

Reflections on Salient Features in Clifford Geertz's Interpretive Approach to Cultural Analysis

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The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. 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. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.

(Clifford Geertz 1973, p. 5)

In those few lines, Clifford Geertz has condensed the essence of his interpretive approach. He proposes to redefine the heart of anthropology as it was practiced until the 1970s, shaking the discipline at its ontological roots and questioning its epistemological adequacy in the purview of an 'enlargement of the universe of human discourse' (Geertz 1973, p. 14). '[C]ulture', he proposes, 'is not...something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a *context*, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is *thickly*—described' (p. 14, emphasis added).

In this article, I aim to elucidate these words and their radical impact on the discipline;¹ in order to do so, I will analyse the concepts of *culture* and *anthropology* as Geertz envisioned them and evaluate their potentials and weaknesses. After reflecting on the context

within which Geertz's interpretive anthropology developed, I provide my own considerations on the interpretive paradigm; this will be followed by an assessment of critiques to the approach raised by Paul Shankman (with particular reference to his paper 'The thick and the thin: On the interpretive theoretical program of Clifford Geertz', 1984) and Michael Martin (with particular reference to his paper 'Geertz and the interpretive approach in anthropology', 1993).

The new place of anthropology: A bold move or mere continuity?

Geertz makes it his mission to free anthropology from a longstanding quarrel between the *Geisteswissenschaften* (humanities) and the *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences). For many decades, both approaches to knowledge have been contending the rights to set the boundaries of the path anthropology should take. On the one hand, the humanist approach opted for an idiographic and descriptive method, which looks at 'objects...not as instances of universal laws but as singular events' (Bruno Bettelheim as cited in Shankman 1984, p. 264); as such, this approach cannot form a general theory nor can it be predicted. On the other hand, the positivistic-pragmatic standpoint of natural sciences is nomothetic and emphasises verification and predictability. Bradd Shore

¹ Even though Geertz's influence was most felt within anthropology, the impact of the Interpretive Approach extends well beyond the discipline,

reaching as far out as agricultural studies, public relations and environmental studies, amongst others (William Sewell Jr. 1997, p. 51).



(1988) neatly summarises this dichotomy: ‘...a humanist seeks to demonstrate underlying complexities and variability in what had seemed uniform, whereas a scientist would seek to demonstrate uniformities in what had appeared diverse’ (p. 21).

Since its beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, anthropology struggled to affirm its position within the realm of the natural sciences, which at that time were increasingly gaining prestige. At first, the discipline followed the footsteps of Darwinian evolutionism, whereby societies were often examined in view of their ranking on a universalised and idealised scale of progression; successively, prominent anthropologists of the early twentieth century proposed rather forced analogies with the natural world, comparing societies to living organisms. In view of these approaches, the preferred and allegedly appropriate methodology was to adopt positivistic norms and proceed through strict inter-cultural juxtapositions. Yet, the growing number of ethnographies that became available during that period made it evident that humans could neither be easily encapsulated in a deterministic evolutionary process, nor could they be put into the background of mechanistic reified societies; similarly, comparisons between societies increasingly appeared inept in rendering the complexity of differing cognitive systems. Moreover, the descriptive parsimony and the separation between ‘subject’ (the researcher) and ‘object’ (informants) advocated by the positivistic outlook were clearly inappropriate for the study of human behaviour. Despite these evidences, however, on the one side anthropologists continued in their efforts to ‘bend’ the discipline in such a manner that it would fit a scientific model (as was the case with cognitive anthropology, which ended up applying its componential analysis to very few spheres of human behavior) and, on the other side, the scientific framework would ‘concede’

methods, such as controlled investigation (as, alas, one could not subject humans to controlled experiments), in order to accommodate the ambiguities inherent in anthropology.

With many scholars struggling to overcome anthropology’s fundamental ‘limits’ as a discipline that is hardly quantifiable and cannot, despite all efforts, overcome the blurring between object and subject that lies at its core, it was just a matter of time before someone would reverse the situation and make what others saw as impeding factors into inspiring qualities and virtues. This person was Clifford Geertz. Geertz is convinced that anthropology can never succumb to the realm of hard sciences: he fully embraces the subjective, humanistic track, and views reality as a text that is liable to personal interpretations and originates from forms of agency exercised at the microscopic level, rather than as a complex set of rigid, abstract theories, mistakenly thought capable of describing human behavior on the macro-level.

By facing the underlying malaise of anthropology and spelling out the resolution to this ambiguity so boldly, Geertz takes it upon himself to champion a new paradigm, thus becoming also the target of numerous criticisms. Nevertheless, as Geertz also points out, he builds his approach upon a long tradition, which dates back at least to Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber, if not to the German idealist philosophers (Shankman 1984, p. 264). One can glimpse at the seeds of the tension lingering at the heart of anthropology already in the famous quote ‘[a]nthropology is the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of humanities’ attributed to Kroeber, and later in Edward Evans-Pritchard’s inclination to view anthropology as part of the humanities. From Evans-Pritchard’s efforts to understand a foreign culture and translate it into terms suitable to explain it to one’s own culture (Thomas Beidelman 1971), to Geertz’s

‘explicating explications’ (Geertz 1973, p. 9) runs a subtle, continuous thread.

From this perspective, it is possible to view the paradigm shift advocated by Geertz as taking place on a continuum that moves from a positivistic and pragmatic rationale towards an increasingly descriptive, subjective and creative paradigm, which ultimately flows into the emphasis on relativity and subjectivity so central to postmodernism.²

It can seem confusing that Geertz, after declaring his commitment to the interpretive paradigm and to a semiotic agenda of thick descriptions, insists on calling his cultural analysis a ‘science’, even if a ‘strange’ one (Geertz 1973, p. 29). In order to appreciate Geertz’s vocabulary, we must keep in mind that the term ‘science’ can be traced back to *scientia*, a word indicating any form of human knowledge. Failing to do so can lead to conclusions that remain outside the purview of Geertz’ main suggestions.³

Interpretive culture: Questioning the viability of public webs, microscopic intentions and dense constructions

The first part of the opening quote: ‘The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. 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...’, gives an idea of the way in which Geertz conceives culture: for him, it has a semiotic nature, and as such it is composed of symbols, which he takes as ‘vehicle[s] for...conception[s]’ or meanings (1973, p. 91). Cultural acts and social events are thus essentially symbols, and cultural patterns are ‘systems or complexes of symbols’ (ibid.). The nature of these cultural symbols is multilayered, as different actors and observers may interpret them differently, in the process of spinning their ‘webs of significance’ (p. 5). It is the task of the anthropologist to ‘grasp and then to render’ (p. 10) these layers of interpretations. Ethnography, Geertz admits, thus becomes a second or even third order of constructions and analyses (the ethnographer relying on his/her own interpretation of an informant’s interpretation of what s/he thinks s/he is doing).

² This development of course does not affect all areas of anthropology: it is one of multiple trends visible in the discipline, coexisting with other scholars’ quest for increasingly scientific methods—cross-cultural analysis and the Humans Relations Area Files (HRAF) project (see <http://hraf.yale.edu/>), Elizabeth Colson’s intensive study of small scale communities (1954), and the more mechanistic and deterministic approach of Marxist anthropologists, are just a few of those.

³ Some salient features of the criticisms raised against Geertz’s approach will be analysed in a later section of this paper. With regards to the misinterpretation of the term ‘science’, suffice it here to mention the example of Shankman (1984) who, despite being aware of the humanistic connotations of ‘science’ (*Geisteswissenschaften*), in his critique of Geertz’s interpretive approach seems oblivious to the term’s erstwhile meaning. He remains entangled within a

positivistic paradigm, as most of his objections concern the lack of scientific features such as objectivity, abstract theory and comparative methods—from which Geertz has instead actively and consciously taken leave. While criticisms such as these could be considered legitimate within the wider evaluation of the direction anthropology has taken, it seems inappropriate to blame Geertz for not adopting those very methods, on the refusal of which he has built his entire interpretive approach. As will be seen in more detail in the last sections of this paper, while Shankman’s concerns with operationalisation and abstraction mainly go back to the old scientific quest for the subject-object distinction (which is incompatible with the interpretive approach), Martin (1993), in his evaluation of the interpretive approach, proposes a slightly more constructive critique, which leaves scope for a development of Geertz’s paradigm *within* the purview of its very foundations.



Drawing from Gilbert Ryle's distinction between 'thick description'—which renders the full range of meaningful (explicit and implicit) structures of an entity—and 'thin description'—which merely deals with the phenomenological, explicit aspects of cultural expressions—, Geertz adopts thick description as the process through which to 'read' a densely textured reality that abounds in metaphors, implicit structures and incoherencies. It is only through thick description that one can do justice to the complexity of cultural actions and constructions, and reach their symbolic dimensions: what Geertz is looking for, is a dense description that uncovers and interprets the *meanings* embedded in social actions, rather than the discovery of *causes* and mechanical laws underlying social behaviors.

A salient aspect of Geertz's conception of culture is that it is *public*: reversing the cognitivists' standpoint that culture is within psychological structures of the mind, Geertz proposes a culture that is public, defining it as a composite of symbolic actions that obtain meaning once they are performed. He notices that to know, at the level of the individual's mind, how to wink does not necessarily translate into the cultural action of winking, and that knowing how to steal a sheep does not imply stealing a sheep—a conclusion to which a cognitivist approach, according to him, would lead (1973, p. 12). Nevertheless, based on the logic of Geertz's example, it is possible to argue that, just as the cognitivists' approach appears to be one-sided, also the interpretive approach could seem incomplete. For example, while it is true that to know how to cook German food does not mean that one *is* cooking German food, this *private* notion, nevertheless, is part of what defines one's cultural background. This pool of private cultural notions subsists also in the case one performs a more *public* act, such as *actually* preparing a dish—for example Italian pasta. While it is true that the public, shared performance also shapes

one's culture, in this case by enriching it with Italian elements, the German culture, even though neither performed nor reinforced through public sharing, remains present and meaningful to the subject. On a larger scale, it can be assumed that private, non-performed actions are as meaningful to a culture, as its public, acted and shared elements.

It could be suggested that Geertz posited the necessity of a public act only at the origin of a person's formulation of meanings, and that these meanings could, after the initial shared public performance, be perpetuated by the individual independently of their re-enactment (the cognitivists, on the other hand, hypothesised the existence of cognitive structures that are *a priori* of any enactment). Nevertheless, in declaring that '[m]an depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability' (Geertz 1973, p. 99), Geertz seems to imply a level of interdependence between symbol and action so strong that there is little scope for the continuity of symbolic meanings without their periodic re-enactment, in a manner similar to the Durkheimian suggestion that social values and society itself can be maintained only through repeated collective activities (Fadwa El Guindi 1977, pp. 10-11). In fact, Geertz postulates that culture is an absolute prerequisite for the survival of the human species given that, differently from other animals, humans lack the intrinsic information necessary to guide their actions (1973, p. 80).

The notion of culture as a condition for human survival, when taken in conjunction with the concept of double- or even triple-layered interpretations and the guessing at meanings to which humans are thus bound—not only as external anthropologists but also as actors belonging to a same culture given that it is difficult to prove a common understanding of shared symbols—sets humans in a remarkably precarious existential status. One may wonder,

then, what are the epistemological and ontological implications of the interpretive approach for the viability of humanity itself if, with Geertz, one embraces the idea that ‘the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse’ (Geertz 1973, p. 14) yet, at the same time, having declared humanity’s absolute dependence on culture, one also deconstructs this very culture and replaces its certainties with interpretations and ‘fictions’ (p. 15). Will humans, as animals dependent on culture, be able to survive ‘suspended in webs of significance’ (Geertz 1973, p. 5) that are continuously subjected to being spun and undone? In a context where interpretations proliferate, will these webs grow and become asphyxiatingly dense, or unsustainably thin? Only Geertz’s re-dimensioning of the anthropological quest and its relegation to a ‘microscopic’ (1973, p. 21), highly contextualised level, can here provide some amount of relief. Nevertheless, whether interpretations at the microscopic level can be satisfying and exhaustive in an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, where a person’s meanings and symbols extend beyond local realities, still remains debatable.

Interpretive Anthropology: An Incomplete Program?

Having attempted a critical analysis of the interpretive concept of culture, I now proceed with an assessment of Geertz’s contribution to anthropological theory and ethnography. While there is obviously not an exclusive correlation, it is predominantly the second part of Geertz’s opening quote that interests us here: ‘...the analysis of [culture is] therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical’.

In this analysis, I will take as main discussion points the critiques raised by Shankman (1984) and Martin (1993). As noted above, the two critics can be broadly taken as representatives of those scholars who, on the one side, as Shankman, do not seem too comfortable with the blatant abandonment of objectivity and the implications of such a move and, on the other side, those scholars who, as Martin, despite sharing at least some reservations of similar kind, seem to be ready to recognise culture-as-text as one of the approaches through which society can be analysed.

Since Shankman’s salient criticisms (lack of objectivity, intersubjectivity and operationalisation, absence of grand theories and mechanical laws) are directed at aspects that are inherent in Geertz’s deliberate refusal of a positivistic framework—complemented by a praise of subjectivity, microscopic studies and dense descriptions—, it results that what are positive attributes for one scholar, are necessarily unfavourable attributes for the other. Where one scholar misses verification and predictability, the other appreciates freedom and thick, creative interpretations; where one scholar finds comfort in the permanence of laws, the other feels suffocation and the strain of conceptual manipulation. It seems that throughout Shankman’s article, and in several of the responses to it, lingers an uneasiness to let go, even just for a moment and hypothetically, of the stronghold represented by the scientific paradigm; consequently, many of the criticisms coming from this school of thought remain essentially at an unproductive distance from the interpretive paradigm. They are either not applicable or suggest solutions that lie *outside* the interpretive paradigm. This resistance appears somewhat mitigated in Martin’s view, as he is ready to evaluate the interpretive approach *within* and *despite* its limits.



Where Geertz states that ‘a good interpretation of anything...takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation’ (1973, p. 18), and that ‘...interpretive approaches...escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not...’ (p. 24), both, Shankman and Martin lament the absence of criteria for assessment of what is a good or a bad interpretation. While this praise of an apparently subjective and impenetrable capacity to discern between truth and untruth can generate some amount of perplexity, Geertz seems to be resorting to common sense, considered a quality inherent to humans, as a means for social and moral guidance. He seems to ask, if this common sense is applicable to so many spheres in our lives, why can it not serve the cause of anthropology? The majority of people would need to admit to several personal anecdotes wherein some things make inherently and seemingly inexplicably more sense than others, and to the fact that their understandings of right and wrong are nuanced and positioned along a spectrum, rather than conflated at its extremes. It is this complexity of the human mind, and of humanity in general, that Geertz seeks to capture through his thick descriptions, and which cannot be easily rendered in a nomothetic framework.

When everything starts to make sense in the light of a specific interpretation, when inadvertently a reality is filtered through the lens of that specific framework, then, Geertz suggests, it is obvious that one has come across a correct interpretation. If guidance by common sense is a diffused human phenomenon, then it is eligible to be at least one of the possible criteria for judgment, or one of the stages of analysis. Nonetheless, the range of common senses is contextual, and one may not be willing to accept the subjective and unverifiable conclusions of another interpreter’s common sense. Validation, thus, remains a problematically unresolved issue. Martin

attempts to amend this limitation by suggesting the existence of general statements based upon inductive reasoning and the assessment of rivaling hypotheses through criteria of logic.

With regards to the weakness of theorisation, Shankman asks: ‘[i]f there is no generalization across cases, then how does Geertzian theory proceed in terms of cumulative knowledge?’ (1984, p. 263). He replies to his rhetorical question by stating that ‘...interpretive theory does not yield much in the way of theoretical formulations’. However, I would suggest that it is erroneous to believe that Geertzian formulations do not yield much; they only yield at another level, namely at the microscopic one: ‘...the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them’ (Geertz 1973, p. 26). Also Martin laments that the scope of culture-as-text is too narrow; however, where Shankman seems to imply that Geertz asks the wrong questions, Martin suggests that Geertz only asks too few questions: ‘[a] reader of a text might well ask not only what the text means but also why the text was produced in the first place, why it takes this form rather than that...’ (Martin 1993, p. 275).

Another aspect considered problematic by Geertz’s critics is the almost complete absence of comparative methodologies within the interpretive approach. However, it has to be remembered that interpretive anthropology pursues thick and dense descriptions at a microscopic level and, as such, aims to satisfy all its questions within that very context, thus circumventing the necessity of comparisons. Also, one could imagine that a comparative methodology within the interpretive framework would probably lead to an unstable ground, rather than promote deep and significant knowledge. Given that each contextual description is the construct of multiple interpretations, if comparisons were to be

carried out, the number of interpretations would instantly multiply; consequently, also the difficulties inherent in handling several layers of transmitted meanings would multiply. Finally, it has to be noticed that there are no directives with regard to the compatibility of two (or more) sets of webs of significance juxtaposed in comparison: the risk is the generation of an entanglement of multiple nets, rather than a coherent and effective perspective.

One of the main issues that Martin exposes with respect to the interpretive framework is the lack of due credit to causality. For him, Geertz's exclusive commitment to the search of meanings rather than of causes does not seem to exhaust the scope of thick descriptions; since, according to Martin, causality is implicit in Geertz's interpretations of cultural performances such as the Balinese cockfight, it demands to be acknowledged and exhaustively elaborated.

Conclusion

What emerges from this discussion is that interpretive anthropology, through its bold connotation as an idiographic 'strange science', inevitably attracts a number of severe criticisms. Due to the interpretive paradigm's descriptive and subjective nature, objections from a positivistic angle might not address much beyond the subjectivity/objectivity clash, upon which rest also related issues such as lack of operationalisation, the impossibility of verification and the neglect of generalisations.

Despite criticisms, the interpretive paradigm offers invaluable contributions to the anthropological debate, starting from its appeal to denser and thicker descriptions capable of reflecting humanity's complexities and details. It is true that from a positivistic perspective these contributions come at a considerable cost; yet, rather than discarding them at once along with the entire interpretive paradigm, it may be useful to formulate critiques from ideological

standpoints that are not completely averse to idiographic and humanistic foundations, and can instead elaborate a richer and more exhaustive interpretive approach.

As I see it, at the cost of distorting Geertz's original conception (and, as such, probably moving away from the interpretive framework, as this is so inherently linked to its founder), an increasingly exhaustive picture and understanding of humanity can arise from descriptive methods that do not repudiate cautious abstractions, microscopic accounts that are not cut off from their wider connections, and symbols that are the products of ongoing negotiations between private as well as public meanings. Questioning Geertz's claim about the superiority of the interpretive approach, I take Martin's stand that '...it is not the whole story, and that non-interpretive questions can and should be asked' (1993, p. 275). If interpretive anthropology fails to incorporate at least some of the above points, it may outlive itself and be destined to an end similar to that of those *grande idées* that have, until the advent of the Geertzian approach, unsatisfactorily modeled the 'concept of culture around which the whole discipline of anthropology arose' (Geertz 1973, p. 4).



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