Symposium: *The Interpretation of Cultures* at Fifty – *peer-reviewed*
Edited by Matteo Bortolini and Andrea Cossu
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/17903

Sociologica. V.18 N.1 (2024)
ISSN 1971-8853
https://sociologica.unibo.it/

On Rereading Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* 50 Years after the Fact

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Submitted: August 31, 2023 – Revised version: February 21, 2024
Accepted: May 6, 2024 – Published: June 20, 2024

Abstract

The essay offers two readings of Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*, one from the author's perspective in the 1970s and a later one from her thinking in the present. The present thinking, influenced by post-structuralism, questions the sharp distinction between politics and scholarship that Geertz offers in this work.

Keywords: culture; hermeneutics; ideology; power; difference.

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My copy of *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973; *TIC*) is the one my (now ex-) husband, [Donald Scott] bought for us when it first came out in 1973. It has markings in the margins in his handwriting and mine, their similarities and differences indicative of the various uses to which we—both of us historians—put our readings. It is, in effect, an historical artifact, reminding me of the impact of that first reading and allowing me to reflect on my own evolution as a scholar interested in theorizing power and difference as it influenced my second reading of the text.

1 Then

Those first readings took place in a period of sustained disciplinary disruption. Social history had already posed a challenge to political history; cultural history came into being in its wake. Interdisciplinarity enabled both developments—sociology for social history, anthropology for cultural history. Each move was associated primarily with a single influential scholar: the sociologist, Charles Tilly, for social history; Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist, for cultural history. Of course, Geertz was not only writing for anthropologists; his critique extended to all of social science, as it was dominated in those years by Parsonian functionalism. Nor was Tilly writing only for sociologists; his appeal to historians rested on his insistence that empirical cases underlie generalizations about social structure, political action, and change. In both instances, their work opened the possibility for historians to think more analytically about their work.

Still, our borrowings required scrutiny. Early in his reading of *TIC*, Don poses a question in the margin of the book that echoed my own and those of our historian colleagues who were, like us, devouring what Geertz (1973) called his "treatise in cultural theory" (p. viii). Geertz writes: "The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods [...]); they study *in* villages." (p. 22, italics in original). Don's note asks "does historian differ?". Our discussions—provoked by this book—explored the differences between working in the "field" and in an "archive." Did that matter for the study of culture in the ways in which Geertz was proposing it be done? It didn't seem to, as we absorbed his careful articulations about the need to attend to symbolic systems, the conceptual apparatus of meaning-making. Important for the articulation of cultural history was Geertz's critique of sociology's—and social science's more generally—"static functionalism," which sought to make functionalism "capable of dealing more effectively with 'historical materials' " by distinguishing "analytically between the cultural and social aspects of human life, to treat them as independently variable yet mutually interdependent factors" (p. 144). He defined culture as "the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action" and, furthermore, social structure as "the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations" (p. 145). It is in the "discontinuities" between culture and social structure that, according to Geertz, "we shall find some of the primary driving forces in change" (p. 144).

For Don, whose field was U.S. intellectual and social history, and who was embarked on a study of the creation of democratic publics in the ante-bellum United States, "Religion as a Cultural System" was probably the most important essay in the book. In a penciled note, he reminds himself to "use this definition of ritual for democratic lyceum." Ritual, Geertz wrote in the text Don marked, was "consecrated behavior." "In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world [...]" (p. 112). Natalie Zemon Davis, whose work exemplifies some of the best of

the cultural approach in history, also cites "Religion as a Cultural System" as her favorite essay. According to Davis (2008):

> Especially helpful to historians, who might be struggling with the relationship between material structure and superstructure or between economy and ideology or society and culture or other such dualities, Geertz portrayed religion with a double image. Religion is both a symbolic model *of* reality, say of social hierarchy, and a model *for* reality, shaping the way hierarchies are created. Whenever I gave a graduate seminar on Religion and Society in Sixteenth-Century France, I had students read "Religion as a Cultural System" the first week (p. 189).

My favorite chapters were the first and last, whose titles became a shorthand for the Geertzian corpus, "Thick Description" and "Deep Play." Thick description provided a semiotic theory of reading social action in which "small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to" (p. 23). Social action was not motivated by material interest alone or even primarily; if one read interpretively, it made manifest a whole set of rules and norms that constituted "culture." Against the Anglo-American functionalists, Geertz invoked the German sociologist Max Weber, defining culture as "a web of significance the analysis of which is not in search of law but interpretive in search of meaning" (p. 5). And it was as meaning-makers—creators of symbolic systems—that humans needed to be studied. Teasing out meaning in social action—whether, as in my fields of labor and then women's history, it inhered in strikes, political movements, or feminist campaigns—meant delving deeply into language, not only as words but also, more generally, as forms of signification. "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (p. 10). Here the analogy openly calls for historians' consideration, offering a way into thinking *beyond* the textual evidence contained in the archive to the accounts of behavior those texts may contain and to the meaning-making not only of the actors being described but also of those of their contemporaries describing it as well.

"Deep Play" offered a concrete example of Geertz's theoretical approach: how to *do* "thick description." And, given my interest in class struggle and political conflict (my first book, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux* was published in 1974), his analysis of the cockfight as "a simulation of the social matrix" (p. 436) and "a dramatization of status concerns" (p. 437) made exciting reading (an excitement, I should add, that recurred in my second reading some fifty years later). After careful dissection (in 16 separate bullet points) of the operations of the cockfight to document his analysis, Geertz nails it by pointing out that the actors themselves agree with his interpretation. Thick description is a hermeneutic practice; it assumes there is a meaning to be got at, independent of the person doing the interpreting. "Societies, like lives," he maintains, "contain their own interpretation. One has only to learn how to gain access to them" (p. 453).

> Finally, the Balinese peasants themselves are quite aware of all this and, at least to an ethnographer, do state most of it in approximately the same terms as I have. Fighting cocks, almost every Balinese I have ever discussed the subject with has said is like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kingroup rivalries and hostilities, but in "play" form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup aggressions

> (something which [...] almost never happens in the normal course of ordinary life), but not quite, because, after all, it is "only a cockfight" (p. 440).

Don and I both had been encouraged to do literary readings of historical texts in graduate school, particularly in an intellectual history course taught by the US historian William R. Taylor. Geertz's "culture", however, provided a more systematic theorizing of the ways in which culture and society could (and, arguably, should) be understood: culture not as a *reflection* of social organization and social relationships, but as *constitutive* of them. "Culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described" (p. 14). As such, cultures were defined by their differences; they consisted of different conceptual systems whose meaning the observer needed to unpack. "The essential task of theory building," Geertz wrote, "[...] is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalize across cases, but to generalize within them" (p. 26).

I doubt I ever fully absorbed the import of this injunction *not* to generalize across cases; in fact, much of my work has been driven by the pursuit of generalization. Still, "culture" mattered to me after reading Geertz, if only as a way of supplementing a materialist analysis. My first book (based on my 1969 dissertation), profoundly influenced by Tilly, examined the ways in which proletarianization shaped the political consciousness of French artisanal glass bottle blowers. My aim, as in so many community studies of its kind in those years, was to offer—against modernization theory—a critique of the impact of industrialization and a more positive understanding of worker resistance to it. In one chapter, I presented a close reading of how artisanal culture formed the basis for the articulation of socialist political identity, but I cannot say it amounted to "thick description." "Culture" offered a way of understanding the processes I wanted to examine, but it was not the only, or indeed the primary, method of my analysis. I was a disciple neither of Tilly nor of Geertz, even as each influenced how I thought and wrote about history. I also think I was less attentive to theoretical issues then than I am now; the political import of the work was what motivated me, first as a labor historian inspired by E.P. Thompson's magisterial critique of capitalist industrialization, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and then as a feminist historian seeking to explain how "gender" could account for the invisibility of women in traditional histories. It was my political outlook (an overriding concern with inequality, a desire to diagnose the ills of society and to expose the operations of difference and power) that inspired my scholarly questions—there was no separating the two—but neither was my research driven by a desire to prove the truth of some partisan political "line." Critique was my chosen approach because it allowed my politics to formulate research questions *without* presuming the answers. Those I sought following disciplinary protocols and models of interdisciplinary analyses.

2 Now

So committed was I to this kind of critical work that I did not pay much attention to Cliff's seemingly apolitical stance, although (as I will suggest below) his stance was not without ambiguity. I took from *TIC* what I needed (notably the insistence on the conceptual work of meaning-making and on the operations of symbolic systems) without full awareness of what drove him, beyond a desire to transform his discipline. But now, as I read him for a second time, at a much later stage of my thinking, I am struck by his firm endorsement of Weber's sharp distinction between science [*Wissenschaft*] and politics [*Politik*]. It is most pronounced

in "Ideology as a Cultural System", his call (first published in 1964) for social scientists not to evaluate ideologies, but to study their operations "scientifically."

> Science names the structure of situations in such a way that the attitude contained toward them is one of disinterestedness. Its style is restrained, spare, resolutely analytic: by shunning the semantic devices that most effectively formulate moral sentiment, it seeks to maximize intellectual clarity (pp. 230–231).

Ideology (which, in this case, is a synonym for politics), in contrast, signifies "commitment:"

> Its style is ornate, vivid, deliberately suggestive: by objectifying moral sentiment through the same devices that science shuns it seeks to motivate action (p. 231).

He concludes the following:

> An ideologist is no more a poor social scientist than a social scientist is a poor ideologist. The two are—or at least they ought to be—in quite different lines of work, lines so different that little is gained and much obscured by measuring the activities of the one against the aims of the other (p. 231).

Then there is a footnote, however, that suggests his recognition of the limits of the contrast. Karl Marx and Edward Shils (a startling combination!), Geertz admits, offer examples of the "successful synchronization of scientific analysis and ideological argument;" but, he concludes, "most such attempts to mix genres are, however, distinctly less happy" (p. 231, *n* 56).

I read this footnote now, in the wake of my later engagement with poststructuralism, particularly the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as a sign of the difficulty of maintaining a strict Weberian position. There is inevitably, it seems to me, a "politics" (in the sense of a position taken, a commitment) in the practice of interpretive social science. Geertz at once recognizes and denies this. He compares his colleagues to "militant atheists" (p. 199) for their treatment of ideology as a "deviation" or (citing Talcott Parsons) "a *discrepancy* between what is believed and what can be [established as] scientifically correct" (p. 198, italics in original). Ideology is not just Nazis and Bolsheviks, Geertz points out, but it is (as the title of the essay indicates) "a cultural system" establishing the meaning of social realities, not obscuring or deforming them. But if ideology functions as a cultural system, are those who hold a particular ideology immune from its constructions of reality? Can scientific investigation be done entirely apart from the ideology (the conceptual meaning system, the discourse, etc.) that constitutes the scientist's outlook? Why is science somehow immune from the theorizing applied to religion and ideology? Why is there not a chapter in this book called "Science as a Cultural System?"

These are the questions raised for me in my return to the text by the note Geertz appends to his reconceptualization of the problem of ideology. Seeking to spell out his relationship to the political views of those whose social science he is criticizing, he insists that his critique of the discipline is "technical and not political"—that is, he does not want to be read as excusing the excesses of authoritarianism or worse. Geertz wants it clear that he shares his colleagues' liberal humanist politics, even as he criticizes their methodology:

> As the danger of being misinterpreted here is serious, may I hope that my criticism will be credited as technical and not political if I note that my own general ideological (as I would frankly call it) position is largely the same as that of Aron, Shils,

> Parsons, and so forth; that I am in agreement with their plea for a civil, temperate, unheroic politics? Also it should be remarked that the demand for a non-evaluative concept of ideology is not a demand for the non-evaluation of ideologies, any more than a non-evaluative concept of religion implies religious relativism (p. 200, *n* 9).

If, however, the evaluation of ideologies is relegated to the political side of the Weberian opposition, *TIC* can be read—as I read it now—as having a politics of its own, albeit one less strident than those he is criticizing. Geertz's "culture" is, after all, a plea to recognize human differences against Enlightenment universalism, what he refers to as "the uniformitarian view of man" (p. 36). He writes that "humanity is as varied in its essence as in its expression" (p. 37). His notion of religion as a cultural system rejects "reductionist" analyses of religion (p. 119) and invidious (we may now say colonialist) distinctions between "great" and "folk or tribal religions," (p. 122) as well as the characterization of religious thought as "superstition" (p. 199). Against militant secular atheism, he asserts "the impossibility of a general assessment of the value of religion in either moral or functional terms" (p. 122), opting instead to "provid[e] moral philosophy with an empirical base and a conceptual framework" (p. 141). To the extent that moral philosophy transgresses the divide between science and politics, offering itself as a guide to behavior, it has important policy implications of the evaluative kind. The terms Geertz applies to his "general ideological position"—"civil, temperate, unheroic"—might also characterize the "disinterested," modest, non-judgmental science he advocates: "modest" because it eschews the arrogance of generalization and universal laws, seeking a conceptual system that can do without them. To be nonevaluative, science cannot be taken to be a "cultural system," but must somehow stand outside of culture. In this sense, *TIC* seems to me to be more about the potential usefulness for liberal politics of a seemingly disinterested social science than the stark opposition posited on pages 230–231 would have it. This is, to be sure, not the same as the partisan condemnation Geertz rejects in the work on ideology of Parsons, et al. Rather, it is also a more "ideological" (that is political, in the sense that he has uses the term) inflection of social science than he seems to acknowledge.

The acknowledgment is evident, however, in the final sentences of the essay, when Geertz discusses the interrelationship between the "different enterprises" of science and ideology and explicitly positions science on the side of a "liberal political system."

> The social function of science vis-à-vis ideologies is first to understand them—what they are, how they work, what gives rise to them—and second to criticize them, to force them to come to terms with (but not necessarily to surrender to) reality. The existence of a vital tradition of scientific analysis of social issues is one of the most effective guarantees against ideological extremism, for it provides an incomparably reliable source of positive knowledge for the political imagination to work with and to honor. It is not the only check. The existence [...] of competing ideologies carried by other powerful groups in the society is at least as important; as is a liberal political system in which dreams of total power are obvious fantasies; as are stable social conditions in which conventional expectations are not continually frustrated and conventional ideas not radically incompetent. But, committed with a quiet intransigence to a vision of its own, it is perhaps the most indomitable (pp. 232–233).

Here social science has a critical and ethical role that stems from the scientists' liberal political commitments, I would say from the stakes they have in the work that they do. This seems to

me to be at odds not only with the sharp distinctions offered earlier, but also with the hermeneutic approach endorsed in "Deep Play," in which the ethnographer's job is to *uncover* meaning, not to *make* it. The prior commitments of the observer (the scientist) are not addressed in that essay the way they are in "Ideology as a Cultural System," which I now take to be the very heart of *TIC* because it exposes the stakes of the enterprise and the tensions it embodies. These tensions stem from the need to claim unfettered access to reality in the name of a disinterested science that cannot, however, be completely separated from the ideological frame in which it operates—the sharp opposition between science and ideology only works to *obscure* the connection. The criticism Geertz offered in a review of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* might be read as a denial or repression of that tension in his own ethnographic work. "For although it puts the past [here we might say 'others'] at a great distance, showing it is caught in its own discourse, it also appropriates the past [again, 'others' can be substituted] for its own current arguments" (Geertz, 1978). It is no wonder, then, that Geertz appeared to have trouble seeing in Foucault's practice of critique what he approved of in Marx: namely, "the successful synchronization of scientific analysis and ideological argument."

The emphasis on interpretation and Geertz's coining of "interpretive social science" to describe the work of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study—his monumental and, so far, enduring institutional accomplishment—also acknowledges what sharp Weberian contrasts do not: the constructive role of the interpreter, the reader. Interpretation is a contingent reading because it is always a meaning-making on the part of the interpreter, a meaning-making that is "caught" in its own discursive frame. In my own intellectual history, it was Foucault (and other post-structuralist theorists) who made that fact explicit, allowing me to recognize and avow what had always been the case: that a critical political agenda, aimed at exposing the operations and effects of the inequalities of class, race, and gender, directed my scholarly curiosity. It has been an agenda in no way constricted by what I took from *TIC* about the analysis of cultural systems; in fact, I have learned a great deal about how to read these politics from Geertz's work. If I read my sources in a more avowedly political way than he thought we should, and if, these days, I read with more attention to the psychodynamics of culture, I also see, more clearly than before, what his own political stakes were in those essays. The stakes are not all that different from mine, although he did not share my critique of the limits of liberalism. Yet, as with any really good theorizing, the particular politics seem to matter less than the conceptual directions provided and the ethical concerns driving them. It is those conceptual directions—about how to analyze symbolic systems as they constitute lived realities—that I continue to take away from this "treatise in cultural theory." As it did on a first reading (fifty years ago), Geertz's call to attend to "culture" still matters for those of us trying not only to interpret the world but also to change it.

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