A LIFE OF LEARNING

Clifford Geertz

Charles Homer Haskins
Lecture for 1999

American Council of Learned Societies

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The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture

Charles Homer Haskins (1870-1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first Chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887, and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1926.

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of thirteen.

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1998 Yi-Fu Tuan

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Brief Biography

Clifford Geertz was born in San Francisco in 1926. He holds degrees from Antioch College (A.B., Philosophy, 1950) and Harvard University (Ph.D., Anthropology, 1956) and has taught at Harvard University, the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Chicago, Oxford University, and Princeton University. Professor Geertz was a Senior Career Fellow at the National Institute of Mental Health from 1964-1970. In 1970 he became Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton, NJ) and since 1982 has been the Harold F. Linder Professor of Social Science.

Professor Geertz has done fieldwork in Indonesia (Java, Bali, Sumatra, Sulawesi) and Morocco. His books, which have been translated into many languages, include *Peddlers and Princes* (1963), *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968), *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (1980), *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (1983), *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988), and *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (1995). He is a member of the editorial board of *Daedalus,* the *Journal of American Folklore, History and Anthropology,* and *Common Knowledge;* he has also been a contributing editor of the *American Anthropologist.*

Clifford Geertz has been awarded the Talcott Parsons (Social Science) Prize from the America Academy of Arts and Sciences (1974), the Sorokin Prize from the American Sociological Association (1974), the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Association for Asian Studies (1987), the National Book Critics Circle Prize in Criticism for *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988), the Horace Mann Distinguished Alumnus Award from Antioch College (1992), and the Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize (1992). He was Distinguished Lecturer of the American Anthropological Association (1983) and the Huxley Memorial Lecturer and Medallist of the Royal Anthropological Institute in the same year. He has also been awarded numerous honorary degrees.

Since 1990, Geertz has been the Hitchcock Lecturer, University of California (1990); the Harvard-Jerusalem Lecturer (1990); the Hardy Lecturer, Hartwick College (1992); the Fukuoka Five-Year Anniversary Lecturer, Tokyo and Fukuoka (1995); the Lecturer in Modern Philosophy, Institut fur die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, Vienna (1995); the William James Lecturer, Harvard Divinity School (1998); and the Wells Lecturer, Indiana University (1998).

Professor Geertz held an ACLS Fellowship in 1950-51. He was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1958-59. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Philosophical Society, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and is a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

Introduction

"Clifford Geertz must be credited with reconfiguring, almost singlehandedly, the boundary between the social sciences and the humanities for the second half of the twentieth century." So Sherry Ortner begins her introduction to a recent special issue of the journal *Representations* (1997), entitled "The Fate of 'Culture': Geertz and Beyond." And she goes on to note that "Geertz's work . . . (has) had the effect of radically repositioning the field of anthropology itself—moving it from a rather exotic and specialized corner of intellectual life to a much more central location."

Geertz (Ortner continues) has argued "that 'culture' must be seen as the 'webs of meaning' within which people live, meaning encoded in symbolic forms (language, artifacts, etiquette, rituals, calendars)." And indeed, Ortner and others view Clifford Geertz's major contribution to anthropology, and through that to the wider configuration of social theory, as retheorizing the concept of 'culture': a retheorization so powerful and so persuasive that Geertz has become, in the words of Renato Rosaldo, the "ambassador from anthropology.

In this panoramic and pungent lecture, the most self-reflective of anthropologists surveys a working life dedicated to the study of other peoples' cultures: "discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it. . . ." To achieve such discovery, Geertz asserts, "it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which people enact their lives. . . . It involves learning how, as a being from elsewhere within a world of one's own, to live with them."

The ACLS is both delighted and proud to present Clifford Geertz's Haskins Lecture, the seventeenth in the series.

— John H. D'Arms, President
American Council of Learned Societies

A Life of Learning
by
Clifford Geertz

Overture

It is a shaking business to stand up in public toward the end of an improvised life and call it learned. I didn't realize, when I started out, after an isolate childhood, to see what might be going on elsewhere in the world, that there would be a final exam. I suppose that what I have been doing all these years is piling up learning. But, at the time, it seemed to me that I was trying to figure out what to do next, and hold off a reckoning: reviewing the situation, scouting out the possibilities, evading the consequences, thinking through the thing again. You don't arrive at many conclusions that way, or not any that you hold to for very long, so summing it all up before God and Everybody is a bit of a humbug. A lot of people don't quite know where they are going, I suppose; but I don't even know, for certain, where I have been. But, all right already. I've tried virtually every other literary genre at one time or another. I might as well try *Bildungsroman.*

The Bubble

I have, in any case, learned at least one thing in the course of patching together a scholarly career: it all depends on the timing. I entered the academic world at what has to have been the best time to enter it in the whole course of its history; at least in the United States, possibly altogether. When I emerged from the U.S. Navy in 1946, having been narrowly saved by The Bomb from being obliged to invade Japan, the great boom in American higher education was just getting

underway, and I have ridden the wave all the way through, crest after crest, until today, when it seems at last, like me, to be finally subsiding. I was twenty. I wanted to get away from California, where I had an excess of relatives but no family. I wanted to be a novelist, preferably famous. And, most fatefully, I had the GI Bill.

Or more exactly, *we* had the GI Bill: millions of us. As has been many times retailed—there was even a television special on the subject a year or so ago, and there is a book about it called, not inappropriately, *When Dreams Come True*—the flood of determined veterans, nearly two and a half million of them, onto college campuses in the half decade immediately following 1945 altered, suddenly and forever, the whole face of higher education in this country. We were older, we had been through something our classmates and our teachers, for the most part, had not, we were in a hurry, and we were wildly uninterested in the rites and masquerades of undergraduate life. Many of us were married, most of the rest of us, myself included, soon would be. Perhaps most importantly, we transformed the class, the ethnic, the religious, and even to some degree the racial composition of the national student body. And at length, as the wave moved through the graduate schools, we transformed the professoriate too. Between 1950 and 1970, the number of doctorates awarded annually increased five-fold, from about 6,000 a year to about 30,000. (In 1940 it had been 3,000. No wonder the sixties happened!) That was perhaps not what William Randolph Hearst and The American Legion, who mobilized popular support for the Bill, precisely had in mind. But even at the time we knew we were the vanguard of something large and consequential: the degreeing of America.

Having grown up rural in the Great Depression, I had not supposed I would be going to college, so that when the possibility suddenly presented itself, I had no idea how to respond to it. After drifting around San Francisco most of the summer "readjusting" myself to a civilian existence, also at the Government's expense, I asked a high school English teacher, an old-style leftist and waterfront agitator who had first suggested to me that I might become a writer, like Steinbeck, say, or Jack London, what I should do. He said (approximately): "You should go to Antioch College. It has a

system where you work half the time and study half the time." That sounded promising, so I sent in an application he happened to have around, was accepted within a week or two, and went confidently off to see what was cooking, happening, or going down in southern Ohio. (As I say, this was another time. I am not sure I even knew that applications were sometimes rejected, and I had no plan B. Had I been turned down, I probably would have gone to work for the telephone company, tried to write in the evenings, forgotten the whole thing, and we should all have been spared the present occasion.)

Antioch, between 1946 and 1950, was, at first glance, the very model of that most deeply American, and to my mind most thoroughly admirable, of educational institutions—the small, small-town, vaguely Christian, even more vaguely populist, Liberal Arts College. With less than a thousand students, only about half of them on campus at a time (the other half were off working somewhere, in Chicago, New York, Detroit, and the like), seventy-five or eighty live-in, on-call, faculty members, and, wedged in between the woods and the railroad tracks in Yellow Springs, Ohio (pop. 2,500), it looked, all latticed arbors and brick chimneys, as though it had been set up on an MGM back lot for Judy and Mickey, or perhaps Harold Lloyd, to play out the passage from home—fumbling at sex, attempting alcohol, driving about in open cars, conning fuddled professors, trying on outrageous selves. There was some of that, but the place was a good deal more serious, not to say grave, than either its looks or its location suggested. Utopian, experimental, non-conformist, painfully earnest, desperately intense, and filled with political radicals and aesthetic free spirits (or were they aesthetic radicals and political free spirits?), it was counter-cultural before its time—a cast of mind and presentation that the influx of GI's, unwilling to take anything from anybody under any circumstances ever again, powerfully reinforced.

Let loose in this disorderly field of moralized self-fashioning (the reigning ethos of the place was Quaker, that most interior of iron cages . . . the reigning attitude, Jewish, all irony, impatience, and

auto-critique . . . the combination, a sort of noisy introspection, passing curious), I simply took just about every course that in any way looked as though it might interest me, come in handy, or do my character some good, which is the definition, I suppose—certainly it was Antioch's—of a liberal education. As I wanted to be a writer, I thought, absurdly, of course, that I should major in English. But I found even that constraining, and so switched to Philosophy, toward whose requirements virtually any class I happened into, musicology, for example, or fiscal policy, could be counted. As for the "work" side of the "work-study" program, and the alarming question it raised—what sort of business enterprise has a slot for an apprentice *littérateur?*—I thought, even more absurdly, that I should get into journalism as an enabling occupation, something to support me until I found my voice; a notion quickly put to rest by a stint as a copy-boy on the, then as now, crazed and beggarly *New York Post.* The result of all this searching, sampling, and staying loose (though, as I noted, I did manage to get married in the course of it all) was that, when I came to graduate, I had no more sense of what I might do to get on in the world than I had had when I entered. I was still readjusting.

But, as Antioch, for all its bent toward moral strenuousness and the practical life, was neither a seminary nor a trade-school, that was hardly the point. What one was supposed to obtain there, and what I certainly did obtain, was a feeling for what Hopkins called "all things counter, original, spare, strange"—for the irregularity of what happens, and the rarity of what lasts. This was, after all, "the ignoble fifties," when, the story has it, the public square was empty, everyone was absorbed in witch-hunts and selfish pursuits, and all was gray upon gray, when it wasn't suburban technicolor. But that is not how I remember it. How I remember it is as a time of Jamesian intensity, a time when, given the sense that everything could disappear in a thermonuclear moment, becoming someone upon whom nothing was lost was a far more urgent matter than laying plans and arranging ambitions. One might be lost or helpless, or racked with ontological anxiety; but one could try, at least, not to be obtuse.

However that may be, as the place was, alas, graduating me, it was necessary to depart and go elsewhere. The question was: where,

elsewhere? With nothing substantial in sight in the way of a job (none of the people I had worked for wanted ever to see me again), I thought it expedient to take shelter in graduate school, and my wife, another displaced English major unprepared for "the real world," thought she might do so as well. But, once again, I didn't know how to go about accomplishing this, and as I had used up my GI Bill, I was . . . we were . . . again without resources. So I replayed my '46 scenario and asked another unstandard academic, a charismatic, disenchanted philosophy professor named George Geiger, who had been Lou Gehrig's backup on the Columbia baseball team and John Dewey's last graduate student, what I should do. He said (also approximately): "Don't go into philosophy; it has fallen into the hands of Thomists and technicians. You should try anthropology."

As Antioch had no courses in that subject, I had shown no interest in it, and neither of us knew anything much about what it consisted in, this was a somewhat startling proposal. Geiger had been, it transpired, in contact with Clyde Kluckhohn, a professor of anthropology at Harvard, who was engaged with some colleagues in developing an experimental, interdisciplinary department there called "Social Relations," in which cultural anthropology was conjoined not with archaeology and physical anthropology as was, and unfortunately still is, normally the case, but with psychology and sociology. That, he said, would be the just the place for me.

Perhaps. I had no particular argument against it. But what clinched the matter was that (this is the part you may have some trouble believing) the American Council of Learned Societies had just instituted an also experimental, first-year graduate fellowship program. The fellowships were to be awarded, one per institution, by a selected faculty member at a liberal arts college to his or her most promising student. Geiger (or "Mr. Geiger," as I still must call him, though he died last year at 94, teaching practically to the end, beautifully unreconciled to time or fashion) was the Council's man at Antioch. He thought me, he said, no more unpromising than anyone else around, so if I wanted the fellowship I could have it. As the stipend was unusually generous for the times, indeed, for any times, it could support both myself and my wife not just for one year but for two. So we applied to SocRel (and, again, nowhere else), were

admitted, and, after another strange summer in San Francisco, trying to pick up pieces which would have been better left dropped, went off to Cambridge (MA) to become vocationalized.

I have written elsewhere, in another exercise in this sort of crafted candor and public self-concealment, about the enormous, unfocused, almost millenarian exhilaration that attended the Social Relations Department in the nineteen-fifties, and what we who were there then were pleased to call its Project—the construction of "A Common Language for the Social Sciences." Bliss was it in that dawn; but the golden age was, such is the case with the assertive and the nonconforming, as well as with the exciting, in academia, all too brief. Founded in 1946 as a gathering of fugitives from traditional departments made restless with routinism by the derangements of the war, the air began to go out of it by the sixties when rebelliousness took less intramural directions, and it was dissolved, with apparently only residual regret and not much ceremony, in 1970. But at full throttle, it was a wild and crazy ride, if you cared for that sort of thing and could contrive not to fall off at the sharper turns.

My stay in the department was, in one sense quite brief—two hectic years in residence learning the attitude; one, no less hectic, on the staff, transmitting the attitude ("stand back, the Science is starting!") to others. But in another, as I was in and out of the place for a decade, writing a thesis, pursuing research projects, studying for orals ("How do they break horses among the Blackfoot?"), it was quite long. After a year being brought up to speed, not only in anthropology, but sociology, social psychology, clinical psychology, and statistics, by the dominant figures in those fields (Kluckhohn, Talcott Parsons, Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, Frederick Mosteller, and Samuel Stouffer), another checking out what the other insurrectionists about the place were plotting (Jerome Bruner, Alex Inkeles, David Schneider, George Homans, Barrington Moore, Pitrim Sorokin . . .), I found myself, along with my wife, facing that most brutal and inescapable—then anyway, things have slipped a bit since—fact of the anthropological life: Fieldwork.

And once again, I caught the wave. An interdisciplinary research team, handsomely funded by the Ford Foundation in the open-

handed way that Foundation funded ambitious, off-beat enterprises in its heroic, early days before its namesake's namesake discovered what was happening, was being organized under the combined, if rather uncertain, auspices of the Social Relations Department, the even more newly formed, more obscurely funded, and more mysteriously intended Center for International Studies at MIT, and Gadjah Mada, the revolutionary university setting up shop in a sultan's palace in just-independent Indonesia—a grand consortium of the visionary, the ominous, and the inchoate. The team was composed of two psychologists, an historian, a sociologist, and five anthropologists, all of them Harvard graduate students. They were to go to central Java to carry out, in cooperation with a matching group from Gadjah Mada, a long-term intensive study of a small, upcountry town. My wife and I, who had hardly begun to think seriously, amid all our rushing to catch up on things, about where we might do fieldwork, were asked, one afternoon, by the team's faculty director (who, in the event, deserted the enterprise, mysteriously claiming illness), whether we would consider joining the project—she, to study family life, I, to study religion. As improbably and as casually as we had become anthropologists, and just about as innocently, we became Indonesianists.

And so it goes: the rest is postscript, the working out of a happenstance fate. Two and a half years living with a railroad laborer's family in Java's volcano-ringed rice-bowl, the Brantas river plain, while the country raced, via free elections, toward cold war convulsion and impassive killing fields. Return to Cambridge to write a thesis on Javanese religious life under the direction of Cora DuBois, an eminent Southeast Asianist who had been appointed while I was away as the first woman professor in the Department (and the second, I think, in all of Harvard). Return to Indonesia, this time to Bali and Sumatra and further political melodrama, culminating in revolt and civil war. A year recuperating at the newly founded Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, with the likes of Thomas Kuhn, Meyer Fortes, Roman Jakobson, W.V.O. Quine, Edward Shils, George Miller, Ronald Coase, Melford Spiro, David Apter, Fred Eggan, and Joseph Greenberg. A year at Berkeley, as the sixties ignited. Ten at Chicago, as they blew up—part of the time

teaching, part of the time directing the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations, a multidisciplinary research project on the postcolonial states of Asia and Africa, part of the time off in an ancient walled town in the Moroccan Middle Atlas, studying bazaars, mosques, olive growing, and oral poetry, and supervising students' doctoral research. And finally (as I am seventy-two, and unretired, it surely must be finally), nearly thirty years at The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, struggling to keep an unconventional School of Social Science going in the face of—how shall I put it?—a certain institutional timorousness and self-conceit. And all of this, in the same form and the same rhythm that I have by now, I am sure, wearied you with to the point of skepticism: a moment of confusion and uncertainty of direction, an unlooked-for opportunity dropped carelessly at my feet, a change of place, task, self, and intellectual ambience. A charmed life, in a charmed time. An errant career, mercurial, various, free, instructive, and not all that badly paid.

The question is: Is such a life and such a career available now? In the Age of Adjuncts? When graduate students refer to themselves as "the pre-unemployed"? When few of them are willing to go off for years to the bush and live on taro (or even the equivalent in The Bronx or Bavaria), and the few who are willing find funding scarce for such irrelevance? Has the bubble burst? The wave run out?

It is difficult to be certain. The matter is *sub judice*, and aging scholars, like aging parents and retired athletes, tend to see the present as the past devitalized, all loss, and faithlessness, and falling away. But there does seem to be a fair amount of malaise about, a sense that things are tight and growing tighter, an academic underclass is forming, and that it is probably not altogether wise just now to take unnecessary chances, strike new directions, or offend the powers. Tenure is harder to get (I understand it takes *two* books now, and God knows how many letters, many of which, I have, alas, to write), and the process has become so extended as to exhaust the energies and dampen the ambitions of those caught up in it. Teaching loads are heavier; students are less well prepared; administrators, imagining

themselves CEOs, are absorbed with efficiency and the bottom line. Scholarship is thinned and merchandized, and flung into hyperspace. As I say, I do not know how much of this is accurate, or, to the degree that it is accurate, how much it represents but a passing condition, soon to right itself, how much an inevitable retrenchment from an abnormal, unsustainable high, the smoothing of a blip, how much a sea-change, an alteration, rich and strange, in the coral structure of chances and possibilities. All I know is that, up until just a few years ago, I used blithely, and perhaps a bit fatuously, to tell students and younger colleagues who asked how to get ahead in our odd occupation that they should stay loose, take risks, resist the cleared path, avoid careerism, go their own way, and that if they did so, if they kept at it and remained alert, optimistic, and loyal to the truth, my experience was that they could get away with murder, could do as they wish, have a valuable life, and nonetheless prosper. I don't do that any more.

Changing the Subject

Everyone knows what cultural anthropology is about: it's about culture. The trouble is that no one is quite sure what culture is. Not only is it an essentially contested concept, like democracy, religion, simplicity, or social justice, it is a multiply defined one, multiply employed, ineradicably imprecise. It is fugitive, unsteady, encyclopedic, and normatively charged, and there are those, especially those for whom only the really real is really real, who think it vacuous altogether, or even dangerous, and would ban it from the serious discourse of serious persons. An unlikely idea, it would seem, around which to try to build a science. Almost as bad as matter.

Coming into anthropology from a humanities background, and especially from one in literature and philosophy, the concept of culture loomed immediately large, both as a way into the mysteries of the field and as a means for getting oneself thoroughly lost in them. When I arrived at Harvard, Kluckhohn was engaged, along with the then dean of the discipline, recently retired from Berkeley, Alfred Kroeber, in preparing what they hoped would be a definitive,

message-from-headquarters compilation of the various definitions of "culture" appearing in the literature from Arnold and Tylor forward, of which they found 171, sortable into thirteen categories, and I, supposedly at home among elevated concepts, was conscripted to read over what they had done and suggest changes, clarifications, reconsiderations, and so on. I can't say that this exercise led, for me or for the profession generally, to a significant reduction of semantic anxiety, or to a decline in the birth-rate of new definitions; rather the opposite, in fact. But it did plunge me, brutally and without much in the way of guide or warning, into the heart of what I would later learn to call my field's problematic.

The vicissitudes of "culture" (the *mot*, not the *chose*... there is no *chose*), the battles over its meaning, its use, and its explanatory worth, were in fact only beginning. In its ups and downs, its drift towards and away from clarity and popularity over the next half century, can be seen both anthropology's lumbering, arrhythmic line of march, and my own. By the 1950s, the eloquence, the energy, the breadth of interest, and the sheer brilliance of such writers as Kroeber and Kluckhohn, Ruth Benedict, Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, Geoffrey Gorer, Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Edward Sapir, and most spectacularly, Margaret Mead, who was everywhere, in the press, at lecterns, before congressional committees, heading projects, founding committees, launching crusades, advising philanthropists, guiding the perplexed, and, not least, pointing out to her colleagues wherein they were mistaken, made the anthropological idea of culture at once available to . . . well . . . to the culture, and so diffuse and all-embracing as to seem like an all-seasons explanation for anything human beings might contrive to do, imagine, say, be, or believe. Everyone knew that the Kwakiutl were megalomanic, the Dobu paranoid, and the Zuni poised, the Germans authoritarian, the Russians violent, Americans practical and optimistic, the Samoans laid-back, the Navaho prudential, the Tepotzlanos either unshakably unified or hopelessly divided (there were two anthropologists who studied them, one the student of the other), and the Japanese shame-driven; and everyone knew they were that way because their culture (each one had one, and none had more than one) made them so. We were condemned, it seemed, to working with a logic and a language

in which concept, cause, form, and outcome had the same name.

I took it as my task, then—though, in fact, no one actually assigned it to me, and I am not sure to what degree it was a conscious decision—to cut the idea of culture down to size, to turn it into a less expansive affair. (I was, admittedly, hardly alone in this ambition. Discontent with haze and hand waving was endemic in my generation.) It seemed urgent, it still seems urgent, to make "culture" into a delimited notion, one with a determinate application, a definite sense, and a specified use—the at least somewhat focused subject of an at least somewhat focused science.

This proved hard to do. Leaving aside the question of what it takes to count as a science, and whether anthropology has any hope of ever qualifying as one, a question that has always seemed factitious to me—call it a study if it pleases you, a pursuit, an inquiry—the intellectual materials necessary to such an effort were simply not available, or, if available, unrecognized as such. That the effort was made, again not just by myself, but by a wide range of quite differently minded, that is, differently dissatisfied, people, and that it had a certain degree of success, is a sign not only that some received ideas of "culture"—that it is learned behavior, that it is superorganic, that it shapes our lives as a cake-mold shapes a cake or gravity our movements, that it evolves as Hegel's absolute evolves, under the direction of ingenerate laws toward a perfected integrity—had begun to lose their force and persuasion. It was also a sign that an abundance of new, more effective varieties of what Coleridge called speculative instruments were coming to hand. It turned out to be, almost entirely, tools made elsewhere, in philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, history, psychology, sociology, and the cognitive sciences, as well as to some degree in biology and literature, that enabled anthropologists, as time went on, to produce less panoptical, and less inertial, accounts of culture and its workings. We needed, it seemed, more than one idea, or 171 versions of the same idea.

It was, in any case, with such an accumulation of proleptic worries and semi-notions that I departed, after less than a year of preparation, and most of that linguistic, to Java in 1952, to locate and describe, perhaps even to go so far as to explain, something called "religion"

in a remote and rural subdistrict five-hundred miles south-southeast of Jakarta. Again, I have retailed elsewhere the practical difficulties involved in this, which were enormous (I damn near died, for one thing), but largely overcome. The important point, so far as the development of my take on things is concerned, is that field research, far from sorting things out, scrambled them further. What in a Harvard classroom had been a methodological dilemma, a conundrum to puzzle over, was, in a bend-in-the-road Javanese town, trembling in the midst of convulsive change, an immediate predicament, a world to engage. Perplexing as it was, "Life Among the Javans" was rather more than a riddle, and it took rather more than categories and definitions, and rather more also than classroom cleverness and a way with words, to find one's way around in it.

What made "The Modjokuto Project," as we decided to call it in the usual, unavailing effort to disguise identities ("Modjokuto" means "Middletown," a conceit I was dubious of then and have grown no fonder of since), particularly disruptive of accepted phrasings and standard procedures was that it was, if not the first, surely one of the earliest and most self-conscious efforts on the part of anthropologists to take on not a tribal group, an island settlement, a disappeared society, a relic people, nor even a set-off, bounded small community of herders or peasants, but a whole, ancient and inhomogeneous, urbanized, literate, and politically active society—a civilization, no less—and to do so not in some reconstructed, smoothed-out "ethographical present" in which everything could be fitted to everything else in just-so timelessness, but in all its ragged presence and historicity. A folly perhaps; but if so, it is one that has been succeeded by a stream of others that has rendered a vision of culture designed for the (supposedly) seclusive Hopi, primordial Aborigines, or castaway Pygmies futile and obsolete. Whatever Java was, or Indonesia, or Modjokuto, or later, when I got there, Morocco, it wasn't "a totality of behavior patterns . . . lodged in [a] group," to quote one of those lapidary definitions from the Kroeber-Kluckhohn volume.

The years in Modjokuto, both then and later as I kept returning, struggling to keep up with things, turned out not to consist in locating bits of Javanese culture deemed "religious," marking them

off from other bits called, no more helpfully, "secular," and subjecting the whole to functional analysis: "Religion" holds society together, sustains values, maintains morale, keeps public conduct in order, mystifies power, rationalizes inequality, reduces anxiety, justifies unjust deserts, and so on—the reigning paradigm, then and since. It turned out to be a matter of gaining a degree of familiarity (one never gets more than that) with the symbolic contrivances by means of which individuals imagined themselves as persons, as actors, sufferers, knowers, judges, as, to introduce the exposing phrase, participants in a form of life. It was these contrivances, carriers of meaning and bestowers of significance (communal feasts, shadowplays, Friday prayers, marriage closings, political rallies, mystical disciplines, popular dramas, court dances, exorcisms, Ramadhan, rice plantings, burials, folk tales, inheritance laws), that enabled the imaginings and actualized them, that rendered them public, discussable, and, most consequentially, susceptible to being critiqued and fought over, on occasion revised. What had begun as a survey of (this has to be in quotes) "the role of ritual and belief in society," a sort of comparative mechanics, changed as the plot thickened and I was caught up in it, into a study of a particular instance of meaning-making and the complexities that attended it.

There is no need to go further here with the substance of either the study or the experience. I wrote a seven-hundred page thesis (Professor DuBois was appalled), squashed down to a four-hundred page book, retailing the outcome. The point is the lessons, and the lessons were:

> 1) Anthropology, at least of the sort I profess and practice, involves a seriously divided life. The skills needed in the classroom or at the desk and those needed in the field are quite different. Success in the one setting does not insure success in the other. And vice versa.
>
> 2) The study of other peoples' cultures (and of one's own as well, but that brings up other issues) involves discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it, something a good deal less

straightforward than the ordinary canons of Notes and Queries ethnography, or for that matter the glossy impressionism of pop art "cultural studies," would suggest.

3) To discover who people think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it, it is necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives. This does not involve feeling anyone else's feelings, or thinking anyone else's thoughts, simple impossibilities. Nor does it involve going native, an impractical idea, inevitably bogus. It involves learning how, as a being from elsewhere with a world of one's own, to live with them.

Again, the rest is postscript. Over the next forty years, or nearly so, I spent more than ten in the field, developing and specifying this approach to the study of culture, and the other thirty (I have not done very much teaching, at least since I moved to the Institute) attempting to communicate its charms in print.

There is, in any case, apparently something to the idea of *Zeitgeist*, or at least to that of mental contagion. One thinks one is setting bravely off in an unprecedented direction, and then looks up to find all sorts of people one has never even heard of headed the same way. The linguistic turn, the hermeneutical turn, the cognitive revolution, the aftershocks of the Wittgenstein and Heidegger earthquakes, the constructivism of Thomas Kuhn and Nelson Goodman, Benjamin, Foucault, Goffman, Lévi-Strauss, Suzanne Langer, Kenneth Burke, developments in grammar, semantics, and the theory of narrative, and latterly in neural mapping and the somaticization of emotion all suddenly made a concern with meaning-making an acceptable preoccupation for a scholar to have. These various departures and novelties did not, of course, altogether comport, to put it mildly; nor have they proved of equal usefulness. But they provided the ambience, and, again, the speculative instruments, to make the existence of someone who saw human beings as,

quoting myself paraphrasing Max Weber, "suspended in webs of meaning they themselves have spun," a good deal easier. For all my determination to go my own way, and my conviction that I had, I was, all of a sudden, an odd man in.

After Java, there was Bali, where I tried to show that kinship, village form, the traditional state, calendars, law, and most infamously, the cockfight, could be read as texts, or, to quiet the literal-minded, "text-analogues"—enacted statements of, in another exposing phrase, particular ways of being in the world. Then there was Morocco and a similar approach to marabouts, city design, social identity, monarchy, and the arabesque exchanges of the cycling market. At Chicago, where I had by then begun to teach and agitate, a more general movement, stumbling and far from unified, in these directions got underway and started to spread. Some, both there and elsewhere, called this development, at once theoretical and methodological, "symbolic anthropology." But I, regarding the whole thing as an essentially hermeneutic enterprise, a bringing to light and definition, not a metaphrase or a decoding, and uncomfortable with the mysterial, cabalistic overtones of "symbol," preferred "interpretive anthropology." In any case, "symbolic" or "interpretive" (some even preferred "semiotic"), a budget of terms, some mine, some other people's, some reworked from earlier uses, began to emerge, around which a revised conception of what I, at least, still called "culture" could be built: "thick description," "model-of/model-for," "sign system," "*epistême*," "ethos," "paradigm," "criteria," "horizon," "frame," "world," "language games," "interpretant," "*sinnzusamenhange*," "trope," "*sjuzet*," "experience-near," "illocutionary," "discursive formation," "defamiliarization," "competence/performance," "*fictiõ*," "family resemblance," "heteroglossia," and, of course, in several of its innumerable, permutable senses, "structure." The turn toward meaning, however denominated and however expressed, changed both the subject pursued and the subject pursuing it.

Not that all this happened without the usual quota of fear and loathing. After the turns, there came the wars: the culture wars, the science wars, the value wars, the history wars, the gender wars, the wars of the paleos and the posties. Except when driven beyond

distraction, or lumbered with sins I lack the wit to commit, I, myself, am shy of polemic; I leave the rough stuff to those whom Lewis Namier, who would know, so finely dismissed as persons more interested in themselves than their work. But as the temperature rose and rhetoric with it, I found myself in the middle of howling debates, often enough the bemused focus of them ("did *I* say *that?*"), over such excited questions as whether the real is truly real and the true really true. Is knowledge possible? Is the good a matter of opinion? Objectivity a sham? Disinterestedness bad faith? Description domination? Is it power, pelf, and political agendas all the way down? Between old debenture holders, crying the sky is falling because relativists have taken factuality away, and advanced personalities, cluttering the landscape with slogans, salvations, and strange devices, as well as a great deal of unrequired writing, these last years in the human sciences have been, to say the least, full of production values. Whatever is happening to the American mind, it certainly isn't closing.

Is it then, flying apart? In its anthropological precincts there seems to be, at the moment, a curious lot of people who think so. On all sides, one hears laments and lamentations about the lost unity of the field, about insufficient respect for the elders of the tribe, about the lack of an agreed agenda, a distinct identity, and a common purpose, about what fashion and controversy are doing to mannerly discourse. For my part, I can only say, realizing that I am sometimes held responsible—the vogue word is "complicit"—both for the fact that things have gone much too far and that they haven't gone nearly far enough, that I remain calm and unfazed; not so much above the battle, as beside it, skeptical of its very assumptions. The unity, the identity, and the agreement were never there in the first place, and the idea that they were is the kind of folk belief to which anthropologists, of all people, ought to be resistant. And as for not going far enough, rebelliousness is an over-praised virtue, it is important to say something and not just threaten to say something, and there are better things to do with even a defective inheritance than trash it.

So where am I now, as the millennium approaches me, scythe in hand? Well, I am not going back into the field anymore, at least not for extended stays. I spent my sixtieth birthday crouched over a slit-

trench latrine in "Modjokuto" (well, not the *whole* day, but you know what I mean), wondering what in hell am I doing here at my age, with my bowels. I enjoyed fieldwork immensely (yes . . . I know . . . not all the time), and the experience of it did more to nourish my soul, and indeed to create it, than the academy ever did. But when it's over, it's over. I keep writing; I've been at it too long to stop, and anyway I have a couple of things I still haven't said. As for anthropology, when I look at what at least some of the best among the oncoming generations are doing or want to do, in the face of all the difficulties they face in doing it and the ideological static that surrounds almost all adventurous scholarship in the humanities and social sciences these days, I am, to choose my words carefully, sanguine enough of mind. As long as someone struggles somewhere, as the battle cry from my own Wobbly youth had it, no voice is wholly lost. There is a story about Samuel Beckett that captures my mood as I close out an improbable career. Beckett was walking with a friend across the lawn of Trinity College, Dublin, one warm and sunny April morning. The friend said, ah, isn't it now a fine and glorious day, to which Beckett readily assented; it was, indeed, a fine and glorious day. "A day like this," the friend went on, "makes you glad you were ever born." And Beckett said: "Oh, I wouldn't go so far as that."

Waiting Time

In his direct and plainspoken contribution to this series of fablings and auto-obituaries a couple of years ago, so different in tone and aspiration to my own, the cliometrical economic historian, Robert Fogel, concludes by saying that he is working these days on "the possibility of creating life-cycle intergenerational data sets" that will permit him and his research team to "study the impact of socioeconomic and biomedical stress early in life on the rate of onset of chronic disease, on the capacity to work at middle and late ages, and on 'waiting time' until death." (He is, I hear from other sources, now weighing rat placentas toward that end.) I am not certain—uncharacteristically, Professor Fogel neglects to give his cutting points—

whether I still qualify for the "late ages" or not. But in any case, the "waiting time" category ("Gogo: I can't go on like this. Didi: That's what you think.") and the onset of disabling diseases—Felix Randall, the farrier's "fatal four disorders/fleshed there, all contended"—cannot be very far away; and as either White remarked to Thurber or Thurber remarked to White, the claw of the old seapuss gets us all in the end.

I am, as I imagine you can tell from what I've been saying, and the speed at which I have been saying it, not terribly good at waiting, and I will probably turn out not to handle it at all well. As my friends and co-conspirators age and depart what Stevens called "this vast inelegance," and I, myself, stiffen and grow uncited, I shall surely be tempted to intervene and set things right yet once more. But that, doubtless, will prove unavailing, and quite possibly comic. Nothing so ill-befits a scholarly life as the struggle not to leave it, and—Frost, this time, not Hopkins—"no memory of having starred/can keep the end from being hard." But for the moment, I am pleased to have been given this chance to contrive my own fable and plead my own case before the necrologists get at me. No one should take what I have been doing here as anything more than that.

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