Clifford Geertz
&
The Human Sciences

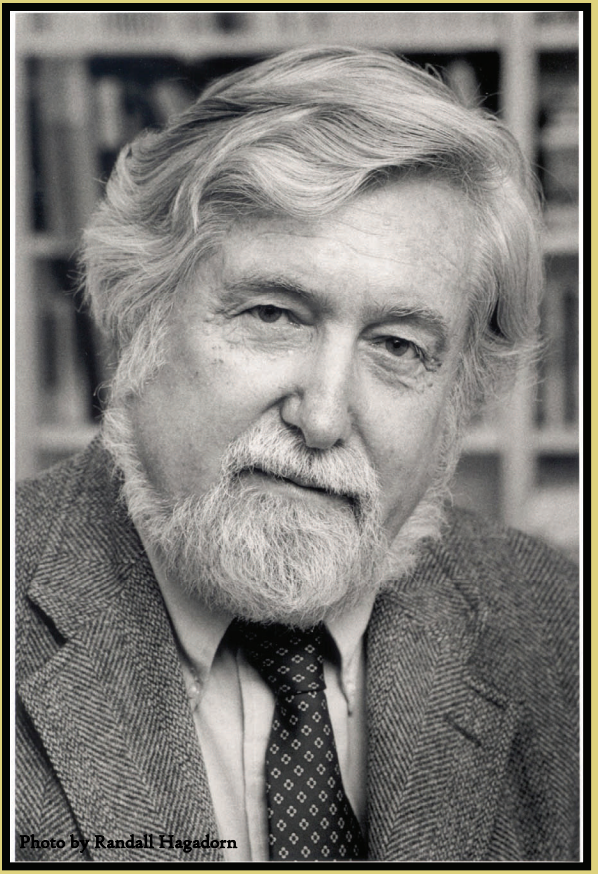

Photo by Randall Hagadorn

Friday, October 19 ~ Sunday, October 21, 2007

The Whitney Humanities Center

The New Haven Lawn Club

Co-Sponsored by:
Yale University
Center for Cultural Sociology
& Whitney Humanities Center

Jeff Alexander - Yale University

David Apter - Yale University

Peter Brooks - Yale University

Stuart Clark - University of Wales, Swansea

J. Joseph Errington - Yale University

Peter Galison - Harvard University

Bernhard Giesen - University of Konstanz

Paul Lichterman - USC College

George Marcus - University of California, Irvine

Isaac Reed – University of Colorado, Boulder

Philip Smith - Yale University

Mats Trondman – Växjö University

Robin Wagner-Pacifici - Swarthmore College

Georgia Warnke - University of California, Riverside

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Friday, October 19th - Whitney Humanities Center

Noon - 2:00	Registration and Lunch
2:00 ~ 2:30	Jeffrey Alexander (Yale University)
	Clifford Geertz and The Human Sciences
2:30 ~ 5:15	**Session I: Geertz in the Human Sciences**
	Chair: Jason Mast
2:30 ~ 3:00	George Marcus (University of California, Irvine)
3:00 ~ 3:05	*Commentator: Ryan Sayre*
3:05 ~ 3:15	Questions
3:15 ~ 3:30	Coffee Break
3:30 ~ 4:00	Stuart Clark (University of Wales, Swansea)
4:00~ 4:05	*Commentator: Samuel Nelson*
4:05 ~ 4:15	Questions
4:15 ~4:45	Mats Trondman (Växjö University)
4:45 ~ 4:50	*Commentator: Rui Gao*
4:50 ~ 5:00	Questions
5:00 ~ 5:15	Follow up questions
5:15 ~ 7:00	Reception: Whitney Humanities Center
7:30	Dinner for speakers at Zinc Restaurant

Saturday, October 20th - Whitney Humanities Center, Room 208

9:00 ~ 10:00	Coffee and Registration
10:00 ~ 12:30	**Session II: Structuralism, Hermeneutics, Geertz**
	Chair: Nadya Jaworsky
10:00 ~ 10:30	Peter Brooks (Yale University)
10:30 ~ 10:35	*Commentator: Andy Junker*
10:35 ~ 10:45	Questions
10:45 ~ 11:15	Philip Smith (Yale University)
11:15 ~ 11:20	*Commentator: Dominik Bartmanski*
11:20 ~ 11:30	Questions
11:30 ~ 11:45	Coffee Break
11:45 ~ 12:15	Peter Galison (Harvard University)
12:15 ~ 12:20	*Commentator: Inge Schmidt*
12:20 ~ 12:30	Questions
12:30 ~ 12:45	Follow up questions

George Marcus

GEERTZ'S LEGACY BEYOND THE MODES OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF HIS TIME

In this presentation, I want to examine Geertz's legacy beyond the arenas in which his scholarship most clearly had impact during this lifetime: the reconstitution of the central intellectual tradition of American cultural anthropology in terms of his leadership in defining first, symbolic analysis, and then interpretation as the primary modality in the study of culture; his influence in giving shape to area studies and social history; and his early contributions to the development/modernization paradigm of the 1960s. Instead, I want to ask how Geertz is reflected in and passed through (and beyond) the so-called 'postmodern' turn in the study of culture, about which he expressed mixed judgments. And more importantly, how his influence is reflected in domains of study in which he had little direct or obvious influence. These domains, which I view importantly as products of the critiques carried in the so-called postmodern turn, are very much beyond the sort of focus on the culture concept that created the conceptual space on which Geertz's originality depended (it is well to recall here that Geertz's scholarship was shaped within the influential and near dominant Parsonian categories of the time, which gave culture a niche, even though Geertz was far from a Parsonian in his own intellectual style). The most important domain to consider here in terms of anthropology is its entry into the realm of science and technology studies since the 1990s. And here I might begin with the observation that Geertz during his last years at the Institute for Advanced Study had been trying to replace himself with a prominent scholar in science studies, an effort that failed at least partly because of an institutional politics that resembled his famous failed effort to bring Robert Bellah to the Institute at the beginning of his tenure. Interestingly, around the time of that effort, I recall my discussion with Geertz in which he was seeking ideas for his replacement among anthropologists, or at least a scholar involved in non-Western research, and seemed personally at a loss to come up with someone The question for me is whether this interest or investment by Geertz in science studies, broadly conceived, as the 'future' has been reciprocated by science studies or other new research agendas by a continuing or legacy interest in him. The larger issue here is the fate of the study of culture, the apogee of which in the U.S. is justly associated with Geertz, in arenas where, after the critiques of the 1980s, the styles of cultural analysis which are associated with Geertz (perhaps Levi-Strauss, also, and generally the anthropological tradition) are effectively proscribed. Can a legacy for Geertz (and for the mode of classic cultural analysis which he came to dominate) be otherwise perceived today in these newer arenas of anthropological research?

Mats Trondman

'TO LOCATE IN THE TENOR OF THEIR SETTINGS THE SOURCES OF THE SPELL' CLIFFORD GEERTZ AND THE 'STRONG' PROGRAM FOR CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

In their formulation of a 'strong' program in cultural sociology, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith argue that sociology, at least after the days of the classics, is suffering from 'a numbness toward meaning' due to 'culturally unmusical scholars'. Clifford Geertz, I will argue, and Alexander and Smith will agree, embodied this demanded musicality on, in Geertz' own words, 'particular ways of being in the world'. He knew how to do a cultural sociology of symbolic structures, meaning making and performances, but did not found a school and had no party line. He even came to reject theory, which forced Alexander in one of his mid-1980s lectures on cultural sociology to conclude that 'we must ourselves turn reluctantly away from Geertz'. And this while at the same time praising Geertz for his outstanding contribution to interpretation of cultures

My aim is to reconcile Geertz with Alexander and the 'strong' program. My main point is that while Alexander rightly criticized Geertz for his turn away from theory, Alexander, at the very same time, missed out on the multidimensional cultural analysis that Geertz kept on doing so well. Because what Geertz came to reject theoretically, I will argue, he kept on doing in his analytical practice. In this sense 'Art as a Cultural System' is a good test case and, in the Kuhnian sense, an 'exemplar'. So to paraphrase: there is no clash between the late cultural analysis of Geertz and Alexander's and Smith's contemporary cultural sociology. It is only a clash within Geertz' own thinking that I would like Alexander to acknowledge. This is one of many reasons my paper on reconciliation is grounded in Geertz' own words: 'to locate in the tenor of their settings the sources of the spell'. As far as I know they ended up as pretty good companions without me.

Isaac Reed

ON MINIMAL AND MAXIMAL INTERPRETATION

Clifford Geertz' great innovation was to recast the relationship between the context of the investigator and the context of the investigator's subjects as the intersection of two meaning-full worlds, subject to the difficulties attendant upon understanding. In his own empirical investigations, Geertz did not start or end with theoretical hypotheses or with facts, but rather artfully wove the two together to produce something that was neither, namely a "thick description," a sense of "being there," or what I would call a "maximal interpretation." Maximal interpretations, I argue, claim the epistemic status of sociological explanations. Indeed, the core problems of the philosophy of social science and social theory (e.g. ideographic v. nomothetic; "idealist" vs. "materialist") can be reframed in terms of the difference between relatively uncontroversial "minimal interpretation" and relatively tendentious (but powerful) "maximal interpretation." This entails, however, a shift in how we think about what theory is and does in sociology.

Philip Smith

THE COCKFIGHT REVISITED:
REFLECTIONS ON STRUCTURALISM AND HERMENEUTICS

Over recent years Geertz's essay on the Balinese cockfight has become his iconic text, effectively outpacing his other writings to become his signature moment. The paper explains this result using resources from Russian formalist literature theory. This is not a scholastic exercise: The fact that such a primitive structuralist toolkit can illuminate the carefully crafted analysis of a famously anti-structuralist hermeneutician should give pause. Geertz's dismissal of structuralism is no longer timely or useful. Better would be a mode of analysis that fuses the generalizing thrust of structuralism with the sensitivities that he pioneered.

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Bernhard Giesen (continued)

The third part presents the concept of "cultural style" and contrasts the cultural style of Negara, that is based on veiling and decoration, honor and withdrawal, dancing and pretention. from the cultural style of Western modernity, that requires unveiling and authenticity, natural unpretentious presentation of the self and functional non decorative aesthetics. The cultural style of Negara repeats in many fields the founding myth of superseding indigeneous barabarians: what is raw and natural, brutish and uncivilized has to be disguised and controlled by cultural refinement and ritual form.

Paul Lichterman

THICK DESCRIPTION AS COSMOPOLITAN CITIZENSHIP

Clifford Geertz's essay on thick description is itself riven with the tensions it so brilliantly identifies in scholarly acts of interpretation. My paper revisits "Thick Description," partly to ratify its wisdom in posing the tensions of thick description against less satisfactory modes of interpretation that are still with us, but more to explore those tensions from a pragmatic and ethnographic standpoint. A central one of these tensions is the relation of description to theory: Good interpretations try to preserve the meanings of particular people in particular situations, Geertz wrote, yet ethnographic, interpretive work also is always 'theory all the way down.' The primary virtue of thick-descriptive interpretation, Geertz implied, is to produce more incisive conversations about the meanings that organize people's action. Taking this invitation to consider thick description as a practical, problem-solving kind of communication, and with examples of interpretive work in view, I propose we should separate the theoretical and rhetorical moments of interpretation more clearly than Geertz's presentation did, without subsuming either entirely under the other. Theory gives ethnographers their bearings in the field, along with some of their standards for assessing an interpretation. Interpretation also requires a rhetorical step that neither the most grounded nor the most structuralist theories can motivate, or assess. To take the rhetorical step ethnographers need to make the people they describe into members of a shared, imagined community. Geertz might have agreed, then, that one of the standards for good interpretive work is projective imagination—not empathy with individual persons but a willingness to communicate the way we think our "subjects" would in that imagined community.

Peter Galison

SCIENTIFIC CULTURES

For much of the twentieth century, "culture" labeled something absolute, certainly not an entity that differed from place to place. After the First World War, that changed; as Clifford Geertz put it: "Instead of just culture as such one had cultures-- bounded, coherent, cohesive, and self-standing: social organisms, semiotical crystals, microworlds." Against culture as semiotic crystal has long stood an opposing image, one with a universalism grounded in shared structures of language, biology, or practical reason: human society as heaped, fundamentally similar grains of sand, not ordered structures of atoms. In the analysis of science. Thomas Kuhn defended the crystal-coherent meanings formed the disjunct scientific languages of "Aristotelean," "Newtonian," or "Einsteinian." By contrast, Rudolf Carnap and his allies saw science as quintessentially granular: elementary re-combinable bits of logical and experiential "protocol language." Is there a way to imagine science in a way that recognizes the productivity of Geertz's ambition to see the fitting-together of practices and beliefs, and yet pushes hard enough on the culture concept to produce an alternative picture—an always-heterogeneous science that resists being caught in the insistent choice of crystal against sand?

Bernhard Giesen

NEGARA -- THE PERFORMATIVE PRODUCTION OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The paper on Clifford Geertz`"Negara" starts with an outline of the hierarchical cosmology of Negara and contrasts this cosmology to the axial age divide between thisworldy "impure" and mundane reasoning and otherworldly principled orientations. It centers the Majapahit conquest of Bali as the founding myth of Balinese royal authority that - unlike the missionary civilization of the west – dispenses with pedagogical zeal, but performs the cultural difference between superior invaders and subjugated people in a non violent way.

The second part of the paper relates Geertz analysis of Negaras ceremonialism to a general thesis about the indispensable ritual and charismatic foundations of political authority. In Geertzens phrasing: "Power served pomp not pomp power". In modern democracies these ritual foundations consist of remembering the revolutionary self constitution of the demos. They perform the reversal of hierarchies and hint at the constitutive importance of regicide.

Stuart Clark (continued)

(as if the winker was doing two things…), and the attention to the ontological status of things in the past (as if what Geertz, following the logical positivists, termed 'protocol sentences' were the historical sources of choice). In considering these sorts of issues and qualifying the 'Geertz effect', I hope to cast fresh light on what has been called the 'cultural turn' in historical studies and Clifford Geertz's part in it.

J. Joseph Errington

ANIMATED LANGUAGE AT THE INTERPRETIVE TURN

Broad notions of culture that coalesced around Geertz' interpretive turn have given his writings a unique influence, durability, and portability across disciplinary lines. Partly because his work is so eclectic, and addressed to so many audiences, it is easy to overlook a recurring thematic conflict it incorporates. Sometimes Geertz rejected and at others presumed interpretive ethnography to be a matter of understanding cultural "systems," as he sometimes put it, through the multiple shifting significances they confer on the world and human doings.

This paper begins with this tension between rejected or attenuated notions of cultural "system" on one hand, and others which play a recurring, crucial role in influential writings on religion, ideology, common sense, ritual, kinship, etc. Whether or not it proves superficial, this paradox returns our attention to the influential culture-as-text trope which Geertz developed with recourse to the work of Paul Ricoeur.

This rereading helps at least to foreground the broader power of Geertz' metaphors, which constrained and did not just enable his text-building strategies for blurring lines between genres of writing, and with them key categories for ethnographic writing (individual and collective, private and public, etc). With hindsight, metaphors of text (and system) can also be seen to have had rhetorical power for readers who needed (and need) strategies for engaging dialectic of otherness, in estrangement and intimacy, which abides in fieldwork and writing alike.

Moving from abstract notions of "system" to experience-near issues of "estrangement" and "intimacy" helps to finally bring Geertz' interpretive reflections on culture into contact with Goffman's late microsociological reflections on interaction. Revisited and suitably relativized, a notion of system might help draw parallels between interpretive notions of culture and interactional frame, so that these two authors' different language games can be considered together with the phenomena they studied.

Robin Wagner-Pacifici

'MALARIAL AND DIFFIDENT': THE VISION OF CLIFFORD GEERTZ

This talk will highlight the recursive structure of Clifford Geertz's famous essay, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,' an essay in which, in Geertz's own words, one stays 'within a single, more or less bounded form, and circle[s] steadily within it'. The talk will link this ever deepening recursive structure to the specific social scientific stance I am calling 'diffident engagement,' a stance that takes its cue from Max Weber's understanding of vocations. Geertz's method of thick description, aimed toward the illumination of meaning, needs to be understood in the light of the productive ambiguity of anthropological distance. I will argue that diffident engagement, in both its Weberian and Geertzian variants, merits revisiting.

Georgia Warnke

GEERTZIAN IRONY

Geertz's account of anthropological understanding fails to do justice to his ethnographic work, at least that on Balinese cockfighting. Geertz's account of anthropology emphasizes the ironic side of anthropology: both interpreter and his or her subject think they know something that the other does not; no matter how successful the interpreter thinks his or her ethnography is, it does not always allow him or her to predict how his or her subjects will act; interpreters and subjects deceive one another insofar they inhabit different universes and usually fail to communicate. Yet, his actual ethnographic work reflects a process of reciprocal education, a fusion of universes and successful communication.

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