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Clifford Geertz: A Memory

PETER VAN DER VEER

Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) was one of the most influential anthropologists of his generation. His influence extended far beyond anthropological circles, mainly into the broad field of the humanities. I met him for the first time when he came to the Netherlands in May 1994 for the Erasmus Ascension Conference on The Limits of Pluralism: Neo-absolutisms and Relativism, a conference seemingly set up to show the hidden connections between the weakening of the Enlightened West by postmodernism and relativism and the growth of anti-Western obscurantist fundamentalism. For such a purpose it was clearly appropriate to invite the British anthropologist Ernest Gellner, who gave the opening keynote lecture in the Aula of the University of Amsterdam. Afterwards, the invitees left for Oosterbeek where a closed symposium was held, in which Geertz was one of the speakers. Gellner had with his usual polemical flourish stated his case for objective truth and universal morality against the relativists, and Geertz rose to the occasion with a brilliant dissection of Gellner's arguments. I cannot keep myself from quoting the beginning of Geertz's lecture, because it shows its spirit:

"I find it peculiarly difficult to respond to Ernest Gellner's most recent animadversions upon the various developments in social theory that he calls, insofar I can see amidst the splutter of it all, in a wholly indiscriminate and arbitrary way, "postmodernist," not because they are telling, but because they are cast in such an arrogant, corrosive, and self-congratulatory tone: the last honest man resisting fools, sophists, nihilists, aesthetes, Middle Americans, snake-oil salesmen, and careerists. Polemics is a more delicate art than the inflamed and righteous sometimes take it to be, and when faced, as we are in Professor Gellner's *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, with such a degraded form of it, the temptation, to which I have perhaps yielded more than I should have done, to respond in kind, and thus reproduce what one most deeply objects to—mere invective paraded as argument—is very strong."

Geertz's lecture could hardly be followed by the uninitiated, because his delivery was characteristically bad, mumbled into his beard and without connecting to his listeners. It was a response to a book by Gellner (mentioned above) in which he had attacked Islamic Fundamentalism as well as Postmodernism. The latter was exemplified by

the group of mostly young American anthropologists that had produced the volume *Writing Culture* in 1986, in which, following Stephen Greenblatt and Hayden White, attention was given to the narrative structure of ethnographies, to the problem of producing coherence without creating "master-narratives," to power and the authority of texts. Gellner had identified Clifford Geertz as the Godfather behind this "postmodernist" movement, as evidenced in Geertz's famous "Anti-Anti Relativism" lecture for the American Anthropological Association Meetings of 1984. Although Geertz in private conversations always emphasized that academics got so worked up about things because usually for them there was so little at stake, in his response to Gellner he really seemed to think that something was at stake. Certainly there were academic issues involved. Ernest Gellner had made his reputation in Anthropology on the basis of his *Saints of the Atlas*, a study of Sufi

On 30 October 2006, Clifford Geertz died at the age of 80. Known among social scientists primarily for his coining of the term "thick description" and his related understanding of culture as "webs of significance," Geertz also contributed significantly to the study of Islam. In this contribution, Peter van der Veer draws upon personal experiences to contextualize the legacy of this eminent anthropologist.

saints in Morocco, a typical example of British functionalism, and Geertz had led a team of researchers also in Morocco, some of whom had published in *Writing Culture*. Moreover, there was a direct attack on Gellner in *Writing Culture* by Talal Asad who had demolished Gellner's concept of language and translation. But, beyond academic issues, there was Geertz's defence of a

more fragmented, almost hesitant interpretive intellectual style in a political context, that is perhaps best exemplified by Bernard Lewis's writing of the causes of "Muslim Rage" and by Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Geertz was inclined towards an interest in cultural difference, in the details of how people construct their worldview, in local knowledge without immediately judging differences in terms of superiority or inferiority. His voice did have an audience in the circles of the *New York Review of Books* and among fellow academics such as the historian Robert Darnton and the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt, but his influence on political currents remained marginal as compared to that of Huntington and Lewis.

Geertz went to Antioch College after he served in the Second World War through the G.I. Bill that made free college education available for former soldiers. He then studied Anthropology at Harvard with Clyde Kluckhohn in an intellectual setting dominated by Talcott Parsons. It was also at Harvard that he struck up a lifelong friendship with the sociologist Robert Bellah. Geertz went to do fieldwork in Indonesia and produced books like *The Religion of Java*, *Peddlers and Princes*, and *Agrarian Involution*, the most-cited books on Indonesia for many years. He thus belongs to the generation that developed the study of Indonesia after the Dutch had left as colonial rulers and Dutch social scientists returned to their narrow focus on Little Holland. With his first wife Hildred he worked on Bali which was the home turf of Dutch philologists like Hooykaas, with whom he had a furious polemic that boiled down to the difference between textual knowledge and local knowledge. Later Geertz went to Morocco and wrote a little book comparing Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, *Islam Observed*. Islam is the main religion of Java and of Morocco and Geertz's interpretations of Islam have been quite influential in the anthropological study of Islam.

Broadly speaking, one can say that Geertz was a typical product of American anthropology, deeply influenced by the German philosophical thought about Culture that was brought to the USA by Franz Boas, inherent in the sociology of Max Weber, and so important for Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils and later generations of American social scientists. Obviously, he modernized this approach by bringing the term "symbol" into play, but he did not have much interest in abstract arguments about semiotics or symbology. His strength was rather in broad comparative analysis that tried to formulate an interpretive approach to politics and culture. At the University of Chicago he was for a decade in the 1960s a member of the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations that tried to understand the cultural basis of the new nation-states in a world that had been decolonized by American power. Nevertheless, Geertz is not known for his analysis of the nature of imperial power, of either the Dutch or of the Americans. He did have an interesting intervention in the study of state power in *Negara*, but his analysis of the pre-colonial Balinese state as a theatre-state has been criticized precisely for its emphasis on power as culture which is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness.

As an undergraduate, Geertz was trained as a "man of letters" in literature and philosophy, and despite his tendency to come up with "the worldview of the santri" or "the system of symbols," he is best known for his vivid, almost literary descriptions of the Balinese cockfight or the

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Thoughts & Perceptions

Javanese Slametan and for his philosophical probing in the nature of cultural difference. He had a great love for ethnography as a genre, but like most anthropologists he could not go on doing one fieldwork after the other and began writing more general essays on religion, culture, rituals, and the like.

In 1970 Geertz was appointed Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and became the founder of its School of Social Science. His intellectual perspective can be readily found when one looks at later appointments at that school, the economist Albert Hirschman, the political philosopher Michael Walzer, and the feminist historian Joan Scott, though he never managed to appoint the sociologist Robert Bellah or, facing strong opposition from the scientists dominating the Institute, the student of science, Bruno Latour. Every year Geertz and his colleagues had to select a new contingent of fellows to come to the School of Social Science at the Institute, and this gave Geertz a unique opportunity to stay abreast of new developments in the social sciences and, thus, to influence new generations. As I mentioned, I met Geertz at the Erasmus Ascension Symposium in 1994, where I was also one of the speakers, and he invited me to come the next year to the Institute. During that year I came to know him as a friendly man who seemed to be shy or, at least, devoid of great social skills. He was deeply private, and as a good anthropologist preferred to observe rather than participate. There was a striking difference between the eloquence of his writing and the reticence of his speaking. It was not that he did not have strong views or lacked confidence in them—on the contrary—but he had a way of delivering them as if he was holding an internal dialogue. His great essayistic skills allowed him to influence a wide variety of intellectuals by showing the possibilities of anthropological interpretation for their subjects. His humanistic view of anthropology, and of human affairs in general, will be remembered with respect for a long time to come.

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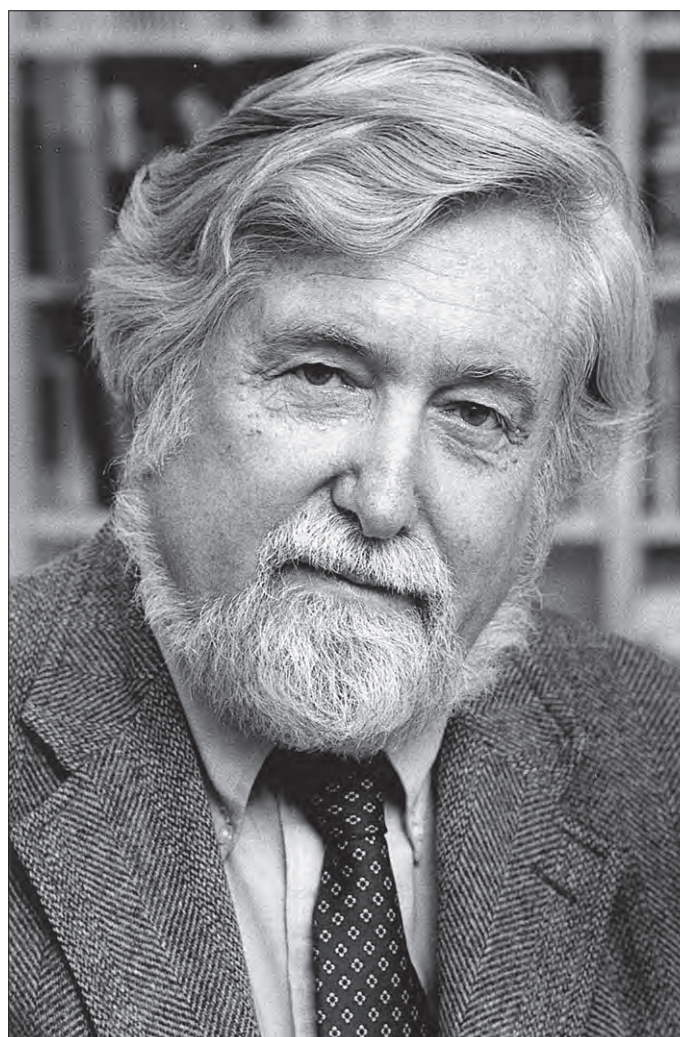


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