geertz understands the relation between *order and contingency*. Due to the autonomy of the cultural dimension, the theoretically informed understanding of that dimension, and its

multidimensional character, Geertz does not need to, quoting Alexander, "dissociate contingency from cultural order."[87] Rather, "contingency could emerge only within the context of cultural life."[88]

The strength and seminal status of Geertz's mid-1960s turn toward meaning as exemplary conduct can be summarized as follows:

- Religion (or ideology, or art) is to be considered as an internally complex cultural system.
- This system provides general conceptions of the meaning of life.
- A cultural system as an internal structure of a specific "world" of religion, ideology, or the arts must also be understood in its relation to wider symbolic structures in society.
- A cultural system establishes powerful moods and motivations in individuals.
- Cultural systems and their symbol's meaning are, however, not by themselves constitutive of persons, structures, or events.
- Thus, persons, structures, and events are "external" to cultural patterns.
- It is only by passing through cultural systems, or structures, that processes as persons, structures, and events can be given a specific lived form of meaning.
- In this understanding of the "passing through" cultural systems and structures, it is impossible to dissociate contingency from cultural order.
- Life and meaning-making are not reducible to a given order only, and cultural acts are not enacted without beliefs, plans, aims, or patterns, that is, such acts are not unfolding at random.
- Contingency can emerge only within the context of meaning and meaning-making in cultural life.
- The same dependency of meaning and meaning-making goes for the reproduction of social order. There are no reproductive actions without meaningful cultural acts moved by motivations and moods.
- Even "the remotest indication" of symbol's meaning and complexes of symbolic structures can and cannot become basis for creative change.[89]

This reconstruction of Geertz's invention of the cultural dimension[90] and its theoretically informed presuppositions can still be used as "a springboard" for a "strong" program in cultural sociology. This is how Geertz's "cultural musicality," revisiting Dylan's talking blues, is *all* right *all* of the time.

The Turn Away from Geertz

"It would be nice if we could just stop right here," Alexander remarks in his mid-1980s lecture on Geertz.[91] But Geertz himself did not stop there. Unfortunately, further essays took him elsewhere. Hence, I will now pay attention to Alexander's righteous critique of how Geertz's thinking tended to decline after his seminal work on religion.[92] My intention is to reveal how the cultural dimension and its presuppositions just laid out are being scattered and lost. To do that I have reconstructed the strained development within Geertz's project in terms of four interrelated *sliding*

areas. The first area concerns Geertz's slide *from cultural meaning-systems toward symbolic action only*. In "Ideology as a Cultural System,"[93] the essay that reads like a sequel to the seminal essay on religion but actually was published two years before, Geertz does not take seriously enough the analysis of cultural systems. He is not interested in, quoting Alexander, "a science of symbols or symbolic patterns, but in a science of symbolic action."[94] We have, then, a much stronger focus on the "contingency of meaningful action" rather than on "the structure of meaning itself."[95] Hence, we now have got symbolic actions disassociated from wider symbolic structures.

The second area relates to a slide *from symbolic actions only toward sociomaterial determination of such actions without cultural mediation*. The test case here, which involves not only one but actually two slides, is the famous early 1970s essay "Deep Play: Notes on The Balinese Cockfight."[96] In the first instance, Geertz argues that cockfight is "a kind of blood sacrifice" with "ritual chants" and "obligations to religious demons."[97] The men with their "fighting roosters in the ring" are handling "the power of darkness."[98] It means that Geertz, somehow, is aware of an "overarching cultural and religious order" in Bali.[99] However, according to Alexander, there are no references to "the cultural order within which the cockfight rests."[100] Thus there is no symbolic structure involved in the concrete analysis.

At this very moment of the analysis, then, we are still stuck with contingency and indeterminacy. Within this indeterminacy, the cockfight is seen as an aesthetic action with power to not only shape structures and thereby make the key themes of Balinese culture visible, they are also, in Geertz's own words, "ordering" these themes "into an encompassing structure."[101] So, again, the symbolic structure within which the shaping aesthetic action is enacted is lost. This is the first sliding area escalating in Geertz's mid-1960s thinking onward. "Where is the structure?"[102] Alexander rhetorically asks. "Unfortunately," he answers, as I see it, truthfully, "Geertz cannot tell us."[103] It would require something that he had promised to avoid, that is, determinacy. It would have needed an understanding of culture as stated by Geertz himself in "Religion as a Cultural System," that is, "culture" as a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which, in this case, men involved in cockfights, communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude to life."[104] Or, repeating Geertz's message from the Haskins lecture: that the turn toward meaning demands recognition of "the frames of meaning within which they," again, men dealing with cockfights, "enact their lives."[105] This message from 1999 clearly reasserts the definition of culture in the article on religion from 1967. We have, then, more than 30 years in-between this coherence in sayings and the hard-to-grasp mismatch in the "postscript-doings." I wonder, but cannot know, what kind of frames of meaning enacted these contradictions in both sayings and sayings and doings.

However, we are not yet finished with the deep play of the cockfight analysis. There is also a second slide to unveil. This is how Alexander puts it: "Indeed, right in the midst of his argument for aesthetic action and contingent indeterminacy, Geertz suggests that the powerful attraction of the cockfight for the Balinese can only be understood by linking culture to non-cultural things."[106] And so the cocks

become symbols for sexual organs. In other words, the deep play is cocks and betting representing a specific and given structure of social status and masculinity. The doings of men dealing with cockfights is thus nothing but a simulation of a social matrix for status distribution in the lives of Balinese men. Thus, again, cultural mediation is lost. "Not the structure of meaning," writes Alexander, "but its creation is what Geertz is after."[107] Hence, there is no enactment within symbolic structures left. Geertz has become one of many sociologists with "numbness toward meaning." We are dumped outside meaning and determined by social structure. We have, to use Alexander's and Smith's labels, become "sociologists of culture" rather than "cultural sociologists"[108] and are left with a "cultural spokesman" bracketing out his own cultural dimension. To avoid the first turn toward symbolic actions and contingency only, Geertz makes a second turn within the same sliding area and becomes a sociostructural determinist. The cultural system—the most decisive aspect of Geertz's turn toward meaning—is lost.

The third area relates to Geertz's slide *from symbolic actions enacted within meaningful cultural systems toward meaning as behavior and use only*. In his introduction to *Interpretation of Cultures*, the collection of essays that stretched from the seminal article on religion to the lurching analysis of the cockfight, Geertz is describing the position he had arrived at. The "proper object" of cultural analysis is now stated as "the informal logic of actual life.[109] Hence, the focus is on "behavior" because it is "through the flow of behavior" that "cultural forms find articulation."[110] In other words, it is from "use" in social life that cultural forms "draw their meaning"[111] and not from the enactment within extrinsic cultural structures.

In the fourth area, there is a slide *from a demand for theory toward antitheorized and local knowledge only*. In the introduction to *Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz announces that theory is impossible, that is, the complete opposite compared with what he states in "Religion as a Cultural System" six years earlier. The purpose of cultural analysis is now, as Alexander puts it, "interpretation, not theory."[112] Thus the empirical suddenly seems to be able to collect, organize, and interpret itself beyond theoretical informedness. In the introduction to *Local Knowledge*, Geertz's second collections of essays, his crusade against theory has become even more "confident and explicit."[113] His turn "from theory to description" is now, Alexander remarks, "tied to the critique of generality itself."[114] "The shapes of knowledge," as Geertz puts it himself, "are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements."[115] Theory as generalization and abstraction has become something that, in Geertz's own words, "sounds increasingly hollow."[116] Caught in-between "the mandarins of deconstructionism" and "the symbolic-domination tribune of neo-marxism,"[117] he just let theory and definitions go. Unfortunately he found theory equivalent with the "God's truth idea."[118] Still he was wise enough to know that, in his own words, "spies, lovers, witch doctors, kings, or mental patients are moves and performances" rather than "sentences."[119] In making that statement, he was, at least implicitly, informed by what he denied: a theoretical awareness.

At this very moment, the cultural dimension seemed scattered and lost: the conceptualization of culture, culture as symbols' meaning, complexes of symbols as cultural structures, and cultural acts and moods and motivations enacted within these systems, or structures. Accordingly, also the presuppositions that informed the

cultural dimension was scattered and lost: the autonomy of cultural, the theoretical awareness, the multidimensional thinking, and interdependencies of order and contingency. I do understand that Alexander, in his mid-1980s moment of despair, turned away in anger. In his critique, he is definitely so, for reasons soon to be laid down, *partly* right *all* of the time.

In the very last sentence of his lecture on Geertz as a cultural sociologist, Alexander insists that "the analysis of culture must proceed within a much more consistently multidimensional frame."[120] I fully agree with that. Hence, and maybe surprisingly so, I will, once more, turn toward Geertz. Why? Because now and then, in both programmatic statements, such as in the Haskins lecture, and in analytical practice, Geertz kept on talking and walking the insights of the cultural dimension. In my view, the most wonderful example of that latter practice—in the midst of all sliding areas and Alexander's devastating critique—is the mid-1970s analysis of oral Islamic poets from Morocco in the essay "Art as a Cultural System."[121] I will now, in terms of a third reconstruction, turn to that analysis with the intention to display the seemingly lost cultural dimension, that is, "synthetic position"[122] of the early 1960s Geertz. Yet another, selected, of course, proof of him being *all* right *all* the time.

The Return of the Turn toward Meaning: The Cultural Dimension Revisited in Practice

At the center of the Moroccan village, in the lamp-lit place in front of a house, the poet stands in public "erect as a tree."[123] To either side of him are his assistants delivering the beat by "slapping tambourines."[124] Behind the poet and the rhythm makers "two lines of sideways dancing men" with "their hands on one another's shoulders" and "their heads swiveling as they shuffle a couple half-steps right, a couple left."[125] Thus as an art form, this poetry is not only literary but also musical and dramatic.[126] The male part of the audience "squats directly in front of him."[127] Now and then some of them "stuff currency into his turban."[128] The women watch from a distance. They either "peek discreetly out from the houses around" or "look down in the darkness from their roofs."[129] Perhaps someone is getting married.

The poetry being performed is not first composed and then recited. "It is put together in the act of singing it."[130] This is poetry as "a living thing" in a specific "performance context."[131] However, the poems are not made out of "sheer fantasy."[132] They rest on "a limited number of established formulae."[133] Some are "thematic" and deal with things such as "the inevitability of death," "the hopelessness of passion," "the unreliability of women," or "the vanity of religious learning."[134] Others are "figurative": "girls as gardens," "worldliness as markets," "wealth as cloth," or "wisdom as travel."[135] Yet others are "formal," that is, "strict, mechanical schemes" of, as examples, "rhyme" or "meter."[136]

Paced by the tambourines and "rhythmic howls," the poet sings his poem, verse by verse, "in a wailed, metallic falsetto."[137] The assistants join him for the refrains, "which tend to be fixed and only generally related to the text."[138] And so the poetry builds up, step by step. And all this is done in a contesting interaction with the

audience signaling approval and nonapproval.[139] There might also be other poets there to compete with. Some of them might give up and go home.

These specific poetic performances are enacted within the world of local and wider Moroccan culture and Islamic religion. The poet "punctuates" his poetry with "lines, verses, tropes, allusions" from other well-known oral poetry, from the "general corpus" of Moroccan life and from local knowledge of people's doings and sayings. Agonies and judgments will be involved. However, it is only by taking the poetry through not only the shared meanings of social life but also, unavoidably so, through the shared meanings of religious life, so that it can produce its particular meanings. In other words, this poetry comes to resemble both Koran chanting and Moroccan ways of interpersonal communication and, hence, reaches its audience as "half ritual song" and "half plain talk."[140] As, in my terms, profaned sacredness.

To understand oral poetry, we need to, according to Geertz, understand at least three interrelated dimensions.[141] The first has to do with the nature and status of the Koran, which is not a testament, that is, words on Allah, but a recitation of Allah's own words. The truth is "fixated" in the Koran as "recitable truths."[142] Thus the Koran "reciter" "chants God himself"[143] in an act in which revelation is renewed. To have true knowledge is to remember those divine sentences this knowledge was "stated in."[144]

Accordingly, the seventh-century Meccan Arabic language cannot be reduced to a vehicle for religious messages, it is "itself a holy object."[145] It is sacred because it resembles God. It is a "model of what speech should be."[146] Hence, it is exactly this meaning of the Arabic language of the Koran that amplifies "the whole pattern of traditional Muslim life."[147] It is this language that "almost every boy" and "many girls as well" learn at drill-schools, where they go to recite and memorize Koran verses.[148] But, the status of those who for "secular purposes" "seek to create in words" is "highly ambiguous."[149] So, when the oral poets "turn the tongue of God to their own ends,"[150] they are very close to "sacrilege."[151] And this is exactly what these poets try to do. As one of them so evocatively put it while trying hard to explain his art to Geertz: "I memorized the Koran. Then I forgot the verses and remembered the words."[152]

The second dimension concerns the character of the interpersonal communication in Moroccan society. Geertz describes its general nature as "agonistic" and "combative."[153] "The general tone of the interpersonal relations in Morocco," he states, is "a constant testing of wills as individuals struggle to seize what they covet, defend what they have, recover what they have lost."[154] Accordingly, the poetic performance as a whole has an antagonistic tone,"[155] a tone played out in a quasi-religious language dealing with local issues. It becomes "a kind of secular counterpoint, a worldly footnote, to the Revelation itself"[156]—"a kind of paradigmatic speech act."[157] To make it conceivable, we need an analysis in which the religious and communicative aspects of Muslim culture are unpacked. It is within this culture the oral poet exists and unfolds himself.

The third dimension is the performance enacted within the tense-determined context of religion and agonistic interaction. That is, using Geertz's own formulations, "catch as catch can in words, ahead on collision of curses, promises, lies, excuses, pleading, commands, proverbs, arguments, analogies, quotations, threats,

evasion, flatteries."[158] This not only, he continues, "puts an enormous premium on verbal fluency," but also, "gives to rhetoric a directly coercive force."[159] The poet uses words that, due to their embeddedness and meaning in Moroccan and Islamic culture, their local knowledge, their culturally established formulae, and their rhythm, motions, and sounds, carry "power, influence, weight and authority"[160] with which the poet can target particular individuals, families, or institutions in the village, or in rival villages.[161] A local Koran teacher, as an example, who had been criticizing a coming wedding feast, was targeted by the poet in public as a sinful person who had been doing "many shameful things."[162] In the poetry, it is revealed that he does not know more than "four Koran chapters" and had used his position only to fill his own pockets.[163]

Hence within this culture of tensions, the poet forms a kind of "recitation" of his own,

> another collection, less exalted but not necessarily less valuable, of memorized truths: lust is an incurable disease, women an illusory cure, contention is a foundation of society, assertiveness the master of virtue, pride is the spring of action, un-worldliness moral hypocrisy; pleasure is the flower of life, death the end of pleasure.[164]

And the poetic performance—its context, its lived forms, and its outcomes—"makes up," Geertz writes, "an integral whole."[165] And at the same time as this "whole" is "an event" that is "constantly new, constantly renewable,"[166] it is also an event deeply embedded and enacted within specific and interrelated systems of meaning. This must, without him saying so, be what he means by "cultural system" in which art has "a particular, heightened kind of status"[167] due to "the relationship between poetry and the central impulses of Muslim culture."[168]

"There is hardly a better example," Geertz states himself, "of the fact that an artist works with signs that have a place in semiotic systems extending far beyond the craft he practices than the poet in Islam."[169] This is also the reason why these signs and practices within the Muslim culture "traffic," even if "not wholly legitimately," in the "moral substance" of the poet's and the audience's shared culture."[170] The Moroccan poet, Geertz states, "inhabits a region between worlds," that is, in-between "the discourse of God" and "the wrangle of men."[171] In other words, the poetry is "sacred enough to justify the power it actually has," and "it is secular enough for that power to be equated to ordinary eloquence."[172]

Out of that, or rather, through that, seemingly contradictory cultural tensions, the meaning and energy of the performance in context unfolds. Or as Geertz himself so beautifully puts it: *poetry, or anyway this poetry, constructs a voice out of the voices that surround it.*[173] It means that "the artist works with his audience's capacities . . . to see, or hear, or touch, sometimes even to taste and smell, with understanding."[174] "Art and the equipment to grasp it," he continues, "are made in the same shop."[175] Unavoidably so, art cannot but be "brought into actual existence by the experience of living in the midst of certain sort of things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with, react to."[176] And from these insights, it follows that art cannot be understood as a "formal science like logic or mathematics."[177] It cannot be captured in terms of "an empty virtuosity of verbal analysis."[178] It can only be meaningful if

understood within "the common world in which men [*sic*] look, name, listen, and make,"[179] that is, through an understanding of "symbolic systems."[180] Accordingly we need, Geertz states, "a science that can determine the meaning of things for the life that surrounds them."[181]

Well, enough, I will not go on piling quotes. I think I have proved what I wanted to prove. In his cultural analysis of the oral poet in Islam, Geertz is back in full vigor. As is Geertz in his Haskins lecture for 1999.

The point of the turn toward meaning is to gain a working familiarity with the frame of meaning within which those under study enact their lives. This is Geertz's program from the essay on religion from 1967. It signals the general significance of the cultural dimension and a refined and reframed concept of culture that is about how to frame an analysis of meaning by focusing on the structure of meaning through which humans construe their experience. Culture becomes the symbols that signify meaning. Complexes of symbols as symbolic structures highly generalized and more or less internalized and shared within us to make both shaping and reshaping possible. Internal structures, such as religion, as more or less specified symbolic systems. Complex relations between wider symbolic structures and more specified internal ones. Cultural acts as the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms. The meaning of social acts mediated by cultural structures. Moods as embodied feelings that come and go, like fog, and motivations as the chronic inclination to perform certain forms of acts and feelings in certain sorts of situations. This is the presupposition of the turn toward meaning nearly fulfilled: the autonomy of the cultural dimension, multidimensional thinking, and order and contingency properly understood. That is, how the oral poet and his poetry would be impossible to understand and explain without focusing on the meaning of culture, including all the layers of the cultural dimension, and contingency as something that emerges as art, within the ordered context of wider and internal symbolic structures of life.

Accordingly, this also means that Geertz in his understanding of art as a cultural system avoids all the sliding areas. We do not have symbolic actions only. We are not left without cultural mediation. We do not have behavior and use only. Neither do we have an understanding of cultural phenomenon reduced to local knowledge. We have even touched upon issues such as power, authority, and material structure. To make an important point: in his analytical practice in "Art as a Cultural System" from 1976, Geertz is very close to fulfill his programmatic statements from "Religion as a Cultural System" from 1967. Hence, his analytical practice from the art-essay is a complete counteract against all of his programmatic statements after "Religion as a Cultural System," besides the Haskins lecture for 1999 that is.

There is one divergence though. He never talks, uses, or formulates a theoretical understanding in the essay on art. The demand for theory so explicitly demanded in the essay on religion was never to be there again. However, Geertz could never have done his analysis of the oral poet if he had not been informed by, however in-explicitly, the insights of the cultural dimension and its presuppositional status. Thus, in the art essay, theory seems to have an implicit being-there-ness informing the analysis. His analysis is definitely abstracted from concrete cases and makes generalizations on particulars, making it sad, then, that Geertz never explicitly allowed theory to inform his analytic practice and its outcomes, that is, theory as

"precursor, medium and outcome."[182] However, nothing is lost. It would be possible, as a suggestion, to read Alexander's "performance theory," as it is presented in his essay "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy,"[183] as a theorized outcome of a meta-analysis of Geertz's essay on art. As if Alexander had been moving like an angel backward into the future of cultural sociology.

In the last words from "Art as a Cultural System," which sums up the analytic, even synthetic, enterprise, of the whole essay, Geertz states, that the analysis made in the essay "perhaps" can "at last" begin to *locate in the tenor of their setting the sources of their spell*.[184] That statement does not count for the oral poets only but also for Geertz himself. In the tenor of his turn toward meaning, in the autonomy of the cultural dimension, we can locate the sources of his most developed and well-informed spell—his multidimensional cultural musicality. In that sense, again, he is *all* right *all* the time.

Repair and Reconciliation

I consider the most important work of the repairman done. First I reconstructed Geertz's early *turn toward meaning*: the cultural dimension and its presuppositional status is the stuff that cultural sociology ought to be made of. It is the musicality, the springboard, "the sing." I dare to state, without hesitation, that Alexander, as well as Alexander and Smith in their "strong" program in cultural sociology, will agree. Also the Geertz who wrote the religion essay, the Haskins lecture, and who did the analysis on art as a cultural system will agree. Second I reconstructed Geertz's early turn away from the cravings of the cultural dimension: the sliding areas that reluctantly forced Alexander to turn away from Geertz, due to the latter turning away from himself. Undoubtedly, there were a lot of moments when Geertz talked and walked as if he was, at least partly, numb toward meaning and lacked cultural musicality. Alexander has, rightly so, made that state of the art completely clear. Geertz writing the essay on religion, the Haskins lecture, and the analysis on art as a cultural system cannot but agree. And so must Alexander and Smith in their program in cultural sociology. Third, despite the outcomes of Geertz's turn away from his own "meaning turn" and Alexander's reluctant turn away from Geertz's own turn away, there are very strong moments in both Geertz's later cultural analysis and programmatic thinking: the reconstruction of the analysis of the oral poet, as a test case, has hopefully made that clear. Alexander who learned so much from the essay on religion would, I dare to say without hesitation, learn as much from the analytical practice in the art essay. And, again, the same goes for Alexander and Smith in their program for cultural sociology. It is not to exaggerate to argue that the writer of "Religion as a Cultural System" would be very happy reading "Art as a Cultural System." He would only have one critical point: the lack of theoretical awareness.

So here we stand with both matches and mismatches. Geertz has, at least now and then, been doing what Alexander and early Geertz himself demanded. Alexander has been criticizing Geertz for what he is saying and doing while not always seeing the remaining logic in some of his doings and sayings. Geertz is definitely stronger in his early sayings than in his later doings, but there are also some later sayings and

doings that match the early sayings. I do not know if Geertz came to fully realize that. Hence, it is possible to reconcile the better, but scattered, part of his project.

Unmistakably there are a lot of good turns toward meaning here and there. Alexander is stronger in his judgment on Geertz's later sayings than in his appreciations of the early sayings and parts of the later doings. In his reluctant turn away from Geertz, he did not realize that. Alexander saw too much order where there was contingency. I am quite sure that he is aware of that now. Geertz, on the other hand, came to see too much contingency were there was also order. However, in his programmatic statements and in his practice, Geertz had a recurring tendency to both abandon and return to his turn toward meaning. In his turn away from Geertz, Alexander, at least partly, came to turn away from his own demand on being multidimensional and not reductive.

But this will really help: in practice, none of them really turned fully away from their own projects and each other. Alexander said he turned away from Geertz, but he never did, he kept on referring to and quoting him. Geertz continued to be one of the most important founders of cultural sociology. And Geertz himself kept on doing and saying what he stated as things that one should not do. Thus they are both saved by not being consistent in the wrong things they were saying while being persistent in the right things they were saying. To me, they seem to be very likeable and nice characters, basically very human.

So here is the tailor-made logic for reconciliation: some of the early and late sayings and doings of Geertz and Alexander are well connected. Alexander's critique of some of Geertz's early and late sayings and doings is valid, but Alexander did not have any reason to turn away from Geertz's work in toto. And nor did he! Neither did Geertz. Or, paraphrasing Alexander's own performance theory: Geertz defused from himself. Alexander defused from Geertz. It happened that Geertz refused with himself. Alexander kept on fusing with Geertz all the time. Accordingly, I have refused what was never completely defused, that is, the best of it all. The rest is just a reminder of what can happen with any of us. We can get scattered and lost within and between ourselves.

So hopefully, to paraphrase Mary Douglas in *Jacob's Tears*,[185] I have energized and clarified my duty as a disciple, calling for the best of minds and most ardent spirits to work together within a cultural sociology worthy of reconciliation. I have tried to do my very best to lace the turn toward meaning at the center of cultural sociology. For that I came, the rest is periphery. Also that, I have learned from Alexander.

As a cultural sociologist, I consider reconciliation to be a frame of meaning within which humans can enact their lives, so that programmatic statements and analytical practices are not scattered and lost anymore. Hopefully I have located in the tenor of Geertz's and Alexander's different settings the shared sources of their very valid and well-needed spell. Within this meaning, Geertz and Alexander are both *all* right *all* the time if we accept that it is okay to be *part* right *all* the time. Yes, we are, in most cases, all *all* right *part* of the time. At least if I can be in your dreams. I think Dylan said something like that.

However, Geertz is no longer here with us. I never met him. I do not know the meaning of that. What I do know, to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson on the work of great artists, is that "they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty," and,

hence, "tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another."[186]

NOTES

1. Alexander, Jeffrey C. & Smith, Philip. 2003. "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics." In Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Meanings of Social Life. A Cultural Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 15.
2. Ibid.
3. The most obvious examples are the early Marx, the late Durkheim and Weber defining sociology or understanding religion, or, later, Parsons theorized focus on the centrality of values to actions and institutions.
4. Alexander and Smith 2003, p. 15.
5. Geertz, Clifford. 1999. "A Life of Learning. Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1999." American Council of Learned Societies: Occasional Paper No. 45. Available at http://www.acls.org/Publications/OP/Haskins/1999_CliffordGeertz.pdf. p. 10.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, p. 11.
8. Ibid, my italics.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Geertz 1999, p. 11.
12. Alexander and Smith 2003, p. 22.
13. In his Haskins lecture, Geertz makes the following remark:

    > At Chicago, where I had by then begun to teach and agitate, a more general movement, stumbling and far from unified, in these directions got underway and started to spread. Some, both there and elsewhere, called this development, at once theoretical and methodological, "symbolic anthropology." But I, regarding the whole thing as an essential hermeneutic enterprise, a bringing to light and definition, not a metaphrase or a decoding, and uncomfortable with the mysterial, cabalistic overtones of "symbol," preferred "interpretive anthropology." In any case, "symbolic" or "interpretive" (some even preferred "semiotic"), a budget of terms, some mine, some other people's, some reworked from earlier uses, began to emerge. (1999, pp. 11–12)

14. Geertz 1999, p. 12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1987. *Twenty Lectures. Sociological Theory since World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 329.
19. Alexander (1983) places Geertz within "cultural sociology"; Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1983. *Theoretical Logic in Sociology. Volume One. Positivism, Presuppositions, and Current Controversies*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p. 125.
20. Ibid.
21. Geertz 1999, p. 12.
22. Ibid.
23. Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006. "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performances between Ritual and Strategy. In Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Social Performance. Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

24. Alexander 1983; Alexander, Jeffrey C. 1988. *Action and Its Environment. Toward a New Synthesis*. New York: Columbia University Press.
25. However, I am in great debt to colleagues and friends such as Ron Eyerman, Paul Willis, Marcus Free, John Hughson, Nihad Bunar, Anna Lund, and several others whose company has always been a cultural sociological one.
26. Geertz, Clifford. 1973/1993. "Religion as a Cultural System." In Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana Press.
27. By "the sing" I refer to the Navahos curing rites as described by Geertz himself in "Religion as a Cultural System." "The sing" is "dedicated to removing some sort of physical or mental illness" as a kind of "religious psychodrama" (Geertz 1973, "Religion as a Cultural System," p. 104). "The structure of all the sings, the drama's plot," Geertz writes,

    > is quite similar. There are three main act: a purification of the patient and audience; a statement, by means of repetitive chants and ritual manipulations, of the wish to restore well-being ("harmony") in the patient; an identification of the patient with the Holy People and his consequent "cure." (pp. 104–105)

28. Alexander and Smith 2003, pp. 11–26.
29. For an overview of Geertz's contribution to social sciences and the humanities, see Inglis, Fred. 2000. *Clifford Geertz. Culture, Custom and Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, and Shweder, Richard A. & Good, Byron. 2003. *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
30. Geertz 1973, "Religion as a Cultural System," p. 104.
31. Ibid., p. 89.
32. Geertz 1999, p. 8.
33. Ibid., p. 7; See Kroeber, Alfred L. & Kluckhohn, Clyde. 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. XLVII—No. 1.
34. Geertz 1999, p. 8.
35. Geertz 1973, p. 313.
36. Ibid., p. 312.
37. Geertz 1973, p. 91.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Geertz 1973, p. 92.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., p. 92.
46. Ibid., p. 93.
47. Geertz 1973, p. 123.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Geertz 1973, p. 105.
53. Ibid., p. 91.
54. Ibid., p. 105.
55. Ibid.

56. Geertz 1973, p. 96.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., p. 97.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., pp. 97–8.
67. Ibid.
68. Alexander 1987, p. 311.
69. See Alexander 1983, 1986, pp. 301–33.
70. Alexander 1987, p. 305.
71. Ibid., p. 304.
72. Ibid., p. 305.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Quoted in Alexander 1987, p. 317.
76. Ibid., p. 307.
77. Alexander 1987, p. 2.
78. I am well aware that "thick description" cannot be understood in purely empirical terms. Its meaning is, I think, very much informed by Geertz's hermeneutic stand. Robert Darnton (this volume) tells the following story of how Geertz explained Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics in relation to thick description to his students:

    > Cliff did not begin with an exposition of Gadamer's general principles and a theoretical account of descriptive as opposed to causal explanation in the human sciences. Instead, he asked the students to imagine themselves explaining baseball to a visitor from Outer Mongolia whom they had taken to a game. You would point out the three bases, he said, and the need to hit the ball in such a way as to run around the bases and reach home plate before being tagged out by the defense. But in doing so, you might note the different shape of the first baseman's glove or the tendency of the infield to realign itself in the hope of making a double play. You would tack back and forth between general rules—three strikes, you're out—and fine details—the nature of a hanging curve. The mutual reinforcement of generalizations and details would build up an increasingly rich account of the game being played under the observer's eyes. Your description could circle around the subject indefinitely, getting thicker with each telling. Thick descriptions would vary; some would be more effective than others; and some might be wrong: to have a runner advance from third base to second would be a clear mistake. But the description, if sufficiently artful and accurate, would cumulatively convey an interpretation of the thing itself, baseball. (Darnton 2007, p. 33)

79. Alexander 1987, p. 5.
80. Alexander 1983, p. 30.
81. Willis, Paul & Trondman, Mats. 2000. "Manifesto for Ethnography." *Ethnography* 1, no. 1; Trondman, Mats. 2008. "Bypass Surgery. Rerouting Theory to Ethnographic Study." in Geoffrey Walford, ed. *How to do Educational Ethnography.* London: Tufnell Press.

82. Geertz 1993, p. 87.
83. Ibid., p. 125.
84. Alexander 1987, pp. 310–11; It is important to add that this quote also concerns Robert Bellah's contribution to cultural sociology, especially so in "Civil Religion in America," in *Beyond Belief* (1970, pp. 168–89).
85. In other words, quoting Alexander, "all must be explained in terms of the search for meaning itself" (1987, pp. 311–12). Or, in Geertz own words:

    > More, it is a matter of understanding how it is that men's notion, however implicit, of the "really real" and the dispositions these notions induce in them, color their sense of the reasonable, the practical, the humane, and the moral. How far they do so (for in many societies religion's effect seem quite circumscribed, in others completely pervasive), how deeply they do so (for some men, and groups of men, seen to wear their religion lightly so far as the secular world goes, while others seem to apply their faith to each occasion, no matter how trivial), and how effectively they do so (for the width of the gap between what religion recommends and what people actually do is most variable cross-culturally)—all these are crucial issues in the comparative sociology and psychology of religion. (1973, p. 124)

86. Alexander 1987, p. 307; this is how Geertz himself puts it:

    > No matter how deeply infused the cultural, the social, and the psychological may be in the everyday life of houses, farms, poems, and marriages, it is useful to distinguish them in analysis, and, so doing, to isolate the generic traits of each against the normalized background of the two. (1973, p. 92)

87. Alexander 1987, p. 317.
88. Ibid.
89. This summary is reconstructed out of my reading of Alexander's analysis of Geertz's turn toward meaning (1987, pp. 314–18).
90. However, Geertz's well-argued and needed turn toward meaning cannot be stated as a completely new discovery. I am quite sure that William Shakespeare knew the meaning of the turn toward meaning in his, using Harold Bloom's famous phrase, "invention of the human" (Bloom, Harold. 1999. *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*. London: Fourth Estate). Rosalind in *As You Like It* emerges out of the "wintriest conditions" (McLeish, Kenneth & Unwin, Stephen. 1998. *A Pocket Guide to Shakespeare's Plays*. London: Faber and Faber), she is an orphan to become banished, but still she makes possible witty conversations of love and need. Her story is lived within a specific material, social, and cultural structure going through changes. And at the centre of this tension in-between the old cruel world and "the arrival of a new moral universe" (ibid.) is Rosalind. She is not only witty but also "full of heart, moral driven, confused, the Goddess of Love reincarnated in an ordinary English girl" (ibid.). She rejects the cruelty of the world and its social order. She is the human driving force part of the becoming of a new order. We must "take the present time," she tells her lover Orlando, a fatherless younger son rejected by his older brother, and "love the spring" (ibid.). Among Shakespeare's "comic heroine," Harold Bloom states, Rosalind is "the most gifted" with "normative consciousness, harmoniously balanced and beautiful sane" (p. 203). She is "free of malice; turning her aggressivity neither against herself nor against others; free of all resentment, while manifesting a vital curiosity and exuberant desire" (ibid., p. 208). She is "social freedom" (ibid.) embodied within changing material, social, and cultural structures, where, as McLeish and Unwin put it, "the woman's negotiating stance is essential and the notion of personal truth is constantly pursued" (p. 19). On the contrary, Coriolanus, in the play with

the same name, is the heroic solider "whose success has frozen his character" (ibid., p. 29). He is "too wretched, or too wrapped up in old-fashion codes of honor" (ibid., p. 30). Coriolanus is but "a symphony of discord" (ibid.). He does not understand what Shakespeare himself knows, that "rank is nothing in itself without attention to its moral and human obligations" (ibid., p. 33). Hence Rosalind and Coriolanus, to paraphrase Geertz and the title of this essay, are both to be located in the tenor of their settings and, hence, have different sources to their spells. Despite their differences in character and living within different symbolic structures, we need the cultural dimension to understand and explain them both. Also Coriolanus—as Bloom formulates it, "the greatest killing machine in all of Shakespeare" (1999, p. 577)—is defined by the cultural structures, relations, and events he passes through. To me, Geertz seems to have theorized what Shakespeare knew while, as just pointed out, "inventing the human." However, Shakespeare was not a theorist, "what he could do," writes Philip Davis, "was to bring into being the motives," and in the spirit of Geertz, I would like to add, "the moods," "themselves in the creation of his play" (Davis, Philip. 2007. *Shakespeare Thinking*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, p. 31). His greatness lies within his capacities to represent the cultural dimension as the beating heart of a more or less "disowned" (Cavell, Stanley. 2003. *Disowning Knowledge. In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Trondman, Mats. 2006. "Disowning Knowledge: To Be or Not to Be the 'Immigrant' in Sweden." *Ethnical and Racial Studies* 29, no. 3.) life-as-drama—both with happy and tragic ends. Shakespeare as an artist definitely practiced in art what Geertz as an anthropologist conceptualized through the cultural dimension. And it is exactly this form of cultural sociology that Alexander puts to work in, as an example, his analysis of Watergate (Alexander 1988, pp. 153–74).

91. Alexander 1987, p. 311.
92. In his mid-1980s lectures, Alexander laid bare severe strains in Geertz's work. They seem to have started not long after his seminal article on religion was written. Rather than being "confronted" and "resolved," these "strains," Alexander states, "were actually deepened" (1987, p. 323). The period covered by Alexander stretch from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. However, even if strains in Geertz's work "become increasingly apparent from the late 1960s and on, Alexander's prime interest is in "theoretical logic, not historical sequence" (ibid.).
93. Geertz 1973, "Ideology as a Cultural System."
94. Alexander 1987, p. 319.
95. Ibid.
96. Geertz, C. 1973. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." In Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. According to Alexander, it was first published in 1972 (1987, p. 323).
97. Alexander 1987, p. 324.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Quoted in Alexander 1987, p. 324.
102. Ibid.
103. Ibid.
104. Geertz 1993, p. 89.
105. Geertz 1999, p. 11.
106. Alexander 1987, p. 326.
107. Ibid., p. 324.

108. Alexander and Smith 2003, pp. 17–21.
109. Quoted in Alexander 1987, p. 327.
110. Ibid.
111. Ibid.
112. Alexander 1987, p. 328.
113. Ibid.
114. Ibid.
115. Quoted in Alexander 1987, p. 328.
116. Geertz 1983, p. 4.
117. Ibid., p. 34.
118. Ibid.
119. Ibid.
120. Alexander 1987, p. 329.
121. The essay was first published in 1976 and then in Geertz, Clifford. 1983. "Art as a Cultural System." In Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books. Geertz described the analysis of the poet in Islam as "general" and "rather unsystematic remarks" on "the place of poetry on traditional Islamic society" (p. 109). Especially so "the popular, oral verse level" in Arabic poetry in Morocco (ibid.).
122. Alexander 1987, p. 316.
123. Geertz 1983, p. 112.
124. Ibid.
125. Ibid., p. 113.
126. Ibid., p. 112.
127. Ibid.
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid., p. 113.
130. Ibid., p. 112,
131. Ibid., p. 110.
132. Ibid., p. 113.
133. Ibid.
134. Ibid.
135. Ibid.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid., p. 113.
138. Ibid.
139. Ibid.
140. Ibid., p. 114.
141. Ibid., p. 110.
142. Ibid., p. 111.
143. Ibid., p. 110.
144. Ibid.
145. Ibid.
146. Ibid., p. 111.
147. Ibid.
148. Ibid.
149. Ibid.
150. Ibid.
151. Ibid.
152. Ibid., p. 112.

153. Ibid., p. 114.
154. Ibid.
155. Ibid., p. 115.
156. Ibid., p. 114.
157. Ibid., p. 110.
158. Ibid., p. 14.
159. Ibid.
160. Ibid.
161. The poets that Geertz describes work mostly "in the countryside" and "among the common classes in towns" (1983, p. 13).
162. Ibid.
163. Ibid.
164. Ibid., p. 113.
165. Ibid.
166. Ibid.
167. Ibid., p. 109.
168. Ibid.
169. Ibid.
170. Ibid.
171. Ibid., p. 117.
172. Ibid.
173. Ibid.; my italics.
174. Ibid., p. 118.
175. Ibid.
176. Ibid.
177. Ibid.
178. Ibid.
179. Ibid., p. 119.
180. Ibid.
181. Ibid., p. 120.
182. Willis and Trondman 2000, p. 7.
183. Alexander 2006.
184. Geertz 1983, p. 120.
185. Douglas 2004, p. 195.
186. Quoted in Cavell, Stanley. 2004. *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CHAPTER 14

RITUAL, POWER, AND STYLE: THE IMPLICATIONS OF *NEGARA* FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF POWER

BERNHARD GIESEN

The following chapter deals with three major findings that Clifford Geertz presented in his book about "Negara", that is, the Balinese monarchies in the nineteenth century. At first the hierarchical cosmology of Negara will be outlined and related to a special founding myth. In the second part Geertz's analysis of the ceremonialism of Negara will be extended to a general thesis about the ritual and charismatic basis of political authority, and this thesis will also be applied to contemporary democracies. Finally the concept of cultural style will be introduced, and the cultural style of Negara will be contrasted to a particular cultural style of Western modernism that, for the lack of a better term, may be called "naturalism." The suggested comparison between Negara's formalism and Western naturalism is, of course, very elliptical; it needs more detailing. This attempt to generalize Geertz's model of the Balinese theater state risks engendering a similar criticism as "*Negara* did in the years subsequent to its publication."[1]

PERFORMING THE COSMIC HIERARCHY

The Majapahit conquest is the founding myth of Balinese royal authority: Hindu warriors from the Javanese empire of Majapahit invaded Bali in the fourteenth century, subjugated the indigenous tribes, and established a caste system separating them from the defeated people, whose leader is mythologically referred to as the pigheaded monster king.[2] The basic mythological narrative is about bringing civilization to the barbarians.

But unlike the Western mythology of modernization, this mission of civilization does not aim at turning the underdeveloped barbarians into civilized citizens.

There is no pedagogical zeal in Negara. Instead, the vertical difference between the invaders claiming superiority and the people subjugated by them was continued and strictly emphasized. This hierarchical relation, however, was not a colonial one. Its basis must not be deterrence and violence. Hindu fatalism and its aversion for brute violence neither fostered a regime of brutal repression nor supported a belief in social mobility within the life of an individual person. Those who are assigned an inferior position will remain in this position until they are reborn. Members of superior castes are obliged to lead an exemplary life. They are not the object of envy and resentment, but of admiration. This basic assumption of cultural hierarchy and of exemplary existence repeats the hierarchical relationship between gods and humans on a social level.[3] What Shiva is for the king, the king is for the commoners. And he, the king, himself is divine. His way of moving, speaking, and smiling exudes the tranquility and calmness of gods. He embodies and exemplifies an ideal existence, but aspiring for divinity within one's own earthly life is not just sinful but just insane in the Hindu cosmos.[4]

But the great chain of being[5] is not just a cosmological model set apart from real social life. It has to be structurally embodied and ritually performed in this world. The court is the embodiment of an ideal life, and performing an ideal life amounts to the creation of a cosmic order. Geertz calls this "the doctrine of the exemplary center." This is the theory that the court and capital is at once a microcosm of the supernatural order, an image of the universe on a smaller scale. By

> providing a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilized existence the court shapes the world around into at least a rough approximation of its own excellence. The ritual life at court and in fact, court life in general, is thus paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of social order.[6]

And we should add: social order reflects and performs the cosmic order.

This performance of cosmic hierarchy is, however, not just a theatrical representation, as the subtitle of Geertz's book suggests. Neither is the king merely playing the king in front of an audience that longs for believable illusions. Nor does the king play the role of Shiva through a theatrical staging. Instead, king and court perform a liturgical ritual in which the basic hierarchical structure of the cosmos is recreated in a visible and tangible way. The reality of these rituals is not just an illusionary representation, but it is an ultimate one that, in the moment of its performance, forbids any doubts and questions by individual participants; suggestions for "improving" the ritual form in a technical sense border on absurdity. The items used in a ritual may represent symbolically something else,[7] but the ritual performance itself, for example, of sacrifice, coronation, marriage, or funeral, is not just theatrical blunder—it is irrevocably and unquestionably real and it has binding results for social life beyond the ritual. The ritual framing of court life turns it into a visible enactment of the invisible cosmic order, and the invisible cosmic order, in turn, is the paradigm for social life—neither less real nor more real than the visible court life.

This insuperable and exemplary reality of the Balinese court is certainly reinforced by the analogous relationship between the visible and the invisible world. The Balinese cosmos as described by Geertz is "preaxialage"—it does not assume a tension between the transcendental realm and the mundane realm, between politics

and religion, and between book and sword.[8] Negara, as Geertz emphasizes, is still a theocracy in which, like in Japan, the king marks the numinous center of the world.[9] The king is truly divine and not only, as in Egypt, China, or Mesopotamia, just the supreme priest who, due to his special relationship to the gods (mandate of heaven, son of heaven, etc.), is especially gifted to ensure the well-being of his subjects.

The Negara Hinduism underwent no axial transformation like Indian Hinduism. In India, the sacrificial function was shifted exclusively to the priests, whereas the ruler got a ritually "impure" position: in contrast to Brahmins, the *Satria* warrior eats meat and sheds blood. Balinese Hinduism is of a more primitive kind. Its cosmos has not been split into two irreconcilable parts, intellectuals and their principled world do not yet matter, sacrifice is still more important than reading the sacred scriptures, and the gods have still their place in this world—as the rulers appear in public in a tangible and visible way, there is no way of challenging the worldly rulers on otherworldly grounds.

In this unitary world of Negara, the basic cleavage is not yet the one between eternal and immutable principles and the shifting tides of this-worldly power. The unitary cosmos allows for a strict hierarchical divide between above and below, and Balinese cosmology did not provide a reason to question or revise this vertical division of the world. We, egalitarian, activist, and critical, may consider this immutable hierarchy to be unbearable. For the *homo hierarchicus*[10] of Negara, it renders meaning to humbleness as well as to royalty.

Court rituals differ strongly from the well-known ritual constructions of a liminal *communitas*,[11] in which hierarchical differences are leveled and, at a special place and for a limited "time out of time," kings and people act as equals in an effervescent merging of their individualities. In liminal *communitas*, the proximity between what is high and low in ordinary life is ritually constructed and turned into an extraordinary shared reality. Liturgical rituals at courts are to achieve the very opposite. They are not geared to create equality and commonality but to underline and to reinforce vertical boundaries under conditions of bodily proximity. They are ceremonial constructions of inequality between people present at a place. And it is this bodily copresence of socially unequal persons that requires ceremonial regulation—since social distance is usually represented by spatial distance—as Simmel has already noted.[12] Thus court rituals counteract the leveling effects of presence. They also suppress the separation of arcane privacy and public performance for the king. There is no privacy for the king. He embodies the state from the first moment in the morning when a servant wakes him up. Louis XVI of France had more than 60 officeholders and representatives of French nobility attending the "Grand Lever" of the king, dressing and grooming him according to an elaborate ceremonial script. This ceremonial regulation and the presence of the grand princes of France turned what usually is a very private moment into a public ritual.[13]

RITUAL COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL POWER

> Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp not pomp power.[14]

Geertz's thesis about the ritual basis of political authority challenges the well-established Western Protestant model about the ritual blunder disguising the real machinery of political power. Power and domination are not the states' ugly and brute core that, through decorative ceremonies and consoling stories, has to be concealed from being noticed by those who are subjected to it. Rituals are, in Geertz's words, "not mere aesthetic embellishments, celebrations of domination independently existing; they were the thing itself."[15] Rituals are the origin of political power—they generate it not in an incidental, but in a pivotal, way.

Geertz maintains this thesis about the ritual foundation of political power at first with respect to Negara, but he hints also at a more general claim: all political power has a ritual basis. We will pursue this thesis by offering several arguments supporting this idea of the ritual origin of political power.

Let us, at first, consider simple acephalous societies, that is, societies without a specialized political authority and without written law and a class system. These societies are strong ritual communities. Rituals provide the frame for exchange and death, they forge collective identities and pattern the temporal order of human life, they enchase the lurking violence between clans, and they allow people to cope with demonic dangers. Rituals are the most elementary integrative institutions beyond the kinship ties; they mark the origin of social order. Each social order has to refer to transcendental foundations, and it is the ritual that invokes this transcendental reference by performative means.[16] Political authority and kingship are comparatively recent inventions that, of course, cannot be institutionalized without ritual foundations: the king has to be crowned, the leader has to be ritually recognized by his supporters, and so on.

Let us briefly mention also the argument that points to the effectiveness of rituals as compared to the threat of violence. If political authority would reside in brute violence and terror only, the required amount of control and of sanctioning would be immense, and its costs would possibly exceed the profits resulting from it.

More important in a culturalist discourse is, however, the hint at the sacral foundations of ancient rulership. The political authority of the king relied on his capacity not only to settle internal disputes[17] and to defend the community against external threats, but also to win the support of supernatural powers. Kings were, above all, leading performers in ritual sacrifices and magical practices, and their efficiency in magical matters was pivotal for their charismatic aura. Rituals and charisma are here interlinked in a complex way. Ritual performance in sacrifices and magic testified charisma, and charisma was presented by rituals. The immediate encounter with the sacred, with the charisma of the king, would burn down the everyday order of ordinary persons—therefore it has to be ritually mediated and enchased.[18] The sheer presence of the ruler had a redeeming effect: his touch could heal diseases and his blessing ensured fortune and success for those who kneeled in front of him.[19] Edward Shils's claim that every political authority has a charismatic core can, thus, be extended to include also its ritual and performative foundations.[20]

Charismatic presence, if successfully staged, engenders immediate authority even if the charismatized person does not command a means of violence and material resources of power. Gestures and postures, rituals and ceremonies are the prime

generators of authority—swords and guns are effective only if an already existing authority is to be defended.

Charisma requires bodily presence, but the moment of charismatic osmosis has to be limited and restricted not only to captivate the followers, but also to allow them to return to the profane order of everyday life. Charisma is volatile and cannot stand the test of time and routine. Any attempt to turn the extraordinary moment into a permanent experience for the followers will result in the decay of genuine charisma. No hero can continuously work miracles.[21] Failure and misfortune will engender a dwindling belief of the followers, doubts may be raised, questions asked, and the charismatic hero is finally revealed as an ordinary, weak, and mortal being.

This decay of charisma is commonly prevented by a retreat to an Arcanum where only the confidants and close family members of the charismatized leader witness his human weaknesses. But the shielding effect of the wall can also be substituted by an armor of ceremonial restrictions that protect the king's personal and private feelings from being noticed by others. The ruler is expected to remain calm and to hide his emotions, to speak slowly, and to abstain from any sudden movements, whereas the visitors are obliged to keep a subdued posture, to avoid any eye contact with the king, to speak only when requested, and so on. What matters is his bodily presence and not jovial talk, and muted presence and rare utterances even increase his otherworldliness.[22] Thus rituals and ceremonies not only encapsulate and shield the private feelings of the ruler, but they also turn the encounter with the king into an extraordinary experience that differs greatly from everyday interactions: *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.

Rituals may be indispensable for constructing the political authority in Negara, but what about the charismatic foundations and its ritual construction in contemporary democracies? Even today's politicians try to evoke the magic of charismatic contagion, when they visit local festivities, open new buildings, visit sick children in clinics, or hasten to appear at the site of a catastrophe—all this is not driven by the exigencies to provide technical advice or assistance, to get information, or to make a wise decision. Instead, it is all about bodily presence and the auratic transmission of charisma. Politicians have to perform presence, and they do this in a ceremonial manner even if they pretend to be utterly unpretentious, cordial, and "natural": together with their entourage they enter the assembly hall, a smile on their faces, their followers applaud and hail them, they raise their arms, wave victoriously, shake the hands of all persons they pass by, ask for their names, and so on. Although the charismatic moment appears to be spontaneous, its extraordinariness is a highly scripted one. Here, too, charisma is staged by rituals, and rituals channel and enchase the charismatic osmosis.

But the question as to the charismatic foundations of democracy transcends the staging of leadership. It brings us to the complex problem of representing an impersonal sovereign. In democracies, the charismatic core of political authority is shifted from the person of the monarch to the people. This fundamental change in sovereignty was originally brought out by the great revolutions, which not only marked the end of an epoch but also orchestrated the new democratic mythology: faced with unjust personal rule—and every personal rule is unjust—the people break the imagined contract with the king, jump back into a state of nature, seize violently

the power, and set up a constitution. In many cases, this turnover of sovereignty was ritually performed by publicly decapitating the monarch.[23] The king was presented as just another mortal being, humble and miserable, not above the law but crushed by the merciless impersonal law of the people.

As clearly as the bloody act of beheading the king could emphasize the turnover of sovereignty, it could not, for obvious reasons, be ritually institutionalized. Like other imaginations of political charisma too, the new charisma of the demos needs ritual representations—even more so since the demos, in contrast to the king, is invisible. Looking for such ritual representations we may, at first, turn to the annual celebrations of the revolution. These annual memorial days staged the fundamental structure of the revolution by theatrical means. July 14 remembering the seizure of *la Bastille* is a paradigm case.[24] It culminated in a big parade that brought together three groups: the notables and officeholders sitting orderly on a stand as the official representatives of the state, the armed forces marching in front of them as the representatives of power and violence, and the watching and hailing crowd standing disorderly behind a barrier as the representatives of the people. The official representatives of the state regarded the crowd as a dangerous power that was hard to control—the audiences were frequently required to remain calm and to abstain from shouting. Furthermore, the cavalry in the parading troops used to ride a mock attack against the bourgeoisie on the stand, thus hinting at the always-lurking possibility of revolutionary violence that could turn against officeholders in democratic states. But these memorial celebrations of the extraordinary founding event remain theatrical performances that had no consequences for real life.

A true ritual presentation of revolutionary violence can be found in rallies and strikes that, in many cases, seriously hinder public traffic and impair the pursuit of private business. One truck parked in the wrong place will be heavily fined, whereas one thousand trucks blocking Paris for a day, by contrast, will not be viewed as breaking the law. The perpetrator is a single person with a face and a name. As soon as the acts of deviance are performed publicly and simultaneously by a crowd, the deviance is depersonalized and the framing of the event has to be changed completely—the extraordinariness of deviance is turned into the extraordinariness of sovereignty. This is the moment of liminality, in which the rules of everyday life are suspended to give way to the ritual construction of the revolutionary demos. For a limited "time out of normal time," the people jump back violently into a state of nature, occupy objects and spaces, and attack occasionally those who are identified as the source of evil. They perform democratic sovereignty.

Cultural Hermeneutics and the Unity of Style

Finally we will elaborate another core metatheoretical conception that Geertz uses extensively when talking about schemata that define the unity of a culture. It assumes that cultural meaning is generated by relatively uniform basic patterns, deep structures, grammars, or styles that can be found in different fields or domains covered by a culture but, in contrast to their salience for the generation of meaning, are hardly explicitly mentioned or taught. Like the rules of grammar with respect to speech, they are operatively efficient with respect to cultural communication not

although, but because they are not themes and issues of this communication. We become aware of their existence only in situations of a hermeneutical crisis—when an action runs counter to "normal," "reasonable," and "regular" expectations, when it cannot be subsumed under the "and so forth" of previous actions, when it makes no sense although it is linguistically and gesturally understandable. We can respond to such a hermeneutical crisis by laughing about the obvious mistake, we can ignore it, or we can try to explain what we consider to be the mistake in doing the right thing because the actor is obviously unable to grasp the deep structure of the situation, because he is unfamiliar with the cultural style of coping with issues.

These cultural styles differ socially, but the cultural style of a social group may hegemonically dominate the public space of a particular historical period. They are less complex and person related than the Bourdieuan concept of habitus, and they are more elementary than narratives or scripts,[25] but they are also not just basic codes or classificatory grids. In contrast to norms and laws that exist independently from the action, they regulate the deep rules of culture and exist only in the process of communication. They are models for doing it in the right way, and this right way is loaded with emotions, memories, and analogies. Cultural styles ensure that a particular way of coping with issues, of dealing with contingencies, of narrating a story, of winning the support of others, and of presenting yourself is considered to be the "right," the "plausible," and the "appropriate" one. They provide the deep grammar without which we could not transfer meaning from one field to another, discover analogies, understand strangers and contingencies, and so on.

Because they are neither locally nor socially confined to a particular domain or group, they provide the clue to the embracing unity of a culture without defining this unity by external "boundaries"—boundaries may not be the most felicitous metaphor in cultural matters. Cultural hermeneutics and deep play are about these cultural styles. To conclude our comments on Negara, we will try to outline this with respect to what we may call Negara's formalism and Western modern naturalism.

Negara's cultural style is, obviously, very different from the one dominating contemporary Western modernity. It is as we have seen—based on the display of a vertical divide, of dignified superiority, of ostentatiously presented rank, and stern-faced withdrawal, whereas the American—if not Western—style is exactly opposed to this: egalitarian, jovial, lively, open, colloquial, dressing down, unpretentious, easygoing, and so on. *Homo hierarchicus* as contrasted to *homo popularis*. This contrast between a cultural style that copes with contingencies by defining vertical differences and a cultural style that does the same by playing equality and joint effort is well known. Instead, the following remarks will address a difference in cultural styles that is generated by different modes of relating to surface and essence, history and nature, classicism and functionalism, theatricality and authenticity, and disguise and discovery.

The formal cultural style of Negara clearly favors the first branch of these oppositions. People who want to be socially respected should not only command immaculate manners, but they also should conceive of and present themselves in terms of the classical heritage—otherwise they will be regarded as raw and uncivilized. Whoever shows spontaneously his inner feelings lacks control and education. Authenticity is

not a virtue but an embarrassing mistake in Negara, and persons who commit this mistake will lose their honor. By their behavior they present themselves as savages, similar to the people of the pigheaded king. The past history is not to overcome and to be forgotten, but instead, it is to be kept alive, and its founding myth has to be repeated again and again.

Loss of honor is nothing that can be compensated in other fields or in other respects. It concerns the whole existence of a person and cannot be repaired. It amounts to social death. Persons of honor control their behavior even at the risk of death—as Geertz's impressive stories about the deathly courage of Balinese warriors exemplify. Here again, Negara and classical Japan show a remarkable similarity in cultural styles (nobility of failure).

The architecture of Negara is based on a complex system of walls that shield the court life and temple activities from external view; the buildings inside the court have, however, mostly open side walls—privacy within the court society is difficult to maintain. Towers with several piled roofs visualize hierarchy; wooden panels mostly display richly ornamental reliefs. Balinese art is highly decorative—all surfaces are covered by a dense texture of figures and symbols, there are no empty spaces. The central symbols, the *padmasana* representing the empty center of the world, the *lingga* representing hierarchy and superiority, and the *sekti* symbolizing the extraordinary power and holiness can be found everywhere in Negara, in temples as well as in palaces.

Pictorial and sculptural refinement abounds, but the most important art is probably dancing. Dances such as the Barong-Rangda are not just popular entertainment by music and rhythmic movement, but also ritual performances of mythical struggles between good and evil. They are scripted by an elaborate liturgy and require special costumes and masks that, of course, were not a matter of individual imagination but of tradition.

Court life and architecture, arts and cosmology, and presentation of the self and conception of history exude one basic cultural style: veiling, covering, disguising what is raw and brutish, naked and uncivilized, and spontaneous and natural. And this operation of veiling the natural core is engendered and carried by a mythology. It repeats in many fields the founding myth of superseding the indigenous barbarians led by the pigheaded monster king.

By stark contrast, Western modern culture is, since the First World War, driven by the opposite move: instead of veiling, it aims at unveiling, at discovering the authentic, at going back to natural roots, and at revealing the naked truth. Individual persons should present themselves in an authentic, natural, spontaneous, and unpretentious way; differences of rank and culture should be disregarded in social interaction; and every person should try to lead a healthy natural life instead of striving for artificial pretensions and pompous prestige. Hidden private worlds came under suspicion; they had to be disclosed by new professional specialists such as the psychotherapist or the detective who turned the evil dark Arcanum to the light of the conscious rational public sphere.

Architecture—according to the chart of Athens—was to show the functional construction and naked surfaces instead of concealing them for the outside observer. The ideal house was Philip Johnson's glass house with no external walls shielding the

private life. Decoration was treated as fake and as bad taste. "Ornament is crime," wrote Bruno Taut at the beginning of last century. Neither individual persons nor buildings or art must pretend to be something else than what their real nature is. Figurative art that pretended the presence of something absent was thus replaced by nonillusionary abstract painting: a painting is just a canvas with paint on it, and it represents just itself, nothing which is not really there. Bauhaus aesthetics led to white empty cubes in which only truly functional items and tools with flat surfaces were allowed. Reduction to the natural and functional core of things was the order of the day.

Nudism became fashionable in northern Europe; the beach took center stage as the arena in which every person could present his or her naked natural bodies devoid of any traces of social rank or personal history. Nakedness is the corporal politics of egalitarianism. We all are equally reduced to our bodily nature. Reform dress and reform diet preluded at the beginning of the twentieth century the ecological movement that, at its end, attracted large crowds of followers.

At the end, we may ask which historical situation was driving or fostering the rise of Western naturalism and reductionism that contrasts so strikingly not only with Negara's formalism, but also with the historicism of nineteenth-century Europe. A very tentative and very elliptical answer will relate the naturalist style to the founding myth of modernism, that is, to the attempt to get rid of the past, to accelerate history into a better future, and to conceive of truth, beauty and moral as universal truth, beauty and moral that has to be cleaned from any hints at local, social, or historical roots and perspectives. Thrusting for an immutable reality behind the changing and treacherous surface of fake and fashion, manners and masks, modernism turned to what was assumed to exist behind it—pure nature and the naked self. Naturalism is—in short—a late offshoot of the enlightenment, and it is carried by the rising class of the clerks, engineers, salesmen, and medical doctors who took the hegemonic position of the educated bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. Today, however, the height days of naturalism are over. Local knowledge and historical memory matter again. Geertz prevailed against Corbusier.

NOTES

1. *Negara*, although considered to be one of his major works by Geertz himself, was reluctantly received outside anthropology and outside the circle of specialists in South Asia. Although scholars such as Milner are backing Geertz's position in their own account of Southeast Asian precolonial politics, others—among them such eminent ones as Stanley Tambiah, Benedict Anderson, and Fredrik Barth—criticized its central concern and insisted on the pivotal importance of political power that according to them cannot be reduced or even diluted to ceremonialism. Geertz's account of the Balinese monarchies is considered to be flawed not only because it disregards the power or material dimension (Howe, L. [1991], "Rice, ideology and the legitimation of hierarchy in Bali," *Man*, Vol. 26.) of history but also because it is assumed to present an elitist perspective (Warren, C. [1993], *Adat and Dinas: Balinese Communities in the Indonesian State*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.). Disregarding matters of political power is, however, not a matter of negligence or ignorance, but the strong and path-breaking message of the book: it does

not claim to cover in an encompassing way Balinese precolonial history but offers a new analytical perspective on politics—at least for Southeast Asia. As such a paradigmatic endeavor, it is simply not challenged by hints at historical detail—in a similar way as hinting at the success of Catholic merchants in early modern Europe or to the impact of asceticism on monastic life in prereformatory Europe does not invalidate Weber's ingenious insight about the connection between reformatory Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. Thus the attempt of younger scholars, such as MacRae (2005, "Negara ubud: the theatre-state in twenty-first-century Bali," *History and Anthropology*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Routledge-Curzon, London), to discover inaccuracies in Geertz's account of precolonial Bali or to claim that we would not dispose of convincing and detailed contemporary sources apart from the famous Helms report simply misses the point. Detailed historical research on precolonial Bali (Agung, A.A.G. [1989], *Bali Pada Abad XIX,* Gadjah Mada University Press, Yogyakarta.; Wiener, M. [1995], *Visible and Invisible Realms: Power, Magic and Colonial Conquest in Bali*, Chicago University Press, Chicago.; Schulte-Nordholt, H. [1996], *The Spell of Power: A History of Balinese Politics, 1650-1940*, KITLV Press, Leiden.) may have questioned some minor assumptions in Geertz's *Negara* but they cannot challenge the conceptual power of the ideal type that Geertz has offered. And an ideal type it is as Geertz insists (Geertz, C. [1980], *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, pp. 9–10.).

2. Geertz 1980, p. 14
3. Dumont, L. (1980), *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
4. Geertz 1980, p. 13.
5. Lovejoy, A.O. (1936), *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
6. Geertz 1980, p. 13.
7. For example, a lamb may represent a human being, and a lotus may represent Shiva.
8. Eisenstadt, S.N. (1986), *The Origin and Diversity of Axial Age*, State University of New York Press, New York.
9. Eisenstadt, S.N. (1995), *Japanese Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
10. Dumont 1980.
11. Turner, V. (1969), *The Ritual Process*, De Gruyter, New York.
12. Simmel, G. (1908), *Soziologie. Untersuchung über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Duncker und Humblot, München-Leipzig, pp. 614ff.
13. Elias, N. (1983), *The Court Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 78–104.
14. Geertz 1980, p. 13.
15. Ibid., p. 120.
16. Giesen, B. (2005), "Tales of transcendence," in Giesen/Suber (eds.), *Politics and Religion*, Brill, Leiden, p. 93ff.
17. Service, E. (1975), *Origins of State and Civilization*, Norton, New York.
18. Giesen, B. (2004), *Triumph and Trauma*, Paradigm Publisher, Boulder, CO.
19. Bloch, M. (1924), *Les Rois Thaumaturghes*, Oxford University Press, London.
20. Shils, E. (1975), *Center and Periphery*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
21. Weber has coined the untranslatable term "Veralltäglichung" for this unavoidable decay of charisma.

22. This is the core of the myth of El Cid; in Kurosawa's film, Kagamusha the dead Prince is replaced by an actor who convincingly plays the prince and thus inspires the followers.
23. Giesen 2004, pp. 75–108.
24. Vogel, J. (1997), *Nationen im Gleichschritt*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
25. Alexander, J. (2004), "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology," in Alexander (ed.), *The Meanings of Social Life*, Oxford, New York.

PART IV

GEERTZ, LIFE, AND WORK

CHAPTER 15

Clifford Geertz as a Cultural System

David E. Apter

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.[1]

I

Introduction

Clifford Geertz was among the relatively few academics and even fewer anthropologists who attained the status of public intellectual. (How many anthropologists have been received by the pope?) Among his peers in an age when obscurantism is likely to be taken for professionality, he brought intelligence into the living room. There were rewards as well as punishments for this accomplishment. He was more influential among scholars and intellectuals generally than in anthropology, although he certainly had a devoted following within a field he considered elusive if not evasive. Indeed, he rarely engaged with anthropologists directly on their own terms, although he could, on occasion, make acerbic remarks about some of them. As an anthropologist, it is difficult to know whom to compare him with. A possible candidate only in relation to the profession because her approaches were quite opposite to his, although their subject matter at times overlapped, was perhaps Mary Douglas. She was very much her own kind of structuralist, where one might argue that Geertz was his own kind of hermeneutician. Both viewed the world as sufficiently idiosyncratic to require somewhat idiosyncratic ideas for its examination.[2]

The basis for Geertz's hermeneutics was a view of social life as a process of self-constructing realities; of events as interpreted by their participants. Like Douglas, the central concern was with how best to interpret their interpretations. He was dubious that any particular discipline or field could be entrusted to define a right analytical path in terms other than trial and error. What is certain

> when it comes to talk of such things as meaning, consciousness, thought, and feeling, is that both psychology's "next chapter" and anthropology's are not going to be orderly, well-formed sorts of discourse, beginnings and middles neatly connected to ends. Neither isolating rival approaches to understanding mind and culture in fenced communities ("evolutionary psychology," "symbolic anthropology") nor fusing them into an inclusive whole ("cognitive science," "semiotics") is in the long run, or even the medium, really workable—the one because it reifies difference and exalts it, the other because it underestimates its ubiquity, its ineradicability, and its force.[3]

His particular take on anthropology was formed early on. His preferred intellectual ancestors included John Dewey and his emphasis on the organic and integral quality of knowledge and experience, and as well his emphasis on art, and the potential for self-rectifying social action; Kenneth Burke and the relationship between rhetoric and order; Wittgenstein and the relationships of logic, language, and representation; and many others including George Herbert Mead, Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, and Talcott Parsons. Like so many others of his generation, he tried to build on the work of the now-classic scholars of modernism and modernity, Weber above all, Durkheim, and others of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century who examined the great transformations from precapitalist to highly advanced industrial societies with all the vicissitudes, social and political, that that implies. But it was the confusion of social life and institutions at the interstices of their original dichotomies— *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, mechanical/organic, and corresponding antinomies in law, magic, religion, and so on—that concerned him. He recognized that if such polar typologies had served a useful purpose at one point, once their moment had passed, they obscured more than they revealed (a view he shared with Susanne Langer and which he came to extend to Talcott Parsons, the self-constituted legatee of Weber and the other main historical sociologists). Nevertheless in rejecting structural-functional analysis even while respecting its intellectual framework for the power and scope of the synthesis,[4] what Geertz took from them, that is, from Weber, Durkheim, and Parsons himself, was the significance of the moral imperative and the centrality of the normative. Indeed, it was the latter that became both a point of departure and remained embedded in his notion of cultural systems.

He also distanced himself from a good deal of what passed for the social science of the day, whether, for example, anthropological structural models of kinship, functionalist sociological models, structuralist semiotics, or, in a more philosophical vein, logical positivism, general systems theory typified by the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, Braithwaitean canons of scientific explanation, and Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics*.[5] He regarded with considerable irony many of the trends toward science that were becoming more dominant in several fields such as inductive behavioral modeling, experimental small group dynamics, or survey work, standardized statistical tests of validity, network theory, or the kinds of regression analysis becoming popular in political science and sociology. As for the economic market, he saw it as a cultural system as well as an empirical mechanism. And he remained a skeptic about the methods of data collection the latter required, not to speak of their presumed claims to universality, which for the most part bordered on the banal. If as a social scientist he eschewed most of the methodological emphases

then succumbing to codes of "science," it was in part because of what he considered their tendency to reify science; in this sense they were not much different from any faith, dogma, or ideology.

His philosophical concerns were primarily in the symbolic system, and they remained remarkably constant. What his own cultural system framework produced was less a theory than a way of observing and analyzing in very different venues. The result was a wealth of ideas focused on and germane to what was being studied: markets and urbanization, beliefs and religion, Islam. To read his books is not only enlightening in terms of their subject matter. Rather, one is bombarded with revelatory insights phrased in striking and aporetic aphorisms. In these regards, Geertz was an inventor, his work in marked contrast to the more mundane or conventional analyses dealing with similar themes and issues: modernism and development, economic growth, and the evolution of political institutions.

All the same, he did not spin his ideas out of his own head but rather saw things on the ground—finding there what other social scientists, whatever their fields, did not. What made him choose to be an anthropologist rather than a philosopher or literary person was the need for fieldwork. Fieldwork, what happened on the ground, provided him the basis for his ideas, whether about politics, the economy, or the role of drama and theater in the organization of social life, or religion and belief as both cosmological and practical social negotiation. One might say that the iconic article that illuminates Geertz's way of thinking and observing, perhaps even more than it does its subject matter, is his famous "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," which interestingly enough first appeared in *Daedalus* rather than in an anthropology journal and with which he concludes his collected essays. Beginning his analysis by first insinuating himself in the scene, that is, locating himself as a part of what is being observed in an almost familiar and chatty way, it is with authorial authority that he describes what he sees as narrative and structure.[6] It is a particularly illuminating mode of analysis, but it defies easy categorization—is it anthropology, dramatology, or both? Is it a literary exercise because of the literary way the loose ends are tied together? Is it a study of ritual and metaphor? Perhaps by ignoring such questions, it is all the more satisfying in terms of both the normative ordering it establishes and the intricacies of a cultural system described. And as a here-and-now experiment within a limited venue, it serves as a template for the larger community, thereby justifying itself as a mode of analysis. At the same time, it also illustrates how ambiguous anthropology is as a discipline. As he puts it in *After the Fact*, "The difficulty, as every anthropologist who has tried to do it knows, is that it is virtually impossible to convey what precisely the nature of this discipline is, or even where exactly it comes from."[7]

One might say that he makes this ambiguity the basis of his own perspective. In his book of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he frames his concept of "culture" between Susanne Langer's argument about the temporary significance of apparently stunning new theoretical ideas and, in an amusing recapitulation of Gilbert Ryles's "communicative winks," establishes the significance of codes and coding. "Decoding their different referential meanings requires 'thick' rather than 'thin,' description (Ryles' terms) which he took as the point of departure for his ideas about cultural systems."[8] The rest of his oeuvre applies and elaborates these themes within

the larger context of important issues: modernization, nationalism, the end of colonialism, potentialities for development, and democratization. He interprets them in terms of their trajectories; not traditional versus modern but a specific before and after, a set of events that on the ground may appear a jumble of contingencies. He saw social life as overlapping and complex, with events made serial and therefore more coherent by those directly involved in them. To understand what they were thinking and doing and how they formed such understanding into communicable knowledge without becoming bogged down in the uniqueness of the event required one to see those events as cultural systems. By doing so, one could locate the generalizable kernel in the empirical shell. If so, then the place to start had to be the participants themselves and their webs of meaning and action.

Thus for him, social life was a series of overlapping, contingent, and complex events, themselves made more or less coherent by those directly involved in them. To explain the meaning of what they were thinking and doing also required appropriate boundaries and units for analysis. At a time when most anthropologists still studied "tribes," Geertz looked at towns and villages.

For all that, he remained deeply influenced by Weber, especially the Weber that Parsons "brought back in" in the *Structure of Social Action* with its emphasis on the normative.[9] But to develop the normative further than ideal types of rationality or pattern variables for that matter meant operationalizing a concept of culture that could incorporate certain cognitive principles, particularly of the kind favored by Jerome Bruner, rather than theories of values and their socialization preferred by Parsons, Bales, and others. More to his liking were theories of language and philosophy that dealt with some of the big issues of the meaning of meaning including "questions of definition, verification, causality, representativeness, objectivity, measurement, communication." That said, for Geertz, the overwhelming question was "how to frame analysis of meaning—the conceptual structures individuals use to construe experience—which will be at once circumstantial enough to carry conviction and abstract enough to forward theory."[10]

Insofar as he dealt with development as a process, he refused the teleologies implied or explicit, embodied in most of the so-called development theories prevailing at the time. Nor did he assume, as others did, that there was some organic connection (or crude correlation) between growth and democratization. They might go together. But then again they might not. Yet in choosing to work on Indonesia, particularly in Bali and Java, one relevant reason was that the country seemed poised for a "takeoff." That was certainly the major concern in *Peddlers and Princes*; how takeoff worked in two different towns. It is the Geertz concerned with the intertwining of the economic and the social.[11] And he was to pose the same question in Morocco with an emphasis on Islam, where it facilitated economic adaptation and growth and where it did not.

II

Geertz also used his idea of a "cultural system" as a critical theory. If he eschewed a good many of the "breakthrough" ideas that came to prevail and which have more or less disappeared, he was mostly right. What might be called the attrition

rate of theories has been high indeed. He was often astringent or at least less than charitable toward a good deal of what passed for dominant social theory. But his critiques started not from theories of theories but from fieldwork. He also considered the interpretive skills of anthropologists, even some of the best fieldworkers, philosophically thin even when they piled up thick-descriptive details. One might have thought that in these regards, he might have felt some kinship with Claude Lévi-Strauss. Far from it—rather he attacks his romantic Rousseauianism and in an uncharacteristically bitter comment (that reveals as much about Geertz's approach as that of Lévi-Strauss), he says that

> what Levi-Strauss has made for himself is an infernal culture machine. It annuls history, reduces sentiment to a shadow of the intellect, and replaces the particular minds of particular savages in particular jungles with the Savage Mind immanent in us all.[12]

Metaphor as structural myth is not enough. Needed is an understanding of the deep play of symbolic codes and their power to organize social lives as webs of meaning. Nor will deciphering the most complicated structural models of, say, kinship systems, or the elaboration of principles of affiliation and distance be anything but shallow if not downright misleading. However, in staking out his position on these and similar matters in terms of anthropology, Geertz favored the end run in which the ball was lifted off the playing field altogether rather than frontal attacks on the field.

For all that, he remained an anthropologist. *The Religion of Java* in many ways covers some of the same topics as, for example, Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*. But whereas the latter's description is functional, including the instrumental characteristics of magic in contrast to religion, the former's is on cosmology, symbolism, and the social ordering as revealed in underlying codes. As he puts it,

> For an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions of the world, the self and the relations between them, on the one hand—its model *of* aspect—and of rooted, no less distinctive "mental" dispositions—its model *for* aspect—on the other. From these cultural functions flow, in turn its social and psychological ones.[13]

In these regards, Geertz's way of thinking went far beyond some of the best anthropological concerns, not least of all Evans-Pritchard's thoughtful conclusion to *Theories of Primitive Religion*.[14]

One might think that such a firm perspective would lead him to select his research sites only after careful reflection and consideration. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Rather he was a prime example of serendipity put to good uses.[15] "The outstanding characteristic of anthropological fieldwork as a form of conduct is that it does not permit any significant separation of the occupational and extra-occupational spheres of one's life."[16] Once in the field, his commitment was pretty total. He had little use, for example, for the seemingly anthropological flaneur, the solitary wanderer, or the subjective subject, pretending to insinuate himself or herself into the local scene in the hope that, especially by interacting casually or

intimately as the case might be with the "belows" of this world or that community, a kind of inversionary truth will emerge. For all that, Geertz considered himself a hardened professional, one who was cautious in using what he learned and austere with local knowledge. The latter was all well and good but too often it was romanticized or given pride of place over other forms of knowledge. As he indicates in *Works and Lives*, with its careful subtitle, "The Anthropologist as Author," it is presumptuous to assume that the post-1960s rambling or shambling traveler who purports to be doing fieldwork by rubbing shoulders with the poorer locals has particular authority one way or another.[17]

Hence if in his view the social world was a bunched up, hit-or-miss affair in which contingency and the effort to cope with it gave to anthropology as well as other social science disciplines their underlying rationale and tension, this in no way justifies a hit-or-miss anthropological method. He singles out as an example of what not to do the anthropologist Paul Rabinow, his former student, who reminds him of

> some Frederic abroad, the pal, comrade, companion—*copain*, to stay in the idiom—knocking about here and there, going as the occasions go with various manners of men (this being Morocco, women, wantons aside cannot be reached this way); a rather obliging figure, as much bemused as anything else, carried along in a flux of largely accidental, generally shallow, often enough transient sociability: a curing séance; a roadside quarrel; a country idyll.[18]

He is almost as hard on two others, Vincent Crapanzano and Kevin Dwyer (the latter two more psychoanalytically oriented), who with Rabinow, Geertz considers a cohort that shares the same failings. Deploring them as a next generation of anthropologists working in Morocco, Geertz calls them "I-Witnesses," who lead with their egos, their work a product of "drifting" chance encounters, and their interviews having the character of a "knowing question asker and a life-damaged self-revealer."[19]

Geertz will have nothing to do with romantic "I was there" anthropology. The authenticity of anthropological work depends on a hardheaded connection between facts and frameworks. By the same token, he sees himself working within the confines of grand theory, which he rejects in favor of instrumentalism (or better pragmatism), phenomenology, although never pushing the latter to its limits, and hermeneutics. But because his was not only philosophical taste but also the practical need of field investigation, it prevented him from refusing to become a functionalist, or a Husserlian, a Gadamerite, or a Habermasian. For him, what matters was that one drew from any branch of knowledge. As for anthropology itself, he suggests two approaches as workable,

> (1) an account of the shifts in intellectual outlook in the discipline, as one found oneself caught up in them; (2) a similar description of similar shifts in the conditions of work, what some would call . . . but I will not, the modes of anthropological production.[20]

He remained, in this sense, interdisciplinary in what he drew on, whether economics, politics, history, psychology, philosophy, and within and between them

according to what seemed appropriate to clarify and sharpen the "blurred image" that is anthropology.[21]

His own approach of getting things right was to get right into what he considers the situation. In *Religion of Java*, one is barely introduced to the site when we are taken immediately to a feast demonstrating a core ritual. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he begins with an episode that if not an example of thick description is thick enough to describe a colonial moment embodying three sets of codes that intersect in an event—a tit-for-tat raiding and recompense procedure that reveals the rules of the game shared by rival sheiks and tribal groups among the Berber in North Africa; the strategic role of an intermediating Jew whose property was stolen by one of these groups, and who appealed to French justice for recompense; the reactions of the French who, in the process of establishing colonial rule, did not want to be involved; and the way the two rival sheiks, in a tensed face-off, and to the great surprise of the French, enabled the Jew to get his stolen sheep back. Indeed so surprised were the French, who did not understand the prevailing Berber codes of conduct, that disbelieving the Jew, they clapped him in jail as a spy.

The frame is as much literary as it is social theory. The remarks on the nature of the enterprise and the descriptions of place can only be described as lapidary. One "sees" what Geertz writes about, and comes to understand how the webs of meaning govern conduct and behavior in ways that even acute but conventional observers remain unaware. In these regards, as an ethnographer, Geertz is a storyteller recounting both the stories that others tell him and what he tells as the way to understand the stories themselves (a practice that he condemns for others).

But of course telling stories is in itself a contrivance. The descriptive ingredients are both descriptive and illustrative, the underlying narrative not simply literary but semiotic. In his hands, interpretative theory is employed so fluently and persuasively that one is hardly aware of the theories being employed. Such pointed articulateness not only provides exceptional insights. It gives scholars permission to jump past the limits of conventional disciplinary boundaries.

To accomplish these activities and not be taken in by discrepancies between fancy and reality requires shrewd observation and an analytically practical taste, while getting directly to situations and circumstances requires initial suspicion of first-glance observation. It also requires a secure place to stand. Geertz stood at the center of his own cultural system. In pitching his tent away from the fetish of mad dash interviewing, of surveys, of the numbing numerology that passes for a good deal of modern social science, and of large-scale "systemic" schemes and theories, which in his view obscures, he combined a literary imagination with a historical one. Context was all. Not surprisingly, he had a visceral distaste for what Charles Tilly once referred to as big theories and large structures,[22] which by no means prevented him from being a consummate theory user. If his first condition was to inquire what could lives lived on the ground explain about the mind's eye, his second was what the mind's eye tells us about lives lived on the ground.

> Culture, this *acted* (my italics) document, thus is public, like a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid. Though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though

> unphysical, it is not an occult entity. There interminable, because unterminable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is "subjective" or "objective," together with the mutual exchange of intellectual insults ("idealist!"—"materialist!"—"mentalist!"—"behaviorist!"—"impressionist!"—"positivist!") which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there *are* true twitches) symbolic action—action which like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense.[23]

And there you have it.

III

In the years in which Geertz was most active, many of the most absorbing research queries centering around themes of order and discontinuity, modernism and resistance to it, and the social and political manifestations of these affected in differing degrees the prevailing orthodoxies of the disciplines as professions. Indeed one of the contributions resulting from the rediscovery of the major historical sociologists was their indifference to disciplinary boundaries. A Weber was an economist, a sociologist, a historian, or a lawyer, as the case might be. In political science, questions of about the universal application of democratic institutions required going outside the Euro- and American-centric views of political institutions and social institutions and historicism and institutionalism of the day. In these terms, this was also a great moment for anthropology. Indeed, anthropology had become the most relevant and the most fresh and intellectual stimulating means of combining classic questions of power, economy, and society with transformational concerns. In this sense and for a time one might say that the age of the historical sociologists was followed by the age of anthropology.

There were two major tendencies in these regards, one might call them with some overstatement British and American. The former, including early founders of functionalism such as Malinowski (who was of course Polish) and Radcliffe Brown with his emphasis on system (and his metaphorical treatment of social life as organism), were followed by Audrey Richards (a student of Malinowski's), Max Gluckman, Meyer Fortes, and Raymond Firth, to name only a few.

Their American counterparts included Franz Boas and Edward Sapir, to be followed by Fred Egan, Margaret Meade, Ruth Benedict, and so on, whose primary focus was the material and ideational aspects of culture. To some extent, the differences in their approach were affected by where as well as how they did their fieldwork. A good deal of British anthropology was done in Africa, although by no means exclusively, *pace* Malinowski and Firth. The Americans concerned themselves with North American Indians, again hardly exclusive, *pace* Meade and Benedict.[24] Both British and Americans considered "tribes" as the originally constituted unit of research, an emphasis in which kinship is the strategic structural unit of which cultural factors are a part; the American emphasis became devoted more and more to the study of culture as an object in and of itself and not simply as an instrumental ingredient of social structure.

For the British, fieldwork was the anthropological experience. With tribes the determining unit it was from Malinowski's day on, it was de rigueur to live closely and intimately among the people being studied (i.e., the tribal group or some subset), preferably in tents.[25] Only after long periods in the field could the testing ground for the anthropologist as well as their subjects, the being of being observed as well as observing, could the kind of relationship become possible so that one could share in and absorb local forms of activity and custom. By this means, descriptive and universal functional sets common to all communities could be enriched in the immediacy of the case with new knowledge deriving from differences between how functions were performed in "primitive" as compared with modern societies.

Such fieldwork was designed to erode strangeness and strangerness. Moreover, in its time it represented an emancipated and emancipating anthropology, shorn in the first instance of its earlier emphasis on "traits" and social Darwinian teleologies. And, insofar as the universality of functions allowed comparison between different "systems" and over time, the goal was not only greater understanding of the intrinsic qualities of primitive societies but also to contribute to the greater understanding of one's own.

In contrast, American anthropologists of Geertz's generation literally redefined the term "culture" in cultural anthropology. In this regard, perhaps three stand out not only in terms of anthropology as a discipline but also in the effects of their work on others in different fields and professions: Marshall Sahlins, whose fieldwork was primarily in the Pacific and South Pacific; Victor Turner, in southern Africa; and Geertz, in Indonesia and Morocco. All of them were interested in cosmological questions, the relations between cosmology and social structure, and the representation of both in ritual and other forms of behavior.[26] All were teaching at the University of Chicago, which at that time was certainly the preeminent institution for the study of cultural anthropology. It is impossible here to discuss either their contributions, which were striking, or the differences in their intellectual trajectories given overlapping concerns. Each was a distinctive figure. To a considerable extent, Geertz stood apart from them both in his ideas but also in terms of distance from anthropology as a field.

Perhaps the three books that best illustrate Geertz's work as an anthropologist are *Peddlers and Princes*, *The Religion of Java*, and *Negara*: *The Theater State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. These also illustrate among other things how Geertz was connected to the real world, as ethnographer, as observer, rather than as journalist. In these regards, he differed too from other public intellectuals whether the New York variety, or Oxbridge, or perhaps above all Paris. If he remained aloof from his nominal discipline, he also remained aloof from the knowledge games one found in these parts of the world.

In these books, one can see how his concern with the normative evolves in terms of cycles, rhythms, patterns, organization, class, economic, and political relations. The *Religion of Java* is perhaps his most "anthropological" work, examining in detail the rituals, religious principles and practices, the coding these imply, and the interconnections between beliefs and actions both in terms of their symmetries and disjunctions, not least of all the absorption of Islam, which later becomes a crucial preoccupation. Prayers, rituals, art, folktales, and storytelling play their

part but less in functional than in cognitive terms. What one carries away is not only the connectedness of society or the idea of an organic unity between individual and society but also conflict and division, something akin to Simmel's idea of conflict as a divisive force having compensatory solidarity-producing consequences or Gluckman's "peace in the feud."[27] Interestingly enough, there is no summary or final conclusion.

Geertz returns to one of the key towns in his first work, Modjokuto, in a comparative study that explicitly emphasizes modernization in terms of institutions, societies, and belief systems as affected by economic and other changes in the material conditions of life. Although for many of the scholars of his generation modernization was an ineluctable force with determining consequences, he is more guarded, too aware of contingencies, and hesitant about accepting many of the favored conclusions about developmental change even while acknowledging their importance. In the introduction to *Peddlers and Princes*, he warns that Indonesia has

> seen the beginnings of a fundamental transformation in social values and institutions toward patterns we generally associate with a developed economy, even though actual progress toward the creation of such an economy has been slight and sporadic at best. Alterations in the system of stratification, in worldview and ethos, in political and economic organization, in education, and even family structure have occurred over a wide section of the society. Many of the changes—the commercialization of agriculture, the formation of non-familial business concerns, the heightened prestige of technical skills vis-à-vis religious and aesthetic ones—which more or less immediately preceded take-off in the West have also begun to appear, and industrialization, in quite explicit terms, has become one of the primary political goals of the nation as a whole. Yet that all these changes will finally add up to take-off is far from certain. It is clearly possible for development to misfire at any stage, even the initial one.[28]

In this short and succinct paragraph, he sums up a good deal of the modernization literature with its emphases on traditionality versus modernity. He uses the distinction for comparing Modjokuto in Java with Tabanan in Bali, their contrasts suggesting the impact of the market in one instance and the political in another, the more rapid decline of traditionalism versus the uses of traditionality for the exercise of power. This one might call the modernization emphasis in Geertz's work.

He returns to Tabanan to go beyond his original work on religion in Modjokuto, this time emphasizing not simply the cycles, patterns, and so on, but the theatrical properties of Balinese beliefs in ways that come close to a theory about the role of theater in politics—theater not as a field for public discourse, nor an agora, or some presumed public space, but in terms of the royal house, both dynastically and as a physical object. Here the emphasis is on staging and performance.

> Looking at the palace as a collection of stages, and as a stage itself upon which exemplary dramas of ascendancy and subordination were over and over again played out, clarifies its spatial layout: why the more sacred spots were to the north and east, moutainward and the more profane to the south and west, seaward; why the less prestigious areas rimmed the more prestigious; why there was a public to private gradient from the front of the palace towards the back. It also clarifies the specific meaning of the various sorts of spaces themselves and the relationships that obtained among them.

Here he cites four such spaces, religious, civic, cameral, residential, that are grounded in "core-line" temple, in which the living and dead royals are centered in ways that define a "world axis."[29]

In effect in these three works we see how in the fact, the situation, the circumstance, cultural systems evolve, connect, organize complexity, and become part of complexity itself. He makes it clear that he does not ignore economy and market but indicates their contingent consequences in terms of the variable ways people interpret and act on their consequences, and by so doing set up other consequences outside the projected political and economic trajectories. Finally, by taking a historical example that becomes a substitute for the traditional, he probes into the cosmology of interior forms of knowledge not only as a thing in itself but in the context of performance and dramatic impact in which in effect people live their dreams.

IV

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to make a few comments on the Geertz whom I knew. Our association went back to the 1940s when we were both students at (the now rapidly becoming defunct Antioch College) arriving there as part of that wave of Second World War veterans that the GI Bill afforded the opportunity to go to college. We both took philosophy in George Geiger's seminar at the same time, and it was Geiger, a convinced and convincing Deweyite, who was perhaps the most pervasive initial influence on Geertz. Geertz became Geiger's protégée. It was Geiger who suggested that although philosophy was a suitable undergraduate major, he would be better off studying anthropology for his PhD. And it was Geiger who induced him to go to Harvard in the then Social Relations Department.[30]

The Geertz I remember from those days was something of a loner, a bit crusty, restless, nervous, whose obvious creativity combined easily with a very uncommon commonsense. The suspicion of theories was evident even then as he negotiated the ideological thickets and political passions of the day, most of which seemed to him more self-serving than revelatory. In the case of some of the more militant radicals (of which I was one at the time), he had the irritating habit of thinking through the moral and institutional dilemmas of their views far better than their protagonists. If this ability did not exactly endear him to some of his fellow students, few could ignore the discomfits of his sheer brilliance.[31]

At Antioch, as later in academia, he carved out his own intellectual niche. I remember he was much taken with the work of Ernst Cassirer. We both read with great interest Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*. The theme or motif that formed in those early years and that remained with him in a more sophisticated form to the end of his life was something like this: how do human beings come to attach meaning to events and things, and by so doing actively order their modes of life both conceptually and institutionally? Or, to put it another way, how to account for, that is, identify and analyze, the multiple relationships of relevant meaning (including the way people interpret both their histories and circumstances), by constructing out of sequences of events, their understanding of context, continuity, and rupture. Although such concerns with cognitive and social ordering were considered by many of us as "superstructural" and associated with developmental stages,

his own interest in modernity was on the differences between its appearances, its realities, and its unforeseen consequences. So to study beliefs as systems, one had to incorporate religion, art, politics, economics, and so on, and how they were composed into templates by means of which people lived their lives as they understood them. This is in contrast to most of the scholars of the time, for whom modernity was the prime subject matter and for whom by and large the economic market was the central allocating instrument of development, whether radically oriented or market oriented. For Geertz, the market was and was not a thing in itself. It was in terms of its social consequences. It was not in terms of its ideational aspects, that is, as a cultural system in itself.

At the time, although I was more interested in political science and sociology and he in anthropology and philosophy, we both saw in politics a natural venue for examining such matters. We both began graduate work at the time, he at Harvard and I at Princeton. We were influenced by Max Weber and Talcott Parsons even as Geertz rejected and I accepted the architectonic edifice that Parsons and his associates had erected (and of which bits and pieces were expropriated in a shamelessly eclectic way by the likes of Gabriel Almond in political science, Cyril Black in history, and Seymour Martin Lipset and Shmuel Eisenstadt in sociology).

Subsequently our paths continued to intersect: the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences 1957–1958, the University of Chicago and the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1972 and 1973.

We remained friends until his death. In retrospect, he had more influence on me than I thought, not least of all by saying more clearly what I had begun groping toward on my own. He gave to me, what he gave to many others, a shock of recognition within the otherwise muddiness of their ideas. And while there were many ways that Geertz stood out, perhaps the key to his intellectual power was a fundamental lucidity combined with remarkable literary craftsmanship. If he could read with ease, he could write the same way too. After he felt he understood something and discovered where it fit in the scheme of things, he could write a main draft more or less at once and complete with grace an elegant and precise prose. It was this ability that made so much of what he wrote accessible to the common reader. Hence his work had its own outreach. It appealed to those other than anthropologists interested in not only understanding but the nature of understanding and included economists as well as literary people, political scientists and artists, and more broadly those in the "intellectual" professions. Indeed, by far, the larger part of his scholarly articles were published not in professional anthropology journals but in edited books, literary publications and a wide variety of intellectual journals, a very large proportion of his essays being published in the *New York Review of Books*.

He became a public intellectual almost to his own surprise. Although he had a sense of his own worth, he also had a natural shyness in the public sphere. He had a remarkable faculty for reading and absorbing virtually every kind of material, taking in the same stride everything from Husserl and Heidegger to Talcott Parsons, to newspaper comics. So much so that he hardly needed to enhance himself at the expense of others. But he always had strong views about what one ought to spend

time reading—not much on Althusser, for example, or Foucault who "built so much of his rhetorical tower, fits anthropology none too well."[32]

If as indicated there is still one central theme, mind connecting to experience according to frames of understanding, the emphasis in Geertz's work is on understanding how experience organizes and is organized by these frames. He does not claim a distinguishing and powerful theory as such. Indeed in his autobiographical essay, *Works and Lives*, he pooh-poohs most contemporary theory, and in a dismissive aside suggests why theories, especially grand ones, are at best presumptuous and at worst misleading. In this regard, he wants to show social life in its diversity, the up-and-down qualities of activities, the immediacy of happenstance, and even the random elements in sequence. Contingency as such cannot be stuffed into theoretical molds, but only by recognizing it as deep knowledge can one begin, as an observer, to understand what it means beyond contingency itself. Knowledge in this sense involves comprehending the phenomenological world of the actors as they themselves structure it, that structuring in turn becoming the analytical object—a removed second order subject—structured by the observer.

In the end, this leads him to eschew phenomenology as a philosophical system. His eye is too comprehensive, the required scope of knowledge too diverse, and experience no matter how simplistic or complex, a function of too many levels of activity. Yet and in more than a residual sense there remained Geertz the philosopher still closer to John Dewey than more rarified Hegelians, Kantians, Husserlians, and others both in the unpretentiousness of his ideas and in the modesty of his claims to knowledge.

V

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Geertz's thought was its pervasive common sense. Put common sense together with deep knowledge and mix with a phenomenology of understanding, and it self-constitutes a way of knowing. It provides the necessary boundaries for defining relevance and the containment of knowledge. It provides a regimen consisting of defined levels of understanding that may be required for knowing what others are about. It is also the case that his approach made one shy away from dealing with the big developmental questions. After his brief flirtation with "takeoffs and landings," his early ideas of primordial revivalism, and a deeper concern with differences between types of Islam in Morocco and Java and their social and economic consequences, he gave up trying to answer what he considered unanswerable questions that too often were given overkill "cultural" answers. Such as the explanation for why given similar colonial administrative structures under British colonialism, former East Asian colonies such as Singapore or Malaysia have been such stunning economic successes in contrast to most African cases where independence occurred in roughly the same period. Answer: the presence of Confucianism in the first instance and its absence in the second. Why autocratic rule in one circumstance like Nigeria resulted in a self-perpetuating military-mafia complex no matter the appearance of electoral democracy: competitive cultural/identity hegemonies as compared with Taiwan. But there were plenty of problems with his work. He wanted a more contextually rooted concept of cultural

system, but he ran the risk that anything could become one—why not supply and demand as a cultural system or class struggle? Defending his views, he became more and more a commentator and at times a cranky one, loosening broadsides against research styles and approaches that he regarded as meretricious: group dynamics, field theory, information theory, institutional political analysis, structural political-economy analysis, deliberation theory, group interactions strategies, the analysis of intermediate institutions, firms, theories of rational choice, and methods such as attitude surveys, regression analysis, spatial differentiation, and so on, not to speak of specific topics focusing on education, family and kinship structure, ethnicity and identity politics, religious revivalism and ideological commitments, administrative and political systems, and big man theories, among others. On the other hand, although he appeared to take a lukewarm interest in politics as such, he could be quite passionate about matters such as elections, judicial structures, and political beliefs, in this country and in Morocco and Indonesia as well. In his sense of real-life moral imperatives, institutional practices and beliefs, modes of conduct or behavior were subject to how people thought about them, adapted them, and changed them. Yet he distinguished between moral and cultural relativism. Above all, what he eschewed were analytically determining categories whether inductively or deductively derived because they resulted in deceptively insufficient requirements for knowledge and ruled out significant contingencies that bombarded people's proprieties in daily life and the resentments and feelings so generated. Above all, what large-scale theories tended to ignore was what to Geertz was the raw material for social analysis, people coping, sometimes failing, and sometimes overcoming and transcending their predicaments, a struggle that in the last analysis is not only the stuff whereby coding and codes and the weaving of the networks are made but the whole cloth that constitutes human dignity as well.

How then to sum up his work? In lieu of a conclusion, I have two comments. The treatment of social life as social text according to multiple cultural systems is like changing lenses on a camera; change the objective and the boundaries and subject are altered both in the frame and in the mind's eye. But which cultural system one chooses, ideological, religious, or commonsensical, and for what purposes, is a matter of discretion. It is the brilliance of Geertz's own taste of selecting, rather than a communicable set of guidelines or criteria, that gives his works their power. Geertz as a cultural system consists of one part the charm of good writing and many parts good observation.

My second comment is that if one is to take thick description seriously and derive from it the relevant cultural system, that is, shifting back and forth between models *of* and models *for*, then the next step was one he refused to take. That is, by denying and decrying the relevance of thinkers who followed more linguistic, structuralist, and hermeneutical traditions, he rejected the idea that cultural systems insofar as they find their way into collective or public space, are in fact discourses that themselves both create and fill the space of art, politics, and social organization with communicative performatives. To consider Geertz a cultural system tout court for the study of cultural systems is to recognize how he creates his own stage, places the actors where he wants them, with the main character not the ostensible subject of the play but himself. The performance is superb, the audience

applauds, but the lines he speaks are in fact commentaries on discourse(s)—his own and others—to the point where one might properly ask, "When is a cockfight just a cockfight?"

Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.
2. See, for example, Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966), *Natural Symbols*: *Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), and especially *Thinking in Circles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).
3. See Clifford Geerz, *Available Light* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 200.
4. He remained loyal to Parsons and continued to admire him even as he went off in his own directions dedicating *Negara*: *The Theater State in Nineteenth-century Bali* to Parsons among others.
5. See in particular R. B. Braithwaite, *Scientific Explanation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 319–368.
6. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 412–53.
7. See Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
8. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.
9. See Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949).
10. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 313.
11. See Clifford Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Clifford Geertz, "The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Lévi-Strauss), reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures.*
12. Ibid., p. 355.
13. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 123.
14. See E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 100–22. It is interesting to note in this regard that this book, which discusses psychological and sociological approaches as well as the work of several key scholars can be compared with Geertz's own book *Works and Lives*: *The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), where he discusses Evans-Pritchard, and in my view caricaturing him quite unfairly (although his demeanor made him an easy target for caricature). Having taken his seminar at Oxford and subsequently spent a year in his company at All Souls College, the "E-P I knew was quite a different person from the one Geertz described."
15. See Geertz, *Available Light*.
16. Ibid., p. 39.
17. See Geertz, *Works and Lives*, p. 87.
18. Ibid., p. 93.
19. Ibid., pp. 89–99.
20. See Geertz, *After the Fact*, p. 97.
21. See ibid., p. 98.
22. See Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984).
23. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 10.
24. So much so that the joke ran that the standard extended Navaho family included at least one Harvard anthropologist.

25. Perhaps the model work in this connection was, and remained for many years, Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* in the functional connections between economic, political, and other patterns of social life were organized around kinship, work, and beliefs, magical and religious.
26. He was probably closest in terms of substance as well as scope to Victor Turner. See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: The Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).
27. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 333.
28. See Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes*, p. 3.
29. See Clifford Geertz, *Negara*: *The Theater State in Nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 111–2.
30. Geertz not only followed such advice but Geiger helped him win an outstanding fellowship to Harvard.
31. For a personal commentary on these early years, see D. E. Apter, "Remembering Clifford Geertz," *Daedalus*, Summer, 2007.
32. Geertz, *After the Fact*, p. 96.

CHAPTER 16

On Clifford Geertz: Field Notes from the Classroom

Robert Darnton

As an anthropologist, philosopher, political scientist, literary critic, and all-around, all-star intellectual, Clifford Geertz helped a vast public make sense of the human condition. But for nearly everyone in that public, his ideas operated like gravity—invisibly, as attraction at a distance. They worked differently up close, especially in the classroom, where they bounced off the walls in all directions, lighting up subjects in unpredictable patterns. I would like to testify to Cliff's prowess as a teacher.

We taught together, on and off, for twenty-five years. Our course, an undergraduate seminar at Princeton University, sported a name that once sounded sexy: "History 406: The History of Mentalities." I began to teach it solo in 1974, when the French variety of *histoire des mentalités*—the study of collective attitudes and worldviews as developed by Robert Mandrou, Georges Duby, Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle, and other historians—looked like the hottest thing off the Left Bank. At the same time, I encountered Cliff, who had arrived in Princeton in 1970 as a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study and taught in its new School of Social Science, founded in 1973. He asked me what historians meant by mentalities. After I stammered out some kind of reply, he said, "Sounds like anthropology." A year later, we were teaching the course together, and it turned into a seminar on history and anthropology.

The love affair between history and anthropology heated up wonderfully in the 1970s. The two disciplines seemed to be made for each other: what historians studied at a far remove in time, anthropologists examined far away in space. The "what" in question was the *je ne sais quoi* called culture. Cliff knew what he meant by the term, but he did not go in for definitions. Conceptual clarity was what he urged on the students, not a party line.

He made his own position clear, however, so clear that many of the students found themselves adopting a semiotic view of culture even if they had not heard of semiotics. That is, they sharpened their awareness of how people construe the world through signs, not merely by means of verbal clues but also by reference to objects from everyday life—the adjustment of veiling to signal degrees of deference in the western desert of Egypt, the designing of houses to align symmetry between man and beast in northeast Thailand, the hunting of cassowaries (an ostrich-like bird) as a journey into the afterlife in the Central Highlands of New Guinea, the eating of pangolins (scaly anteaters) to produce fertility in the Congo....

Once, long before Cliff became famous even beyond the range of The *New York Review of Books*, I overheard one undergraduate say solemnly to another in the men's room of Firestone Library, "I'm not a Freudian. I'm a Geertzian." When I mentioned this to Cliff, he just laughed. He never tried to found a school. He wanted to help students crack open distant mental worlds and wander around inside alien ways of thinking.

We adopted a straightforward strategy in designing the course. The students would compare a historical and an anthropological monograph on the same subject—for example, Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. The topics could be tied together in endless combinations. They took us all over the globe and through all periods of time, because we did not worry about covering anything systematically.

Thomas's Elizabethans obviously inhabited a different world from that of Evans-Pritchard's Africans, yet Cliff found ways of making meaningful comparisons between their views of witch-craft. In his fieldwork in southern Su-dan during the 1920s, Evans-Pritchard learned that the Azande attributed all disasters to witchcraft and that they had a rigorously empirical understanding of the way it operated. When a granary raised on top of wooden stakes collapsed on a man who had been sleeping beneath it, they acknowledged that the pillars had been eaten away by termites. Weren't the termites therefore the cause of the death?

Certainly not, said Cliff, summoning up Evans-Pritchard's famous dialogues with his native informants. Why did that granary collapse on that particular man at that specific moment? they asked. "Bad luck," the Western answer, was no answer at all, according to them. They dismissed "luck" as a much feebler concept than witchcraft, which they understood as having material manifestations that could be detected by autopsies. By the time Cliff had explained the self-confirming character of the entire Azande system of thought, they seemed to be more reasonable, in their way, than the fanatics of seventeenth-century England with their dunking stools and human bonfires.

Cliff tried to make the distant seem familiar and the familiar look foreign—as in *Gulliver's Travels*, one of his favorite books. But he did not simply rely on ethnographic storytelling to drive the message home. We usually began the course by discussing a medley of theoretical essays. Cliff's own sympathies were easy to detect: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, linguistic philosophers like J.L. Austin, and Weberian sociologists like Robert Bellah. But he took pains to extract the most original elements from the thought of anthropologists whose work was least

compatible with his—Claude Levi-Strauss, for example (Cliff disliked the abstract and formalistic character of his ethnography), and Bronislaw Malinowski (Cliff had little patience with functionalist explanations of culture). Instead of reducing theories to a lowest common denominator (his own), he reveled in their differences.

As I learned from redrafting the syllabus with him each year, Cliff seemed to have read everything. Moreover, he read at a prodigious speed, extracting the essence of a book along with a vast amount of detail, which he blended with information derived from other books, so that trails of evidence criss-crossed in unexpected patterns from one subject to another.

Was this sharp intelligence, inexhaustible curiosity, and encyclopedic knowledge intimidating? Certainly. Cliff was a shy person who had difficulty in making contact with others, despite his skill as a field worker. He had learned to read the status conflicts acted out in Balinese cockfights and to spot the telling details that distinguished the Islam experienced by the Javanese from the Islam of the Moroccans.[1] Yet he did not smooth the way for give-and-take among academics. After conversing with him, other professors often walked away with an uncomfortable feeling of their own inferiority. Did this difficulty impede Cliff's effectiveness as a teacher? Certainly not. He got on well with students, because they expected him to know more than they did, and they rarely knew enough to be awed by his omniscience.

Cliff preferred teaching undergraduates. Unlike graduate students, they took risks and did not suffer from the anxieties attached to the process of professionalization. I recently ran into a former student who took History 406 many years ago and remembered vividly how Cliff had encouraged him after he blurted out a remark that the rest of us thought absurd: Evans-Pritchard had made witchcraft seem so believable that perhaps it really did exist. Cliff was delighted. The student had broken through the barrier of culture-bound thinking.

Yet Cliff was not a born teacher. He talked too fast and mumbled into his beard so badly that the students found it difficult to understand him. His huge mane of hair hung over his skull in such disorder as if to say: "Beware! Genius Inside." He sat awkwardly in a chair, his jacket buttoned too tight over his potbelly, his legs crossed at an odd angle which exposed six to twelve inches of shiny white shin. None of his clothes fit. The rumpled, disheveled figure at the far end of the table frequently said nothing, apparently lost in its own thoughts. Then suddenly, it would explode in talk. The words would tumble out in a torrent, and we would sit back amazed.

My job was to set the stage for the explosions. Not that we ever planned them or discussed pedagogical strategy. But it became clear that I would have to start the discussion rolling, soften up the students, and prepare points, so to speak, like a sparring partner. Then Cliff would come in with the KO punch. Occasionally he hit home with such force that he broke open a whole new way of thinking.

When we were discussing Alfonso Ortiz's superb, but difficult, monograph about the Tewa people in the Rio Grande valley of New Mexico, *The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being, and Becoming in a Pueblo Society*, I tried to warm things up by going over Tewa cosmology as it was explained in the text. I enumerated esoteric details about the connections between cardinal directions, color symbolism, and mythological motifs. By the time I got to initiation rites, I realized that everything

was falling flat. I was making a worldview sound as mechanical as the directions in a tool kit.

At that point, Cliff intervened. He described what happened. Adolescent boys sleeping in the familiar comfort of their beds are awakened unexpectedly in the middle of the night. They are dressed in a ritual breechclout (a kind of loincloth), covered with a blanket, and made to climb down a ladder into a windowless antechamber of a kiva, the deepest, most secret room in the pueblo. Then they are told to shed their blankets. A terrible thump occurs over their heads. Elders cover the ladder with a blanket; and when they remove it, there stands the chief deity in a terrifying mask. He announces that he has come from his dwelling place beneath the lake and asks the boys if they are prepared to be "finished" as men. After they agree, he flails their bare torsos with a yucca whip, striking with all his might and raising huge, red welts on their rib cages. Finally, when they are reduced to terror, he pulls off his mask, and they see the face of a relative or neighbor laughing at them.

What was the nature of the revelation? Cliff asked. Like all the students, I thought the boys had been initiated into something like a confidence game. By removing his mask, the elder had exposed the human hiding behind the false deity. It made me think of the child who pulls the beard off the department-store Santa Claus. No, Virginia, there is no Santa: that seemed to be the message.

Not at all, Cliff explained. The boys had learned that Uncle X was a god, not that a supposed god was only Uncle X. Suddenly we were staring into strange territory.

The pueblo chiefs and ritual clowns often perform a rain dance when they see black clouds approaching, Cliff remarked. Is that because they want to maximize their power by leading the credulous to believe that they can make it rain? No, he said. The dancing "brings down" the rain. It is a way of helping the people enter into harmony with the cosmological forces—not priestcraft but the acting out of a worldview. Culture as performance, ritual as the enactment of myth—Cliff was always seizing on points that ran counter to our intuition. That was his genius as a teacher: to help us think against the grain of our own culture and to enter imaginatively into mental territory that lies beyond it.

After the seminar sessions, Cliff and I always continued the conversation over beer at the Annex, a nearby restaurant now defunct. He had ideas about everything—jazz, foreign affairs, horse racing, automobiles, mathematics, the New York Yankees, James Joyce, colleagues. Instead of pulling subjects into the gravitational field of his own expertise, he pursued them into corners where they were most unfamiliar, where he could capture their otherness.

"Othering" has become a cuss word among anthropologists, something nearly as wicked as "essentialism." In recent years, Cliff was accused of making other cultures look too coherent and of polishing his prose so effectively as to misrepresent alien societies by eliminating their rough spots and fault lines. Did he take an overly aesthetic and holistic view of culture in our class discussions? No, but he worked hard to get across the notion that symbolic systems, such as the representation of political authority in the Balinese "theater state" hold together with a power of their own, that they do not derive from social organization, and that the interpretation of them requires rigorous empirical study as well as conceptual clarity.

For example, in expounding the esoteric notion of the hermeneutic circle—the conception of interpretive understanding favored by the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer—Cliff did not begin with an exposition of Gadamer's general principles and a theoretical account of descriptive as opposed to causal explanations in the human sciences. Instead, he asked the students to imagine themselves explaining baseball to a visitor from Outer Mongolia whom they had taken to a game. You would point out the three bases, he said, and the need to hit the ball in such a way as to run around the bases and reach home plate before being tagged out by the defense. But in doing so, you might note the different shape of the first baseman's glove or the tendency of the infield to realign itself in the hope of making a double play. You would tack back and forth between general rules—three strikes, you're out—and fine details—the nature of a hanging curve. The mutual reinforcement of generalizations and details would build up an increasingly rich account of the game being played under the observers' eyes. Your description could circle around the subject indefinitely, getting thicker with each telling. Thick descriptions would vary; some would be more effective than others; and some might be wrong: to have a runner advance from third base to second would be a clear mistake. But the descriptions, if sufficiently artful and accurate, would cumulatively convey an interpretation of the thing itself, baseball.

Cliff had the students dashing around the hermeneutic circle like runners stealing bases. He did not invoke great names—Weber, Dilthey, Gadamer—in order to get across his argument. But he cited authorities as needed, without the name dropping that can create a climate of oppressive intellectuality in a classroom. Cliff had no use for intellectual snobbery. He was an intellectual himself, the real thing. And as a teacher, he was exhilarating. When his eyes lit up and the words poured out, he infected students with the excitement of the chase. They, too, could penetrate another world. The game was difficult, but anyone could play. And in Cliff, they had an example of a hunter-gatherer who blazed his own trail through the jungle of cultures. He opened a way for the rest of us, for readers everywhere, for the citizenry in general, but above all for the undergraduates fortunate enough to pick up the scent in History 406.

NOTES

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1. See "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), and *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Yale University Press, 1968).

CHAPTER 17

AFTERWORD: THE GEERTZ EFFECT

MATTHEW NORTON

To what effect, the work of Clifford Geertz? Certainly the range of "the Geertz effect" is wide, transcending the limits of discipline to become a "trans-human-scientific" phenomenon. But what is the consequence of that effect? Geertz himself adopted a characteristically deflationary answer to this sort of question about his legacy in his 1999 American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Haskins lecture:

> I suppose that what I have been doing all these years is piling up learning. But, at the time, it seemed to me that I was trying to figure out what to do next, and hold off a reckoning: reviewing the situation, scouting out the possibilities, evading the consequences, thinking through the thing again. You don't arrive at many conclusions that way, or not any that you hold to for very long . . . A lot of people don't quite know where they are going, I suppose; but I don't even know, for certain, where I have been.[1]

Geertz never summed it up, put the disparate pieces and influences together into a specific program, or elaborated either system or method that could properly be called, in a nutshell, "Geertzian." In fact, one of the most recognizable and recurrent themes of Geertz's work is a suspicion of exactly such systematizations, summaries, and nutshells. In the words of his Haskins lecture, Geertz's tendency was always to evade the consequences and hold off a reckoning. This avoidance of programmatic definitions and the closure of questions inhabits the Geertzian style of writing itself. Conclusions, in Geertz, are regularly deflated and deferred by comma phrases—"[y]ou don't arrive at many conclusions that way, or not any that you hold to for very long"[2]—and complicating contexts are unfurled between dashes, pulling the rug out from arguments that might otherwise sound like they rise too close to the level of theoretical generalizations. Not knowing exactly where one has been, while reading Geertz, but still knowing that interesting and important ground has been covered, is an important, and theoretically significant, part of the point.

But one of the consequences of Geertz's success in more or less achieving the inconclusive end of "[holding] off a reckoning" was that he largely avoided the establishment of an elaborate program of research and a cadre of students to perpetuate it and ensure its spread. As a result, "the Geertz effect" is less a robust agenda that identifies research problems and connects them to a certain brand of social theory and more a matter of name-dropping and keywords. "Geertz" has largely become an iconic signifier, a piece of intellectual currency, a readily recognizable marker that locates a writer in complex discursive fields and predictably evokes a limited set of typified meanings. "Geertz" comes to signify thick description, deep play, culture, and interpretive social science in general. Perhaps he signifies a middle road between the excesses of postmodern doubt and positivistic hubris. At the limit, he might signify the possibilities and promises of interdisciplinary approaches. But ought this set of iconic keywords and associations really be the limit of "the Geertz effect"? Might a more robust, thoughtful, rigorous, and ultimately more interesting "Geertzianism" result from an engagement with his work that stays closer to "the hard surfaces"[3] of argument, theory, ethnographic practice, and text rather than an engagement with Geertz that is limited to the reproduction of a set of simplified intellectual icons, keywords, and concepts stripped of their characteristic comma phrases? After all, the question of the effects of Geertz's work now that the man is gone will only ever be answered by how Geertz is constructed by those who read and reference him. What is at stake is whether those constructions look more like shibboleths or semiotics, simple signs that say little but imply much or a robust set of theoretical propositions that continue to illuminate, problematize, and open up routes of inquiry.

Collectively, the chapters in this book suggest that the latter approach is both possible and fruitful. The authors have done some scouting of their own, and the result is a critical return to the complex web of signifiers that Geertz himself wove and a map of its potential as a vocabulary for posing and answering new questions. "[T]he office of theory," Geertz claimed, "is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself . . . can be expressed."[4] Another way to pose the question of "the Geertz effect" is to ask how it does and how it might operate as such a theoretical vocabulary. The deiconicized return to Geertz that the chapters in this volume promote suggests a number of problems, possibilities, conundrums, ways forward, and potential limits for "Geertzianism" as a theoretical vocabulary. They sketch out, in short, the possibility for a provocative return to Geertz to take a second look at where one might go in his company. In this conclusion, I synthesize some of the major features of this renewed engagement, organized around three of the core elements of Geertzian social theory: culture, semiotics, and interpretavism.

Culture

If Geertz's writing is conceived as a web of thought, then the center of that web, or perhaps better its structure, can only be understood with reference to the concept of culture. Geertz's development of the culture concept is at the heart of his response to Parsonian systems theory. Geertzian culturalism moved the "L"—latency pattern maintenance—in Parsons's Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, and Latency

(AGIL) scheme from the outskirts to the center of social analysis. Just as importantly, it introduced a more subtle, nuanced, and local understanding of the ideal world that was able to bear the sustained and minute analyses of Geertz's thick-descriptive ethnographies. Geertz's "culture" concept itself became the target of sustained anthropological skepticism,[5] but one of the clearest messages of the chapters collected in this volume is that Geertz's "culture" concept has weathered these critical storms to provide a strong common platform for diverse sorts of social inquiry. To be clear, the storms have not abated, but the fact that "culture" continues to offer a useful and productive platform for common strife over contentious and important issues in the human sciences indicates the durability of the concept.

Many of the authors here contribute to the development of Geertzian approaches to cultural analysis in the human sciences—based on the theoretical insight that human interactions with the world are pervasively interpretive and that these interpretations can be best understood through the reconstruction of semiotic systems and the meanings that are generated within them—but these contributions also accentuate important disputes and theoretical alternatives available within a generally culturalist mode of thought. The early concern of the anthropologists that culture referred to something discrete, local, and comprehensive is no longer pressing.[6] As a construction, "Balinese culture" does not make good Geertzian sense because a generalization of this scale wildly overdetermines the local structures of meaning and knowledge that are Geertz's main interest. But the question of what "culture" *is* as an object of analysis persists, and is represented by a continuum of approaches to and concerns with the culture concept by the authors of this volume, ranging from questions about how cultural meanings are organized relative to one another to questions about their boundaries and what indistinct boundaries mean for the task of cultural analysis. Giesen's notion of "cultural styles," for example, lends itself well to comparisons of such disparate phenomena as Negaran cosmology and axial age distinctions because he understands culture to be systems of meanings that are structured along similar enough lines that their different approaches to being in the world bear comparison. Smith similarly advocates a cautious return to structuralism as a way of interpreting culture that foregrounds culture-structure in the production of meaning. On the other hand, Marcus reminds us of the critique of "totalizing frameworks of cultural analysis, which indeed were the milieu of Geertz's anthropology" (Marcus, this volume) as well as of the "traditional notions of culture in anthropology, for which Geertz was perhaps the last great articulator," indicating a way forward predicated on a more fractured and differential culture concept. He is less interested in culture as structure and more interested in what the concept of culture stands for in specific research fields such as science studies. Galison similarly rejects constructing culture as a clearly bounded or rigidly structured entity, instead suggesting we develop a fluid and dynamic understanding of culture by focusing on the "trading zones" at the borders of cultural systems where order becomes unstable and hybrid forms abound.

As both Apter and Alexander suggest, there is an essentially Geertzian approach to resolving this dilemma about what culture as an object of social-scientific analysis actually is: in the field, locally, with reference to specific sets of empirical observations. Structure, hybridity, cultural style, boundary, fluctuation, and other

concepts can be treated as a theoretical repertoire that, going forward, Geertzian cultural analysis can develop with reference to carefully observed empirical material. What culture *is* can be sorted out locally, with regard to particular questions. This strategy—"to take the capital letters off"[7] of profundities such as "Culture" as a fixed and potentially reified universal object of analysis—can serve as the sort of "big tent" that keeps the various "Geertzian" approaches to culture adopted by the authors in this volume in dialogue with each other.

Semiotics

A Geertzian approach to culture is, of course, "a semiotic one."[8] But Geertz himself never spelled out in a systematic way what, exactly, he had in mind by invoking semiotics. Indeed, a Geertzian semiotic approach is perhaps most accurately understood as simply "what Geertz does when he does cultural analysis," but this does not give those interested in adopting and refining this approach much to go on. A number of the chapters in this volume return to the question of what taking a semiotic approach entails and the kinds of tensions that inhabit it. In the first place, as Brooks points out, semiotics for Geertz does not conform in a more continental fashion to the model of linguistics. Rather, a Geertzian semiotic approach is modeled on hermeneutics, and thus social analysis is focused on interpretation of these "social texts." As Apter points out, one of Geertz's most notable achievements was to hold off pressures of his time toward certain predetermined objects and techniques of analysis, and instead to deploy his own interpretive approach that was focused on making sense of how others in other places made sense of the world. The goal of his semiotic ethnographic practice was, as Geertz puts it, not "to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving" but rather to "reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these?—to which unfamiliar acts emerging out of unknown backgrounds naturally give rise."[9] But even equating Geertzianism with hermeneutics can be somewhat misleading, for as Errington explains, Geertz also had an ambivalent relationship with the metaphor of text, insofar as it tended to reduce the complexity of social life. This is indeed an ambivalent relationship as anthropology, really any social analysis, must always engage in reduction, making the text metaphor more relevant. The question becomes how one identifies the focal points of "textual" analysis and how one treats the complexity that exceeds the metaphor of the text. Errington suggests a more Goffmanian conceptualization of interaction. This does not eliminate the (irresolvable) tension involved in moving between the complexity of life and the necessary reductivism of hermeneutic analysis, however, so much as it enriches the text metaphor by suggesting a more dynamic space of analysis. Wagner-Pacifici identifies another Geertzian (as well as Weberian) resource for dealing with this tension in observing Geertz's style of "diffident engagement." Using this approach, the analyst brackets complex contexts that are beyond the focus of analysis but—in a densely woven web of social meanings—never irrelevant to it. Though clearly a compromise, one of the virtues of this sort of approach is that it enables the authors to reflect complexity but does not allow one's analysis to be swallowed by it. The movement described by Wagner-Pacifici is itself strongly hermeneutic, moving between proximity to the object of

analysis and distance in a way that involves the reader in the recursive reconstruction of ambiguity.

To sort out what a Geertzian semiotic approach might look like, it is useful to go back to the meaning of another core concept: thick description. Geertz's semiotic endeavors were not about discovering and mapping conceptual structures, nor were they about idiosyncratic accounts that remained opaque. Instead, he focused on developing pieces of writing that allowed readers access to the anthropologist's efforts to sort "winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones."[10] But a Geertzian semiotics need not necessarily be limited to the kind of semiotics that Geertz engaged in. For Geertz, a semiotic approach to culture was thick description and thus locked both into the typical hermeneutic circle between parts and wholes and into a kind of hermeneutic circle—really more like a figure eight—typical of the human sciences, characterized by interpretation at every turn: objects of interpretation themselves interpreting the world, the researcher as another interpreter interpreting those interpretations (and writing them down), and the reader interpreting the author's interpretations of interpretations. But within this hermeneutic muddle, a number of strategies for figuring out "what the devil is going on"[11] present themselves as promising interpretive strategies. The point of semiotics, for Geertz, was its capacity "to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers"[12] and many of the diverse methodologies advocated in this volume contribute, in their way, to that larger project, from Smith's structuralism, to Wagner-Pacifici's close-textual analysis, to Lichterman's neo-Geertzian ethnographies focusing on the disruption and reconstitution of the interpreter's "scientific imaginations."[13] From the evidence that these chapters present, in terms of both methods and results, there are many ways to describe thickly and thus to do semiotics in a Geertzian style.

Interpretavism

The major affiliation of Geertzianism is interpretive social science. Here too, thinking with Geertz is useful and effective in sharpening questions and identifying directions for development. Reed in particular takes Geertz's interpretavism as a provocation to social theory, making explicit the question of how researchers navigate between the context of explanation—of the things we want to explain—and the context of investigation—the context in which the researcher's claims come to count as "explanations." Geertz always sought to make the distinction between these contexts explicit in a way that problematizes the interpretive nature of social-scientific claims rather than obscuring it. Thick description, as Clark's engagement with it suggests, is one technique for bridging this gap in an explicit way. Geertzian thick description—which Clark contrasts with "more description"—draws its theoretical impetus from Ryle, holding that action must be described adverbially if it is to count as a satisfactory explanation. Adverbial description requires the analyst to engage with the meanings of the action, which in turn requires hermeneutic reconstruction of semiotic "webs"—structures by another name.

Lichterman's chapter engages with ethnography, the sort of interpretavism with which Geertz is most closely associated, but his argument helps to identify a Geertzian approach to the problem of negotiating the contexts of explanation and

investigation identified by Reed. Lichterman recognizes that ethnography is riven by insoluble tensions and ambiguities, but finds in Geertzian thick description a technique for trying to write the ethnographer and the subjects into an imagined world that readers find believable (i.e., it counts according to the criteria that they hold for "explanation") but which still resists establishing a prior orientation to the symbolic world of subjects, in part, by an explicit effort to focus on episodes that disrupt theoretical categories and assumptions. Warnke too provides an optimistic account of ethnography despite Geertz's later turn to anthropological irony characterized by unbridgeable gaps and misunderstanding in the play of constructions between ethnographer and subject. In place of this postmodern anthropological stance, Warnke suggests a return to hermeneutics a la the early Geertz's efforts to reconstruct the horizons of meaning of "subjects." These reconstructions are indeed partial; as Geertz writes, "[c]ultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete,"[14] but they nevertheless represent some degree of communicative success by dint of hard cultural work and do not merit a retreat to ironical defeat.

Indeed, one of the more attractive elements of Geertzian interpretavism is the course that it traces between positivism and postmodernism. As Trondman's account shows, even as Geertz became more interested in material determinants of the sources of action, he never abandoned a strong focus on cultural explanations. His objection to the more positivistic elements of high structuralism and its tendency to predetermine and reify its own objects of analysis is also well known. Cultural analysis, in Geertz, never abjures the mantle of "science," but it likewise never loses sight of itself as a science that provides interpretive explanations and seeks to organize knowledge. "[N]ot worth it," as Geertz said that Thoreau said, "to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar."[15] Geertz saw something else in the concept of a human science, a space of thought and action between counting cats and solipsistic reverie, and his work can be read as an inducement to that analytical space.

* * *

The chapters of this book collectively offer an alternative construction to Geertz as the iconic cultural straw man, either ally or foe. They suggest the possibility for a significantly deeper and more productive Geertz effect based on the questions and tensions that inhabit the dense web of Geertz's texts and a more thoughtful interrogation of where else they may lead, what other projects they may contribute to, and how else Geertz may be read. Rather than reciting Geertzian shibboleths, they collectively begin to map out a series of possibilities for Geertzian approaches and appropriations, ways of moving forward with Geertz. They do not, nor do they attempt, to lay out an organized program. They do, however, identify a theoretical richness in Geertz's work that rewards elaboration, application, analysis, and interpretation. One may be forced to start "any effort at thick description . . . from a state of general bewilderment,"[16] as Geertz points out, but

> one does not start (or ought not) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas . . . are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new

> interpretive problems . . . If they continue being useful, throwing up new understandings, they are further elaborated and go on being used.[17]

Geertz's confession in the Haskins lecture not to really even know where he has been should not be taken as a justification for reducing the complexity of that intellectual trajectory to a few keywords or iconic turns of phrase. The richness of the web of Geertzian thought continues, usefully, to produce new understandings, elaborations, questions, and productively contentious claims. A real Geertzian may start out bewildered, but it is the texture of that bewilderment and what it makes possible that continues to recommend it as a point of departure for the human sciences. This volume, as a whole, if nothing else, suggests strongly that any definitive assessment of "the Geertz effect" at this point would be wrongheaded; we are really just getting started.

NOTES

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2. Ibid.
3. Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books. p. 30.
4. Geertz 1973, p. 27.
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7. Geertz 1973, p. 21.
8. Ibid., p. 5.
9. Ibid., p. 16.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 27.
12. Ibid., p. 16.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 29.
15. Ibid., p. 16.
16. Ibid., p. 27.
17. Ibid.

Contributors

Jeffrey C. Alexander is professor of sociology at Yale University. His books include *The Meanings of Social Life* (Norton 2005), *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford University Press 2006), and *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (editor, 2005).

David E. Apter was emeritus professor of sociology and political science at Yale University at the time of his death. His work focused on the cultural analysis of development and contestation. His books include *The Legitimation of Violence* (Macmillan 1997) and *Political Protest and Social Change* (Macmillan 1996).

Peter Brooks teaches in the University Center for Human Values and the Department of Comparative Literature at Princeton University. His books include *Realist Vision* (Yale University Press 2005), *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton University Press 2008), and *Enigmas of Identity* (forthcoming).

Stuart Clark was formerly professor of history at University of Wales, Swansea and visiting professor at Princeton University. His books include *Thinking with Demons* (Oxford University Press 1997) and *Vanities of the Eye* (Oxford University Press 2007).

Robert Darnton is Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and director of the University Library at Harvard University. His books include *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (Public Affairs 2009) and *The Devil in the Holy Water, or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2009).

Joseph Errington is professor of anthropology at Yale University. His books include *Shifting Languages* (Cambridge University Press 1998) and *Linguistics in a Colonial World* (Wiley-Blackwell 2008).

Peter Galison is university professor at Harvard University. His books include *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Maps* (Norton 2003) and *Objectivity* (with L. Daston, Zone 2007).

Bernhard Giesen is professor at the University of Konstanz and Research Director of the DFG Research Centre "Norm & Symbol". His books include *Zwischenlagen* (Velbrück 2010), *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual* (Cambridge University Press 2006, ed. with J.C. Alexander and J.L. Mast), and *Religion and Politics: Cultural Perspectives* (Brill Publishers 2005).

Paul Lichterman is professor of sociology and religion at the University of Southern California. His books include *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge 1996) and *Elusive Togetherness* (Princeton 2005).

George E. Marcus is Chancellor's Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. His books include *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton 1998); *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (with Paul Rabinow, 2008) and *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be* (edited with James Faubion, Cornell University Press 2009).

Matthew Norton is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Yale University. His publications include "A Structural Hermeneutics of *The O'Reilly Factor*," forthcoming in *Theory and Society*. His dissertation examines the interplay of systems of classification and state power in early modern England.

Isaac Ariail Reed is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He is the author of *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press 2011).

Philip Smith is professor of sociology at Yale University. His books include *Why War?* (University of Chicago Press 2005), *Punishment and Culture* (University of Chicago Press 2008), and *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (editor, 2005).

Mats Trondman is professor of sociology at Linnaeus University. His recent publications in English include "Burning Schools/Building Bridges. Ethnographical Touchdowns in the Civil Sphere" (in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, Alexander et al. eds) and "Disowning Knowledge: To be or not to be 'the immigrant' in Sweden" (*Ethnic and Racial Studies 2006*).

Robin Wagner-Pacifici is professor of sociology at the New School for Social Research. Her books include *The Art of Surrender* (University of Chicago Press 2006) and *Theorizing the Standoff* (University of Chicago Press 2001).

Georgia Warnke is distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. Her books include *After Identity: Rethinking Race, Sex and Gender* (Cambridge University Press 2007) and *Debating Sex and Gender* (Oxford University Press 2010).

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