

Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology: An Encyclopedia

Geertz, Clifford

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Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) was easily the best known American cultural anthropologist of his generation, both greatly admired and a lightning rod for criticism. He resisted being identified with any particular school of anthropology, insisting, “I don't do systems,” yet many anthropologists of his generation came to identify themselves as Geertzian. In *Available Light* (2001), his last book, he describes himself as an ethnographer who investigated the role played by ideas in human behavior, the meaning of meaning, and the judgment of judgment. In a career that spanned half a century, he spent almost 3 years doing fieldwork in Java, 1 year in Bali, and nearly 3 years in Morocco; he authored or coauthored 10 books stemming from his ethnographic research, observing that fieldwork did more to nourish his soul than the academy ever did. Intertwined with these ethnographies, Geertz regularly produced what he once described as “cliff-hanging” essays on the concept of culture.

Biography

Geertz opens his final book, a collection of essays titled *Available Light*, with an intellectual autobiography. After serving in the navy in the Second World War, he studied philosophy at Antioch College. On graduation, he took the advice of a philosophy professor who advised him to try anthropology because philosophy had fallen into the hands of Thomists and technicians. Encouraged by a serendipitous encounter with Margaret Mead, in 1950, Geertz began graduate studies in the new, interdisciplinary Department of Social Relations at Harvard, where Talcott Parsons presided over a vigorous effort to construct a common language for the social sciences (Geertz recalls that someone helpfully suggested English). Parsons launched the Social Relations program to embody his vision of an integrated social science, where psychologists would study individuals and sociologists, the functioning of social systems, leaving culture to the anthropologists.

This division of academic labor put Parsons in conflict with the dominant Boasian school of American anthropology, the issue turning on the meaning of culture. The issue came into sharp focus with the publication of Parson's *The Social System* in 1951. Parsons argued that to become an analytical empirical science, anthropology needed to take as its subject a restricted view of culture that was independent of both sociology and

psychology. The same year, two leading anthropologists, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, expressed their dissatisfaction with the idea that social systems could [p. 304 ↓] be separated from culture. Kluckhohn argued that social structure is a part of the cultural map and that social systems are built on a framework of explicit and implicit culture. To this, Kroeber and Kluckhohn soon added an evolutionary postscript, arguing that culture originated with early man's facultative abilities to use symbols, generalize, and make imaginative substitutions.

At Harvard, Geertz was assigned to study and comment on the draft of Kluckhohn's and Kroeber's *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, which aimed at a definitive compilation of all the prevailing definitions of culture. Geertz seized on this question and pursued it for more than 50 years. When he was a beginning professor at Chicago in the 1970s, his students recall, the reading list for his signature course on "Theories of Culture" included 277 items, drawing from philosophy, literature, religion, and psychology, as well as anthropology. In *Available Light*, Geertz reflected that in the history of the concept of culture—its drift toward and away from clarity and popularity over the next half century—could be seen both his own intellectual biography and that of anthropology itself.

But in 1951, resolving—or at least working through—these conflicting ideas about culture still lay in Geertz's future. In 1952, Clifford and Hildred Geertz began doctoral fieldwork in a small town in east Java, joining a team that Geertz described as the very stamp and image of the Social Relations idea as conceived by Parsons: a long-term, well-financed, multidisciplinary field project focused not on a small tribal culture but on a 2,000-year-old civilization in the midst of revolutionary change. Geertz's task in the team was to study Javanese religion. His approach was to try out a Weberian hypothesis, that the strongly Muslim sector of Javanese society would be functionally equivalent to Reformation Protestants, spearheading a comprehensive social transformation. In 1956, Geertz received his PhD with a 700-page doctoral dissertation, published in 1960 as *The Religion of Java: an account of the everyday religious practices of Javanese Muslims*, in which the informants spoke for themselves in indented excerpts from field notes.

After completing their fieldwork in Java, the Geertzses made their way to Bali, where they lived in the village of Tihingan for most of a year and investigated kinship, calendars,

laws, states, villages, and cockfights. Returning from Indonesia, they spent 1958 at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, followed by a year at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1960, they moved to the University of Chicago, where Geertz directed another multidisciplinary center, the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations. Soon thereafter, Geertz began his third major fieldwork project, this time in an ancient walled town in the Moroccan Middle Atlas Mountains, studying bazaars, mosques, olive growing, and oral poetry. In 1970, Geertz was invited to found a new School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he remained for the rest of his career, seeking (as he later wrote) to advance a conception of research centered on the analysis of the significance of social actions for those who carry them out and the beliefs and institutions that lend significance to those actions.

Geertz's First Ethnographies

Between 1960 and 1966, Geertz published five monographs based on his Indonesian fieldwork: *The Religion of Java*, *Agricultural Involution*, *Peddlers and Princes*, *The Social History of an Indonesian Town*, and *Person, Time and Conduct in Bali*. The most widely cited of these books was *Agricultural Involution*, a study of social change in rural Java that caught the interest of American social scientists and quickly became an indispensable text for courses on modernization and development. As Geertz later recalled, he danced for rain and got a flood.

Geertz borrowed the term *involution* from the American anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser to describe a peasant society in which endless small-scale innovations in agriculture failed to trigger economic growth. Dutch colonial policies had produced “shared poverty,” in which the economic pie was divided into ever smaller fragments. Involution occurred as a result of incremental changes to labor and land tenure arrangements, and virtuosity in rice cultivation techniques using human and animal labor. These productive arrangements were mirrored in social and religious systems, *pace* Max Weber. Intensified cultivation of rice paddies was matched by a similar involution in rural family life, social stratification, political organization, and even religious practice: the “folk culture” value system in terms of which shared poverty was normatively regulated and ethically justified.

[p. 305 ↓] Geertz's thesis was exhaustively analyzed and critiqued; in his review of *Economic Change in Southeast Asia, c. 1830–1980*, Colin Brown described it as a brilliant hypothesis brought down by available evidence. Geertz was further criticized by Wim F. Wertheim for a “sociological blindness” that paralleled the blind spots of colonial and postcolonial elites, whose vision of the harmonious and peaceful village community, characterized by solidarity and mutual aid, was derived from and promoted by the village elite themselves. Another Dutch historian, Ernst Utrecht, similarly argued that Geertz had turned a blind eye to class distinctions and class struggle. In 1965, Geertz published *The Social History of an Indonesian Town*, in which he argued that one of Java's greatest needs was for a virile yeomanry. But 1965 was the year of the Indonesian massacres, an anticommunist coup in which hundreds of thousands of people died, mostly in rural Java and Bali. The killings were especially savage in east Java, where Geertz had done his fieldwork. Although the army organized the first death squads, most of the villagers died at the hands of their neighbors, and the consensus of subsequent research on the causes of violence emphasized tensions in rural society stemming from class and religion.

Geertz's first four ethnographies focused on rural Java and were not specifically aimed at anthropologists but rather at the wider social science community interested in modernization and development. If Parsons and Weber proved to be imperfect guides to counterrevolutionary Java, arguably more successful, if less well-known, are Geertz's first publications about Bali, notably *Person, Time and Conduct* and a 1959 article, “Form and Variation in Balinese Village Structure.” In these works, Geertz set aside both the methods and the questions of Parsonian development theory in favor of an open-ended phenomenology of everyday life in Bali. To explain this departure from Parsonian orthodoxy, he argued that while conventional sociological analysis can ferret out the functional implications for a society of a particular system of “person-categories,” and at times even predict how such a system might change under certain social processes, the success of the analysis depends on whether the social system—the categories, their meanings, and their logical relationships—can be taken as already known. This approach revived some of the themes Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson had developed in their studies of Bali in the 1930s, which explored the interplay of culture and personality. But where Mead and Bateson had focused on child rearing, dreams, and visual art, Geertz was interested in the social world.

Bali, like Java, had been extensively studied by several generations of Dutch colonial ethnographers, for whom scholarly publications in ethnology were the key to professional advancement in the colonial civil service. In particular, the intricacies of *adat*—local custom and law—were considered to be vital to the mission of the colonial government, and civil servants competed to produce lucid descriptions of local variation in *adat*. Geertz wondered how the pieces might fit together. The Balinese make extensive use of both a lunisolar and a permutational calendar, which in combination depict time as unfolding in intricate patterns of embedded cycles. Geertz explored the ways in which this “wheels within wheels” view of time shapes Balinese concepts of the self as reflected in the progression of personal names encoded by generational kinship terminology and teknonymy. Later on, he extended this analysis to encompass interlocking cycles in the organization of irrigation. Here, Parsons was nudged aside in favor of the phenomenological perspective of Alfred Schutz—in particular Schutz's concept of the “lifeworld,” which relates concepts of the self to the social universe. The social system was not *sui generis* (as in the Parsonian scheme) but rather built up from more fundamental ideas, like time. Geertz concluded that the variation in Balinese village structure observed by colonial scholars was not accidental but intrinsically meaningful.

The Interpretation of Cultures

In 1973, Geertz published what was to become his most influential book, a compendium of essays titled *The Interpretation of Cultures*. In one of them, “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind,” originally published in 1962, he endorsed Kroeber and Kluckhohn's view that the development of culture profoundly affected the evolution of the brain. Rather oddly, he cited Parsons in a footnote to support the idea that culture should be defined as a learned pattern of the meaning of signals and signs. But Parsons was soon to drop out of Geertz's [p. 306 ↓] footnotes, because for Geertz, psychology and the social system (the other two legs of the Parsonian triad) could not be separated from culture. In the most frequently cited passage in the book, Geertz offered his own definition of culture, derived from Max Weber's view that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun. Culture, wrote Geertz, is equivalent to those webs. Consequently, cultural analysis is not an

experimental science in search of laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning. Two later chapters differentiated Geertz's views from those of Claude Lévi-Strauss and offered a model for a Geertzian style of cultural analysis.

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the question is how subjects create meaning, not (as Lévi-Strauss would have it) how meanings create subjects. Exactly how meaning is to be read from the ethnographer's up-close observations was explored in the final chapter, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (1972), the most cited of Geertz's essays. As the historian Natalie Zemon Davis recalls, Geertz's techniques for observing, understanding, and writing about Indonesia and Morocco burst like fireworks on the horizon of historians back in the 1970s. From an intensely significant and observable local event, like the Balinese cockfight, could be teased a world of meaning and an enduring style of life. "Deep Play" is a close reading of an ordinary cockfight witnessed by Geertz in 1958, 10 days after arriving in the Balinese village of Tihingan. The cocks are surrogates for the owner's personalities; the cockfight a simulation of a social matrix in which status and prestige are the driving forces. To read the meaning of events like cockfights as if they were plays, Geertz concluded, opens up the possibility of an analysis that attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them.

At Princeton, Geertz joined a seminar taught by the historian Robert Darnton. Like his Princeton colleague Zemon Davis, Darnton credits "Deep Play" as the inspiration for a new style of microhistorical analysis, exemplified by Darnton's analysis of the slaughter of cats by a printer's apprentice in Paris in 1730, *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984). In the era of incredulity toward metanarratives, when structuralists like Louis Althusser were questioning whether the modern concept of history is more than an artifact of the 18th-century struggle of the revolutionary bourgeoisie against feudalism, "Deep Play" showed what historians and ethnographers could decipher from primary texts and up-close observations.

Later Works

In 1980, Geertz published a book-length study of 19th-century Balinese kingdoms. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* offered the provocative thesis

that displays of status and prestige were as important to the princes of Bali as to the cockfighters (often the same individuals) and that Balinese rulers competed to produce grand spectacles in which power served pomp, rather than the reverse. This argument was met with bafflement; critics felt that Geertz had upended the relationship between ideology and the material foundation of the state, and his thesis was regarded as so provocative that reviewers seldom attended to the evidence Geertz offered in its support. Geertz had simply lost interest in sociological issues, in the view of Adam Kuper.

Yet as Geertz showed, Balinese rulers competed not for land but for manpower and expended their fortunes on spectacular rites of world renewal. The constantly changing borders of their tiny kingdoms could usually be traversed in less than a day, and they shared power with acrobat's pyramids of princelings, whose signatures were generally required to execute the business of the state, such as making a treaty or concluding a peace. Geertz mined the colonial archives to discover how it all worked: the intricate webs of *adat* relationships between lords and subjects, the organization of irrigation, taxation, trade, and warfare. Whatever intelligence Bali may have to offer us about the nature of politics, Geertz concluded, it can hardly be that big fish eat little fish or that the rags of virtue mask the engines of privilege.

After *Negara*, Geertz returned to essays, his favorite genre, and from time to time scooped up a collection of them to publish as books. In the 1988 book *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Geertz confronted the criticism that attention to ethnographic writing calls into question the whole project of ethnology, by celebrating the struggles of four anthropologists to “get texts exact and translations veridical ... getting them sufficiently on the page that someone can obtain some comprehension of what they might be” [p. 307 ↓] (pp. 145–146). *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (1995) gives us Geertz on Geertz. A complete bibliography through 1999 was published by Fred Inglis as an appendix to his monograph *Clifford Geertz: Culture, Custom and Ethics*. In his last book *Available Light*, Geertz offers reflections on philosophical topics. If all we wanted was home truths, he tells us, we should have stayed at home.

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See also

- [Althusser, Louis](#)
- [Goldenweiser, Alexander A.](#)
- [Kluckhohn, Clyde](#)
- [Kroeber, Alfred L.](#)
- [Lyotard, Jean-François](#)
- [Parsons, Talcott](#)
- [Weber, Max](#)

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