

CLIFFORD GEERTZ: WRITING AND * INTERPRETATION

Kliford Gerc: Pisanje i tumačenje

APSTRAKT *Tekst predstavlja pregled aspekata dela Kliforda Gerca, jednog od najuticajnijih teoretičara društvenih nauka XX veka. Gerc se pre svega povezuje sa „interpretativnim“, „postmodernim“ ili „književnim“ zaokretom u antropologiji, mada on sebe ne bi ubrojio ni u jednu od tih kategorija. Koncepti „kulture kao teksta“ i „semiotički koncept kulture“ uticali su na generacije naučnika. Ovi koncepti su bili izloženi i kritici, ali u ovom tekstu ukazujem na neadekvatnost (a ponekad i neozbiljnost) nekih od ovih kritika. U tekstu se prati pre svega „interpretativni“ aspekt Gercovog opusa (od 1972), sa svim metodološkim implikacijama za jednu otvorenu, relativističku antropologiju, gde se do saznanja dolazi kroz pluralizam perspektiva — pa sve do njegovih radova tokom 1990-tih, gde izgleda dolazi do usvajanja jedne jedine perspektive, jedinstvenog okvira za razumevanje sveta u kome živimo. Zaključak je da ova najnovija faza Gercovog dela može biti nespojiva sa metodološkim pluralizmom za koji se on zalagao u svojim ranijim radovima.*

KLJUČNE REČI *Kliford Gerc, interpretativna antropologija, savremena antropologija — metodološki aspekti, kultura — metodološki aspekti.*

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An earlier (and much shorter) version of this paper was published in Slovenian in 1996 (Bošković 1996).

ABSTRACT *The paper examines the scope and influence of Clifford Geertz, one of the most influential social scientists in the 20th century. Geertz is associated with the “interpretative,” “postmodern” or “literary” turn in anthropology, although he would not necessarily put himself in any of these categories. The concepts of the “culture as text” and the “semiotic concept of culture” have influenced generations of scholars. They have also been criticized, but I point to inadequacies of some of these criticisms. The paper traces this “interpretative” thread of Geertz’s work, along with its methodological implications for the relativistic, plural perspectives, up to his writings in the 1990s, when he seems to adopt a position that there actually can be one interpretation, a specific “master narrative” according to which “the world” we live in can be understood. The conclusion is that this latest phase of Geertz’s work might be impossible to reconcile with a kind of methodological pluralism implied in his earlier works.*

KEY WORDS *Clifford Geertz, interpretative anthropology, contemporary anthropology — methodological aspects, culture — methodological aspects.*

Introduction

The concept of the interpretation of cultures in anthropology is primarily associated with the work of Clifford Geertz. His collection of essays of the same name has become an indispensable reading for most of the anthropology courses throughout the world (Geertz 1973). It has also become a starting point for what is being referred to as “postmodern ethnography” (Pool 1991: 313; cf. also Marcus and Cushman 1982),¹ for what Geertz found himself among those accused of the “spectacularization” of anthropology (Friedman 1987: 161). He is also one of the principal “bad guys” in an account of “the experimental moment in North American anthropology” by Darnell (1995). On the more personal level, it was Geertz’s *Works and Lives* (1988) that opened up a whole new set of perspectives for me, both within the field of anthropology and outside of it. I could say that it made me choose anthropology as something I wanted to do. At least for the time being.

In this paper I intend to outline some of the directions that his work opens, as well as some questions that might be looked at from different perspective,² taking

¹ While it can be argued that the concept of “postmodern ethnography” actually predates Geertz, it is only after his works were published and largely based on the impact that these works had on the world of the social sciences (and anthropology in particular) that this concept has received the attention and the recognition that it deserves. Of course, Geertz himself is not a “postmodern” anthropologist — despite the prominent place that concepts like relativism take in his work (for a marvelous misinterpretation of the concept, see Gellner 1992).

² Different in the sense that it takes as the starting point the concept of the “culture as text,” with all its implications.

into account the “interpretative” or “literary” turn in contemporary anthropology.³ I regard Geertz as the “primary mover” behind these relatively recent trends, and his approach (especially regarding “reading culture[s]”, where, strictly speaking, he follows upon the brilliant late 19th /early 20th century German tradition of *Verstehen*, primarily by Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber — although the concept itself is, of course, Paul Droysen’s) opens up numerous possibilities for the anthropological work in the contemporary world. It also opens possibilities for reexamination of the anthropological *praxis* and the ways in which anthropologists have been interpreting the world.

According to Paul Ricœur, Geertz’s attitude “is linked to a conceptual framework which is not causal or structural or even motivational but rather semiotic” (Ricœur 1991: 183), which is also linked to the “conversational attitude,” most intimately associated with the possibilities of interpretation. My primary interest is in the exploration of possibilities for interpretations in different contexts and different meanings that the “literary turn” opens. These are the meanings that are in contemporary anthropology being explored from radically different perspectives, as nicely summed up by Pierre Bourdieu:

The distance the anthropologist puts between himself and his object (...) is also what enables him to stand outside the game, along with everything he really shares with the logic of his object (...) Nothing is more paradoxical (...) than the fact that people whose whole life is spent fighting over words should strive at all costs to fix what seems to them to be the one true meaning of objectively ambiguous, overdetermined or indeterminate symbols, words, texts or events which often survive and generate interest just because they have always been at stake in struggles aimed precisely at fixing their ‘true’ meaning. (Bourdieu 1990: 17)

It is precisely the abandonment of this quest for the “true” meanings that characterizes the “literary turn” in contemporary anthropology. One should add here the recognition of differences, the abstraction (distancing) from the notion that observers somehow stand above and outside the cultures that they are observing (which would in turn enable them to have the clear, total, and “true” picture of the observed reality), as well as the concept of relativism⁴ that this shift in perspective

³ By the “literary turn” I mean a text-centered and text-oriented approach, according to which cultures could be “read” or interpreted as texts or collections of texts. It has become especially prominent following the publication of the *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986; cf. also Marcus and Fisher 1986), and even though it is not as influential today as it used to be a decade ago, still many anthropologists feel obliged to state their position with regard to it. It was also seen by some authors (Gellner, Fabian, Kapferer, Pohl, Scholte) as the origin of the so-called “postmodern” approach in anthropology (Darnell 1995).

⁴ The concept of relativism that I am referring to was made possible by the concept of the arbitrariness of linguistic sign, as postulated by Ferdinand de Saussure.

implies. Like many other aspects of anthropological theories since the 1980s, this is also not something that new, when one takes into account the writings of some “classics,” such as Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard.

Research Questions, Issues, Problems...

Clifford Geertz’s research interests gradually shifted from the field studies in Indonesia (Bali and Java — resulting in the book that was based on his Ph.D. dissertation, *The Religion of Java* [1960], as well as numerous essays) and Morocco (Islam in different contexts [cf. Geertz 1989]), different ways of interpreting culture and “the systematic study of meaningful forms” (set of essays in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973; also *Local Knowledge*, 1983), and, during the 1980s, to the ways of interacting between the researcher and the community where he/she is doing research, as well the interpretation of interpreter’s views and attitudes (“being there, writing here,” as outlined in the book *Works and Lives*). His 1960s paper on “religion as a cultural system” has been one of the most influential in this area of anthropology (Geertz 1966; it was reprinted in 1973). In the last decade his work included discussions of the relationship between anthropology and history (1990a), as well as the “feminist anthropology” (1990b). While *After the Fact* (1995b) gives a sort of a summary view of his anthropological career, some of his more recent papers (1997, 1998) deal with the issues of reconfiguration of the world we live in (the rise of nationalism and the emergence of new ethnic conflicts). Some of these papers have been reprinted in the collection of essays published as the *Available Light* (2000). This book is, in my opinion, the best collection of essays that he published, and it includes a relatively inaccessible essay on culture from the 1960s. While notoriously not engaging in polemics regarding his work (cf. Rorty 1986 on Geertz 1986, but he did reply to Gellner 1992 in Geertz 1995a), Geertz has been keen to actively participate in the meetings discussing his work (for example, at the November 2002 AAA meeting at New Orleans), and has remained an astute observer of the current debates and (“real” or constructed) controversies in anthropology (2001).

Geertz’s influence has been particularly important in the “interpretative” aspect of his work (1972, 1973, 1983, 1988), and his name is frequently associated with the foundations of the “interpretative” or “critical” anthropology (for Geertz and the “hermeneutic” tradition, see Gottowik 1997), although Geertz himself does not seem to be in favor of any grand generalizations considering his work. The criticism of his work covers the wide range, starting from what I would call the “exorcist” approach — that is to say, the view that Geertz is the main source of most of the problems and confusions of contemporary anthropology, so if he is somehow eliminated, the problems will automatically disappear — this type of criticism is

exemplified by Shankman 1984 and Carrithers 1988.⁵ Geertz's work was also criticized for the alleged incompetence and too much hold of power (Hobart 1986, 1990 — he also criticizes Geertz for very bad ethnography), then it was criticized through perspectives of different cultural and intellectual frames (Scholte 1986, Rosaldo 1990), and his views on religion were forcefully questioned by authors like Asad (1983). More recently, Kuper (1999) devotes a whole chapter to the criticism of Geertz's ideas on culture and religion.⁶ I think that some of the serious misunderstandings that critics like Hobart have about this approach⁷ is that they believe that the proponents of the “literary” or “interpretative” approach are trying to impose it as *the* way of doing anthropology today.

This very concept of *imposing* is at sharp contrast with one of the main facets of contemporary anthropological theories: namely, the idea that there is a plurality of truths (and, consequently, a plurality of theoretically *equally* valid approaches). The practical value of each and every approach will be determined within the specific context where one is doing his or her research — so the only measure of success will be to what extent different approaches help in (or facilitate) one's intended research. As pointed out by the “anarchistic” methodological approach of Paul Feyerabend (for example, 1992 [1975]),⁸ this context-bound and context-based research strategy has been described and used by some of the most influential physicists and “classical” scientists from the late 19th and early 20th century (Bolzano, Mach, Einstein, Bohr), but has still tended to be largely ignored. The great figures of the western science were quite well aware of the *relativity* of concepts on which their

⁵ When reviewing the *Works and Lives*, Carrithers postulates that the book is about the *works* of anthropologists and the *lives* of the peoples studied, which is a rather strange conclusion and almost total misunderstanding of the book. Of course, Geertz does not live up to the reviewer's expectations.

⁶ I also believe that, while Kuper makes some very good points (like on the Indonesian politics, 1999: 94-96), he comes from a neo-structuralist perspective that is incapable of grasping different aspects of Geertz's work.

⁷ Actually, there are several different approaches, and the authors frequently lumped together are frequently in sharp disagreement with each other. However, most of the criticism is taking the “literary” or “text-centered” or “postmodern” approach to be a single identifiable and unified category, in total disregard of what the authors involved actually say or write.

⁸ “To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, 'objectivity', 'truth', it will become clear that there is only *one* principle that can be defended under *all* circumstances and in *all* stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*.” (Feyerabend 1992: 19). The pun is intentional, the variety of meanings also, so Feyerabend wrote in the same book: “'anything goes' is not a 'principle' I hold — I do not think that 'principles' can be used and fruitfully discussed outside the concrete research situation they are supposed to affect - but the terrified exclamation of a rationalist who takes a closer look at history” (1992: vii).

theories were based (as well as the incommensurability of their theories with the alternative systems of knowledge, such as the ones outlined in and referred to by myth or fiction, for example), and contemporary rationalist crusaders have become painfully aware of these difficulties through the problems opened by the quantum physics, physics of sub-atomic particles, as well as the phenomena such as the Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy and various examples from the quantum mechanics.

I will begin this brief discussion with one of his earlier (and most famous) essays, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (Geertz 1972),⁹ and the ways in which it might help us to understand the problems of communicating with and within a culture of "the others," and continue with the brief (again) overview of Geertz's views of interpretation. My emphasis here is primarily on the concept of interpreting (reading) the culture (a Balinese village) as a "text." This approach, I believe, could lead to the consideration of contemporary anthropology as essentially an art (in the Latin sense of *ars*, or Greek τεχνη) of producing texts. Of course, ultimately, the value of this (just like any other) approach can only be seen in specific and concrete contexts and observable situations, by the "real" people. Hence, Geertz's approach *works* in various anthropological situations (as *one* possible interpretation), but remains highly problematic when it comes to some current political and historical trends (since it essentially replaces one form of universalization with the other – the consequences of which I discussed elsewhere (Bošković, 2002).

Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

Geertz's approach to communication is within the community studied, and it is supposed to serve as one of the means for better understanding of the communication processes. For example, when he and his former wife came to a Balinese village in the 1950s, the villagers simply *did not talk to them* — as a matter of fact, they did not talk to them at all, the pair of anthropologists were something like non-persons. But, eventually, this wall of silence was broken after they reacted to the unexpected event (the police raid) in the way everyone else in the village did: by running. This correct response to the challenge eventually influenced their partial integration within the village community, and the subsequent events also showed that they had been carefully observed by the villagers throughout their stay.

⁹ It is interesting to note that this article has received a great deal of attention at the 1984 meeting at the School of American Research in Santa Fe (papers were published in the volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), where it was analyzed by two out of ten participants, Clifford and Crapanzano (Marcus and Clifford 1985: 269).

In his article on the Balinese cockfight, Geertz wrote:

An image, fiction, a model, a metaphor, the cockfight is a means of expression; its function is neither to assuage social passions nor to heighten them (though, in its play-with-fire way, it does a bit of both), but, in a medium of feathers, blood, crowds, and money, to display them. (1972: 23)

This brings one closer to meanings of various expressive forms – meanings that are certainly influenced (another question is to what extent) by a specific culture. And the only way to understand these meanings is to observe them in a particular context, so

Any expressive form works (when it works) by disarranging semantic contexts in such a way that properties conventionally ascribed to certain things are unconventionally ascribed to others, which are then seen actually to possess them. To call the wind a cripple, as Stevens does, to fix tone and manipulate timbre, as Schoenberg does, or closer to our case, to picture an art critic as a dissolute bear, as Hogarth does, is to cross conceptual wires; the established conjunctions between objects and their qualities are altered and phenomena — fall weather, melodic shape, or cultural journalism — are clothed in signifiers which normally point to other referents. Similarly, to connect — and connect, and connect — the collision of roosters with the decisiveness of status is to invite a transfer of perceptions from the former to the latter, a transfer which is at once a description and a judgment. (Logically, the transfer could, of course, as well go the other way; but, like most of the rest of us, the Balinese are a great deal more interested in understanding men than they are in understanding cocks.) (*ibid.*, 26)

In the passage that has become famous with the advent of the “literary” approach, Geertz argues that cultures can actually be read as texts:

The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. There are enormous difficulties in such an enterprise, methodological pitfalls to make a Freudian quake, and some moral perplexities as well. Nor is it the only way that symbolic forms can be sociologically handled. Functionalism lives, and so does psychologism. But to regard such forms as “saying something of something,” and saying it to somebody, is at least to open the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them.... But whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them. (*ibid.*, 29)

Every form of communication is engaged in constant metaphorical refocusing of specific cultures. The facts that participants and actors of any given cultures communicate to their members and participants are not always (or, more probably, in most cases) intelligible to observers that stand outside the specific culture. The

question of the possibility of communication between the specific cultural forms and the observer then arises. To a certain extent, understanding of the specific form requires analysis very much like an analysis of the *text* (and Geertz is very well aware that “such an extension of the notion of a text beyond written material, and even beyond verbal, is, though metaphorical, not, of course, all that novel” (*ibid.*, 26), and any attempt to interpret it apart from the culture (as, for example, the structuralist-influenced interpreters do), and aside from the actual social and cultural context, cannot lead very far. To use another metaphor, the aim of anthropologist’s analysis should be to go *beneath* the surface¹⁰ (or, at least, to try to) — and that is exactly what (and where) most attempts fail.

For the time being at least, we seem to be left with writing. About cultures, peoples, concepts, and, among other things, about writing itself.

Interpreting the Other: Writing About Writing

In the introductory essay for *The Interpretation of Cultures* (“Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture”), Geertz states that “the whole point of the 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” (1973: 24). Geertz is himself firmly positioned within what is commonly regarded as “the literary turn in contemporary anthropology” (Marcus and Clifford 1985, Marcus and Cushman 1982, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Scholte 1986 and 1987, Kapferer 1988, Fabian 1990 and 1991).

When discussing what can be referred to as “writing about writing” (“Anthropology and the Scene of Writing” in Geertz 1988), Geertz notes that, first of all, there are very few anthropologists that have a distinctive literary style (Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, Bronislaw Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss).¹¹ So why should anyone bother to analyze their writings?

The answer to this question brings us (again) to the problems of meaning and interpretation. How is a writer going to convince us (the readers) that what he/she writes is actually true?

¹⁰ “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 in the midst of them. The essential vocation of interpretative 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.” (Geertz 1973: 30)

¹¹ And one would have to add Geertz himself to this list.

The crucial peculiarities of ethnographic writing are, like the purloined letter, so fully in view as to escape notice: the fact, for example, that so much of it consists of incorrigible assertion. The highly situated nature of ethnographic description — this ethnographer, in this time, in this place, with these informants, these commitments, and these experiences, a representative of particular culture, a member of a certain class — gives to the bulk of what is said a rather take-it-or-leave-it quality. “Vas you dere, Sharlie?” as Jack Pearl’s Baron Münchhausen used to say.

The anthropologist is “there” and he/she brings her/his experiences to us “here.” How can we be convinced that the described experience is “real”?¹² Do we need to be convinced at all? And what difference does it make? Or, perhaps it makes more sense to ask: can we be convinced at all and at what price?

Obviously, things change and people with them. The Azande today are certainly much different than when Evans-Pritchard wrote about them; our image of the K’iche Maya changed dramatically since the first groundbreaking writings by Carmack; “*la vie quotidienne*” of cultures all around the globe is being constantly re-written (curiously enough, one can hardly find people from these exotic cultures writing on their own legacy — it is always somebody else, someone from the scientific, real, true world to accomplish this task) and re-explained in various forms and mediums, from the ethnographies and geographical or historical descriptions, to the travel guides.¹³ There are certainly great risks in looking upon anthropological writings as the literary ones (one could be lead to concentrate on the actual meaning of specific words, and, consequently, to leave this world for another one, in which discussing is all that matters), and there are other great risks such as that of the aestheticism. Reading an anthropological book sometimes might be as exciting as reading a good novel or a short story.¹⁴ And this brings with itself many risks, including the accusations that the anthropologist does not really know what he/she is actually doing, that she/he is imposing herself/himself on another genre or mode of expression or (worst of all) another culture or set of values, etc. Or even that she/he

¹² “Real” in the sense that she/he was actually “there” (with the more or less specific objective[s] in mind) and is trying to communicate the experience of being “there” to “us” (readers, audience, students, scholars, etc.). “Real” in the sense that when reading an ethnography we instinctively want (need, even ask) to be convinced that the experience of being “there” did actually happen.

¹³ Throughout Latin America and Africa, more and more anthropologists are being employed by tourist agencies as guides or organizers of trips. It is interesting to note that the anthropologists themselves are transformed in an intriguing set of “others” by the fact that the tourists cannot easily relate to the native(s), but they can to the anthropologists who are engaged in this strange game.

¹⁴ And perhaps even more — depending on who is doing the reading. Geertz’s writings are particularly seductive.

brings passion and pleasure in a science (or field) that is supposed to be emotion-free, cold and disinterested. To go back to Geertz:

But the risks are worth running, and not only because some central issues do in fact revolve about what language games we choose to play, or because neither product enhancement nor tendentious argument is exactly unknown in the increasingly desperate scramble to be noticed, or because writing to please has something to be said for it, at least as against writing to intimidate. The risks are worth running because running them leads to a thoroughgoing revision of our understanding of what is it to open (a bit) the consciousness of one group of people to (something of) the life-form of another, and in that way to (something of) their own. (Geertz 1988: 142-143)

Although I am well aware of the risks involved in the “letting the facts speak for themselves” approach, even when the “facts” are very obvious, I would like to conclude this section with one more quotation¹⁵; part of the Michel Leiris’ *L’Afrique fantôme* (originally published in Paris, in 1934), which summarizes in a most elegant way the differences between “othernesses,” interpretations, languages, and cultures. In quoting this passage, Geertz uses Leiris in order to offer an elegant answer to the criticism of the “writerly” approach, as well as to the objections concerning the “Boasian” irresistible quest for meaning:

Right away this afternoon I go with Abba Jérôme to see [the Ethiopian woman] Emawayish and give her pens, ink, and a notebook so she can record for herself — or dictate to her son — the manuscript [of her songs], letting it to be understood that the head of the expedition, if he is pleased, will present her with the desired gift.

Emawayish’s words this afternoon when I told her, speaking of her manuscript, that it would be especially good for her to write down some love songs like those of the other night: *Does poetry exist in France?* And then: *Does love exist in France?* (1988: 129)

Writing About Cultures

What is the source of an alleged authority of an anthropologist to write about other cultures? *Being there* is not enough, since any construction of other people’s concepts or images presents a kind of an authoritative account of them. Any such interpretive construction (a text, a description) presents a certain “unified” image of a culture observed to the “outer” world. (As such, even a text championing a “local” perspective might be regarded as “globalizing” and “universalizing.”)

¹⁵ Or, strictly speaking, a quotation within quotation.

In an interesting rejoinder to Huntington's "clash of civilizations" concept (1996a, 1996b), Geertz (1998) sees the world as it will emerge in the next century as a set of fragments, not necessarily corresponding to state, cultural, ethnic or linguistic frontiers, but more like various interest groups organized around their own particular agendas. In this fragmented world, as he sees it, individuals will owe their particular allegiances not to their respective ethnic or cultural groups ("nations"), but to their own specific (professional? corporate?) "community."¹⁶ The wars of the future, hence, should be the wars about particular interests of particular groups (or even corporations?) – not wars or conflicts between ethnic groups or "civilizations."

Of course, the question then arises of the "objective" place of anthropology and anthropologists in the future world. It seems that Geertz takes for granted that anthropologists do have a kind of a privileged position from which they are capable of observing processes of culture change, although allowing for a possibility that the discipline itself might in the future be transformed into "cultural studies" (Handler 1991: 612). This privileged position is derived from their capability to observe "other things in other places," to immerse themselves into other worlds and interpret them. But, then, any interpretation is just one possible among many, and it is far from clear how this authority is established and what it is based upon. Geertz expressed a great degree of optimism when it comes to realizing the limits of "local knowledge":

What we need (to give a dictum) are not contemporary reenactments of old debates, nomotetic and ideographic, *erklären* and *verstehen*, but demonstrations, on the one side or the other, of either an effective technology for controlling the overall directions of modern social life or the development and inculcation of more delicate skills for navigating our way through it, whatever direction it takes. And when it comes to that, I am reasonably confident both as to which is the more desirable and the more likely actually to occur. (1992: 134)

The view that "local knowledge" should take precedence over universalizations and generalizations seems to be at odds with the view that experts (not necessarily local) could be in a position to interpret the constant shifts and fragmentations of the world as we know it. The issue of interpretation is also closely related to the one of understanding: do people who interpret something necessarily know what they are talking about? Does interpreting imply understanding?¹⁷ In

¹⁶ Actually, Geertz has been moving in this direction several years earlier, for example: "In any case, nation-states are not the only sorts of "standing entities" standing. From the Security Council, the European Community, ASEAN, and the OAS to OPEC, NATO, the IMF, and the Muslim Brotherhood, collective actors of another sort, claiming and exercising authority over places and peoples, are entering not simply the politico-economic relations among countries, but within them" (1993: 61).

¹⁷ Cf. also the line of criticism used by Aletta Biersack (1989).

many cases, the observed ones simply act in a way that is expected from them by an outside authority (the observers — anthropologists, ethnographers, etc.). For anyone who observed the events in the former Yugoslavia since 1991 (where people seem to have behaved in ways that were *expected of them* — there simply never existed age-old interethnic hatreds that many of the Western observers were so keen to finding; cf. Geertz 1993), the answer to these and similar questions should be more than clear — the outside authority frequently both induces and produces types of “local knowledge.”

“Inscribing” a meaning (that is later going to be deduced as a result of the interpretative analysis) on a set of events that are being observed might be of some benefit to an anthropologist/observer (making some sense for him/her out of an otherwise completely unintelligible situation), but could have nothing to do with any form of “understanding” or “explanation” of the things (events, processes, etc.) being observed. The essential plurality of truths (or possible explanations) is one thing, but the actual events are sometimes quite another. Possibility should not be confused with probability.

Geertz once wrote (and it has been picked up by Fabian and others) that anthropologists essentially *write* — but it could also be argued that first and foremost they *observe*. What *is* and what *could be* written only later comes into play. And when it does come, the unresolved question remains the one of the *power* and *position* from which one writes or interprets. This has been one of the strongest lines of criticism of his work by Marcus (1998). It is also the issue that I find most important to be resolved — for in his late writings (especially 1998), Geertz seems to be too close to justifying a specific worldview, sometimes associated with the so-called “neo-liberalism.” This opens a potentially uncomfortable question: are his interpretations really ones among the many (with no claim to “true meanings”), or are they an uncomfortable reminder that there is after all *the interpretation* that comes before all the others. However, this is a more complex issue, and I would like to leave the verdict (and any *interpretations* of it) to other people in other places, trying to make sense of the work of undoubtedly one of the most influential anthropologists of the 20th century.

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