

# The Work and Legacy of Clifford Geertz. An Essay on the Interpretive Turn in Anthropology

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2020

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Malighetti, Roberto, 2020. "The Work and Legacy of Clifford Geertz. An Essay on the Interpretive Turn in Anthropology", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : [article1852.html](http://article1852.html)

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

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Visited on 11 February 2025 at 23:21

The great transformations in intercultural relations that marked the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the profound modifications in the scientific status of knowledge, forced anthropologists towards a general rethinking of the aims and methods of their discipline. Global phenomena such as decolonization and indigenization, the Cold War and the rise of nationalism in the countries then called the Third World, questioned the theoretical and ethico-political bases of anthropology, their legitimacy and their reason for existence. The critiques mainly regarded the collusions of the discipline with the colonial enterprise and Western expansionism. The accusations of being the *child of imperialism* or *applied colonialism* (Gough, 1968; Onoge, 1979) were extended to underline the complicity with neocolonialist government programmes such as the South Seas project (Kramer, 1966), the Camelot project (Horowitz, 1967) and the involvement of anthropologists in the Vietnam war and in Thailand (Berreman, 1969; Wolf, Jorgensen, 1970; Flanagan, 1971; McCoy, 1971).

This context exercised complex influences on the disciplinary developments. Some authors predicted the end of anthropology on the basis of the end of colonialism (Willis, 1974) or, under the impact of Western hegemony, as a consequence of the exhaustion of an object of study identified with static and isolated primitive or tribal societies (Worsley, 1966). Other scholars tried to respond to the ethical and political problems deriving from research practices. In 1970 the American Anthropological Association issued the Principles of Professional Responsibility (AAA, 1970) to call anthropologists' attention to the deontological

aspects of ethnographic work. Texts such as *Reinventing Cultures* (Hymes, 1969) or *Anthropology and the colonial encounter* (Asad, 1973), urged serious consideration of the political dimensions of the discipline. Feminist anthropology, focusing on the influence of gender on the conditions of the production of knowledge, brought the crucial questions of researchers' positioning to the fore (Rosaldo, Lamphere, 1974, Reiter, 1975; Weiner, 1976).

In this complicated landscape, crossed by contradictory pushes, the 1973 publication of an article entitled "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", which Clifford Geertz inserted in a collection of essays entitled *The Interpretation of Culture*, had a strategic role in the process of redefining the discipline. In this book, the author responds to what he later called a "pervasive nervousness" (Geertz, 1988, p. 132) caused by the profound changes which had occurred in the world "that anthropologists for the most part study" and in the academic world "that they for the most part study it from" (Geertz, 1988, p. 131). As a matter of fact, Geertz's work moves within a scenario determined by the crisis of cultural representation caused by the convergence of the political and the epistemological dimensions of the ethnographic encounter: "the history of ethnography [...] is one of the appropriation of the voices of the weak by those of the strong, much as their labor or their natural resources were appropriated by more straightforward imperialists [...] compromised in its origins, it is compromised in its acts – ventriloquizing others, making off with their words" (Geertz, 1995, p. 129).

Combining fieldwork with sophisticated considerations on the discipline, Clifford Geertz (San Francisco 23.08.1926 – Philadelphia 30.10.2006) laid down the theoretical basis for rethinking the foundations of anthropology and of the social sciences in general. His reflections on the interrelation between the theoretical and the political aspects of anthropology are primarily based on the critique of the mimetic appropriation of the empirical and rational principles that originated in 17th-century knowledge of astronomy and physics. Geertz's epistemology stands in opposition to the normative systems of thought that inaugurated the scientific revolution: Bacon's inductive model; the Galilean union of observation, experimentation and mathematization of nature; the Newtonian experimental and causational classical mechanics; the Cartesian metaphysical systematization of this form of rationality, based on the dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and on the subsequent conception of knowledge as representation. The articulation of Geertz's discourse is thus based on a radical questioning of the pre-eminent orthodoxies which gave rise to the modern conception of science: the myth of a univocal and fixed scientific method; the conception of knowledge as representation and of objectivity; the rigid separation between subject and object and between theory and "data"; the search for a perfect formal language, purified from subjective references; the mystical ideal of truth.

The Geertzian reform of anthropology is based on the criticism of the "grande idée" (Geertz, 1973, p. 3), of the totalizing paradigms of modernity and of what Jean-François Lyotard called "metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1979). It regards the foundationalist and nomothetic approaches, the various forms of positivism, the attempts to construct general theories that subsume the

particulars and the primacy of the hypothetico-deductive explanatory models. Geertz's thought stands in direct opposition to the sociological reifications of functionalism, the reductionist views of neo-evolutionism, Lévi-Strauss's "cerebral" universalism and foundationalism and the attempt of the ethnosciences to elaborate a "neutral" descriptive language.

Geertz developed his project combining the stimuli coming from different fields of knowledge in very complex and creative ways: from the Parsonsian sociology and the Boasian anthropological tradition to hermeneutics and the philosophy of science; from semiotics to comprehensive sociology; from the philosophy of language to literary criticism. On different occasions, Geertz acknowledged the importance of his interdisciplinary background which had been influenced by "the penetration of the social sciences by the views of such philosophers as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gadamer or Ricoeur, such critics as Burke, Frye, Jameson or Fish, and such all-purpose subversive as Foucault, Habermas, Barthes or Kuhn" (Geertz, 1983, pp. 3-4).

Based on a fertile interdisciplinary outlook, Geertz's theoretical reflections provoked seminal contributions on the conditions of cultural representation. They also stimulated the interdisciplinary dialogue on the scientific status of knowledge and on the relationship between the sciences and induced an evaluation of the social and political role of the anthropologist (Malighetti 2008). For his intellectual efforts it is not difficult to foresee – as Geertz stated about Thomas Khun's legacy – that his work "will be disturbing our certitudes, as it disturbed his, for a very long time to come" (Geertz, 2000, p. 166).

**"An excellent way, interesting, dismaying, useful, and amusing, to expend a life"**

Geertz's interdisciplinary perspective characterized all his intellectual life, as he himself recognizes in his biographical works (Geertz, 1995; Geertz, 2000). After graduating in philosophy and literature at Antioch College (Ohio, 1950) without any university education in anthropology (Geertz, 2000 p. 7), he gained his PhD in anthropology at the Department of Social Relations of Harvard University in 1956 under the supervision of Talcott Parsons and Clyde Kluckhohn. Here Geertz received a solid positivistic education, studying in a very stimulating environment, pervaded by a profound trust in the exact sciences and characterized by the conjunction of anthropology "not with archaeology and physical anthropology, as was, and unfortunately still is normally the case, but with psychology and sociology" (Geertz, 2000, p. 7). Geertz recalls how those "post-war and heroic" years were permeated by very optimistic cognitive and political attitudes and by the idea that "the emergence of the United States as a world power, indeed *the* world power, reviving Europe, containing the Soviet Union, setting the Third World on its developmental course seemed to suggest that the headquarters of learning and research had moved here as well" (Geertz, 1995, p. 99).

The interdisciplinary activity of the department, directed by Talcott Parsons, Clyde Kluckhohn and by the psychologist Henry Murroy, was identified with the project of

elaborating a “grandly architectonic general theory of social action” – seen by Geertz as “the sociological equivalent of the Newtonian system” (Geertz, 1995, p. 100). On these bases the department promoted important activities: Henry Murray’s projects “dedicated to systematizing and testing psychoanalytical insights in a properly scientific manner”; the Russian Research Center, directed by Kluckhohn, “employing social scientific techniques (refugee interviewing, content analysis) in an effort to penetrate, and foil, Soviet intentions”; the group of Jerome Bruner, who was developing what would later become cognitive psychology; the Laboratory of Social Relations directed by the methodologist Samuel Stouffer, “perfecting statistical measures and survey techniques”; and the Ramah Project, coordinated by Kluckhohn, who was “engaged in a long-term comparative study of values in five adjacent cultures in the American Southwest” (Geertz, 1995, pp. 100-101).

In these early days, Geertz was trained to apply the positive laws of research, working, above all, in the Laboratory of Social Relations with the anthropologists Paul Benjamin, Evon Vogt, Douglas Oliver and David Schneider. He also collaborated with the Ramah project for shorter periods of time, working as a sort of armchair anthropologist on the reports and notes written by the members of the research group, “blithely sorting Navajo ways of mourning from Zuni and both from Mormon, Texan, and Spanish American, never having myself so much as been to a funeral” (Geertz, 1995, p. 102). In these institutions, under the guidance of authoritative masters, he was able to consolidate the multidisciplinary approaches that prepared him for fieldwork:

After a year being brought up to speed, not only in anthropology, but in 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, Eron Vogt, 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 (Geertz, 2000, pp. 8-9)

Geertz’s field research activities were carried out in different contexts: in Java (1952-1954; April 1984; March-August 1986; November-December 1999); in Bali (1957-1958) and in Morocco (June-July 1963; June-December 1964; June 1965-September 1966; June 1968-April 1969; June-July 1972; June-July 1976; November 1985; March 1986). His debut was in Java as a member of a team composed by “two psychologists, a historian, a sociologist, and five anthropologists, all of them Harvard graduate students” (Geertz 2000, p. 9). The project was financed by the Ford Foundation and organized under the combined auspices of the Laboratory of Social Relations, the Center for International Studies of MIT and Gadjah Mada, “the revolutionary university setting up shop in a sultan’s palace in just-independent Indonesia” (Geertz, 2000, p. 9). The research was one of the first anthropological attempts to study “a whole, ancient and inhomogeneous, urbanized, literate, and politically active society” (Geertz, 2000, p. 9). The project, called *Modjokuto*, a translation of the term Middletown (the name of the small

town in Indiana, object of the classic sociological studies conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd, in the 1920s), required anthropology to abandon the almost exclusive interest in primitives as well as in “intellectual isolation, cultural particularism, mindless empiricism, and the lone ranger approach to research”. It challenged anthropology to engage with “more conceptualized disciplines (psychology, economics, sociology, political science) to the construction of “a unified, generalizing science of society” (Geertz, 1995, p. 103).

At the beginning, Geertz focused mainly on religion, trying to apply Weberian theories to Muslim and Indonesian reformism. However, the programme changed over time, due to the difficulties of carrying on relations with Indonesian colleagues: “they were dubious indeed about both us and the project – skeptical of our capacities, opposed to our plans, suspicious of our intentions.” (Geertz, 1995, p. 104). Geertz defines this research as a “reincarnation of the pith-helmet procedures of colonial ethnology” inaugurated in the area by the Dutch scholars of the *Volkenkunde* tradition: “we would summon people in from the countryside round and about – or, more exactly, local officials, who would know who was appropriate, would summon them for us” (Geertz, 1995, p. 105).

Only after this sort of research practices recalling the “intensive study of limited areas” elaborated by Alfred Cort Haddon and his colleagues during the Torres Strait expedition, Geertz was able to start working in a Malinowskian manner based on “free, intimate, and long-term relations with those we were studying... the Trobriands in Java” (Geertz, 1995, p. 106). This fieldwork experience was later represented by him in the following way: “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” (Geertz 1995, p. 9).

Back in the USA, Geertz worked as a researcher at the Center for International Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1952-1958) and as a research associate (1957-1958) at the Harvard Laboratory of Social Relations. In the Center he collaborated with some economists and wrote an analytical history of the “involutional” development of Javanese agriculture (Geertz, 1963a). After a stay in Bali and Sumatra in time to attend a “political melodrama, culminating in revolt and civil war” (Geertz, 2000, pp. 9-10), he moved to Palo Alto at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University (1958-59). Here he worked one year “with the likes of ” an extraordinary multi-scientific group: “Thomas Khun, Meyer Fortes, Roman Jakobson, W.V.O. Quine, Edward Shils, George Miller, Ronald Coase, Melford Spiro, David Apter, Fred Eggan and Joseph Greenberg” (Geertz, 2000, p. 10).

After two year as assistant professor of anthropology at Berkeley (1958-1960), Geertz was hired in Chicago in 1960, as assistant professor (associate professor in 1964) and as director of the “Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations” – an institution founded by Edwards Shils to carry out multidisciplinary research on the postcolonial states of Asia and Africa (Geertz, 1963b). In 1963 the Committee published his book on social change and economic modernization in the Javanese town of Modjokuto and the Balinese town of Taban,

(Geertz 1963c). The first in a series sponsored by the Committee, the text is an analysis of field material gathered by Geertz between 1952 and 1958.

Throughout the sixties, Geertz alternated academic activity and research in a new field, Morocco, spending “a part of the time teaching, part of the time directing the Committee for the Comparative Study of the New Nations... 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” (Geertz, 2000, p. 10).

In Chicago, in the “most stimulating, academic environment I have ever experienced” (Geertz, 1995, p. 184-5), populated by scholars like Frederick Eggan, Sol Tax, Milton Singer, Melford Spiro, Manning Nash, David Schneider, Lloyd Fallers, Victor Turner and Paul Ricoeur, “the effort to redefine the ethnographical enterprise whole and entire” took shape, the outcome of which is most generally known as “symbolic anthropology”. It aimed at questioning “the received traditions in anthropology” and at elaborating “a foundational critique of the field as such” (Geertz, 1995, p. 114). Geertz took a very active role in realizing that “move towards meaning” which, in the following years, would be consolidated – as Geertz writes – “as the linguistic, the interpretive, the social constructionist, the new historicist, the rhetorical or the semiotic “turn” (Geertz, 1995, p. 114).

In 1970 he was the first professor in social sciences ever hired at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, “the most unstandard, and the most difficult, academic environment yet” (Geertz, 1995, pp. 120). This institution, which Geertz defined as the “America’s answer to Oxford’s All Souls and Paris’s College de France” gathered distinguished scientists from all over the world: Hermann Weyl, John von Neumann, Erwin Panofsky, Kurt Godel and Albert Einstein (Geertz, 1995, p. 122). Here he became professor emeritus at the School of Social Science and worked until his death, “struggling to keep an unconventional School of Social Science going” (Geertz, 2000, p. 10) and continuing to pursue “an excellent way, interesting, dismaying, useful, and amusing, to expend a life” (Geertz, 1995, p. 168).

At Princeton, Geertz consolidated the turn that he himself defined as “interpretative”, opposed to both “casting the social sciences in the image of the natural sciences”, and to the “general schemes which explain too much” (Geertz, 1995, pp. 127). As described in his autobiographical pages, the “turn” was nourished by the profound political and social “revolutionary” ferments of the sixties, “the American *kairos*: the point at which the future changed”: the Cold War, decolonization, the rise of nationalism, indigenization, the transition from the Eisenhower era to the Kennedy-Johnson era, Vietnam, the civil rights movement, the counterculture (Geertz, 1995, p. 110). These events accompanied his definitive departure from Parsons’ influences and marked the elaboration of a new approach founded on very different authors: from the German historicist tradition to the analytical philosophy and from Dilthey to Gadamer, Kenneth Burke, Ryle, Wittgenstein and Ricoeur. As he himself stated:

...the philosophical disquietudes that had been gathering within those

sciences during the previous two decades grew so powerful in the seventies and eighties as to disarrange their sense of what it was they were all about... It was that the foundations upon which the social science idea had rested since anyway the time of Comte shifted, weakened, wobbled, slipped away. The moral and epistemological vertigo that struck the culture generally in the post-structuralist, post-modernist, post-humanist age, the age of turns and texts, of the evaporated subject and the constructed fact, struck the social sciences with particular force. (Geertz, 1995, p. 128)

Moving the emphasis from the analysis of behaviour and social structure towards the study of symbols and meanings, Geertz's anthropology is part of the currents of thought that, from the late 1960s, rejected positivist approaches and approached the German historicist tradition: Franz Boas's relativism, with its conception of anthropology as ultimately psychological and mental; Edward Sapir's critique of the concept of the superorganic, largely based on Heinrich Rickert; Ruth Benedict's emphasis on the incommensurability of cultures holistically understood, influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey; Robert Lowie's use of the "idiographic" and "nomothetic" concepts to draw a difference between human and natural sciences.

From the very beginning, Clifford Geertz's work provided a text for those anthropologists that were dissatisfied with the nomothetic conceptualizations that, after the Second World War, promoted a conception of anthropology as a "natural science" of society: Leslie A. White's and Julian H. Steward's neo-evolutionism and Marvin Harris's cultural materialism are certainly the most representative figures in this scientist's perspective. Contrary to these approaches, Geertz clearly identified his symbolic and interpretive "revolution" (Geertz, 1995, p. 115) in "placing the systematic study of meaning, the vehicles of meaning, and the understanding of meaning at the very center of research and analysis: to make of anthropology, or anyway cultural anthropology, a hermeneutical discipline" (Geertz, 1995, p. 114).

### **The interpretive turn**

Geertz's reform of anthropology and of the social sciences is based on the articulation of hermeneutic contributions with those provided by 20th-century "hard" sciences. From these perspectives he reflected on the complex links between subject, method, theory and object and overcame the metaphysics of the *givenness* in favour of a constructivist conception of knowledge. He could assume that knowledge builds its referents, forming and shaping the phenomena, and conceive reality in a non-representative way in conformity with a non-extensional logic.

Freed from the dogmatism of modern epistemology, Geertz's concept of science is connected to man's faculty to give meaning to the world. It can be said that it accepts and reformulates a conception of science as a "phenomenon-technique" – a technique for the production of phenomena, according to Gaston Bachelard's expression (Bachelard, 1940). He explicitly states that the anthropological works are "inventions", "constructions" or

“fictions”, not because they do not concern themselves with the “truth” or are postulated as mere hypotheses, but because they are the result of a constructive work: “anthropological writings... are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are ‘something made’, ‘something fashioned’ – the original meaning of *fictio* – not that they are false, unfactual” (Geertz, 1973, p. 15).

Geertz’s hermeneutics excludes the possibility of an objective analysis of social phenomena independently of the theoretical perspectives of the subject. It considers that the level of the constitution of the cultural phenomenon is the level of meaning and value and that – as Ernst Cassirer puts it – the forms of cultural life of man are symbolic forms that constitute worlds (Cassirer 1953 [1923]). Accordingly, the cognitive activity is not a simple reproduction or representation of “data”, but a “forming” process which gives meaning and ideal value to “facts”.

Hermeneutics attributes the function of the Kantian schemata to theory: a model that “puts in front” the data (*Vorstellung*). Theories are not imaginative or figurative representations of the object (*Darstellung*). The function of the theoretical model is *poietic* (from the ancient Greek ποιεῖν/*poieîn* meaning “to make”). It comprehends the *obiectum* (a Latin word meaning “thing put in front”) as the effect of a construction produced by the technical devices of schematization and modelling. The object is not *Ding*, substantial data, immediately found “out there”, and endowed with properties independently of the knowing subject. Rather it is *Sache*, the question, that which is under consideration.

Geertz’s approach assumes that cognitive activity is a “formative” process that shapes phenomena and that the sciences are constituted by models which construct their referents. At the base of his hermeneutics lies the idea that understanding is constitutive of being-in-the-world in the form of a “pre-comprehension” that moves against the background of language, conceived as the prominent place of the possibility to have access to meaning (Heidegger, 1927; Gadamer, 1960). The horizon is definitely semantic: language constructs its objects, forming and transforming meanings. As a consequence, the world coincides, as Gadamer maintains, with the totality of all possible meanings: “Our verbal experience of the world is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 447).

Based on this horizon, Geertzian epistemological reflections take the form of an analysis of the modelling mechanisms, that is, of the way scientific models construct their objects. Geertz’s constructivist approach finds its theoretical references also in what he considers the most up-to-date results of contemporary sciences, that is to say, in the acquisitions “of particle physics, neurophysiology, statistical mechanics or mathematics of turbulence” (Geertz, 2000, p. 149). The subordination to a modern concept of science produced – according to Geertz – a tendency towards “naturalization” and “hyper-simplification” and gave rise to ‘sterile,’ ‘half-baked,’ and ‘implausible’ imitations, linked to anachronistic images of what contemporary sciences are and do (Geertz, 2000, p. 156). Geertz notices that the contemporary scientific approaches followed by the social or human systems of thought are

based on concepts “deeply uninformed about the realities of the ‘real sciences’” and on obsolete models coming from the “opening stages of the scientific revolution – Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Boyle – not to anything in any way remotely contemporary” (Geertz, 2000, p. 144):

As long as there was nothing around much faster than a marathon runner, Aristotle’s physics worked well enough, Eleatic paradoxes notwithstanding. So long as technical instrumentation could get us but a short way down and a certain way out from our sense-delivered world, Newton’s mechanics worked well enough, action-at-a-distance perplexities notwithstanding. It was not relativism – Sex, the Dialectic and the Death of God – that did in absolute motion, Euclidean space, and universal causation. It was wayward phenomena, wave packets and orbital leaps, before which they were helpless (Geertz, 2000, p. 64).

Geertz adopts the complex and disordered images of a world of non-absolute and non-localizable objects configured by the contemporary sciences. These images provide a reality alternative to simple Euclidean extended bodies, defined by a metric space, well circumscribed and clearly defined in speed and location. The objects of the “hard” sciences – such as the micro-objects of subatomic physics: protons, neutrons, electrons, quarks – cannot be thought from an “individualizing” point of view, as “simple” Newtonian facts connected according to the causal paradigm and thinkable with the self-evident categories of mechanics (mass, force and movement). The particles of the subatomic world do not constitute empirical objects of sensation, either immediately or indirectly in the idealized context of the experiment. Quantum mechanics maintains that in every measurement there is an interaction between object and instrument, whose value remains undetermined: it is not possible to measure the position and the speed of a particle at the same time, nor to conduct experiments regardless of the specific conditions of the experimental observability. As a consequence, scientific objects do not exist before the inevitable alteration of the parameters produced by the knowing subject. They are constructed in the contingency of the interaction with the measuring instrument (Borutti, 1999; Malighetti, Molinari, 2016). As Heisenberg suggests, “what we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our methods of questioning” (Heisenberg 1959, p. 81).

The objects of all sciences – rituals or institutions, genes or quarks – are artificial constructs, the precipitates of complex operations of framing and modelling. They result from theoretical and technical procedures that permit the visibility and the knowability of the world. The objects are “well-conducted realizations” or *sur-objects*, “nomological objects”, that is, objects given by a law (from the ancient Greek νόμος/*nomos* meaning “law”). They are theoretical places and formal constructs, the result of complex modelling procedures (Borutti, 1988). As Geertz (1995, p. 62) puts it, what we know are not “data” (i.e. given) but “facts”, that is to say, something “made”: “facts are made (as etymology – *factum, factus, facere* – in itself ought to alert us).” Geertz proposes the concept of objectification to stress how knowledge builds its referents, forming and shaping the phenomena:

Everything is tinged with imposed significance, and fellowmen, like social groups, moral obligations, political institutions, or ecological conditions are apprehended only through a screen of significant symbols which are the vehicles of their objectification, a screen that is therefore very far from being neutral with respect to their 'real' nature (Geertz, 1973: 367).

Geertz's epistemology removes the relation between theory and observation from a naïve empiricism and coordinates it with Wittgenstein's and Norwood Russell Hanson's constructivist approaches. For these authors, to "see" is not an immediate physical process, the formation of a retinal image, but a "theory-laden" enterprise (Hanson 1958, p. 19). Perceptual propositions are not simply "empirical" but contain knowledge: 'the echo of a thought in sight' (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 212).

Accordingly, Geertz's anthropology does not dichotomize the theoretical and the observational, the anthropological theory and the ethnographic representation: the descriptive comment is already an interpretative and constructive theoretical moment. Geertz argues that "every conscious perception is, as Percy has argued, an act of recognition, a pairing in which an object (or an event, an act, an emotion) is identified by placing it against the background of an appropriate symbol" (Geertz, 1973, p. 215). He uses ethnography to recall the different ways in which cultures shape reality, organizing it in significant terms and interpreting it according to relative categories and specific constructions: "the Hopi see the natural world as composed of events rather than objects [...] the Eskimo experience time as cycles rather than serial [...] the Azande conceive the causal chains in mechanical terms but explain their intersection in moral ones" (Geertz, 1983, p. 149).

The Geertzian "turn" at this level produces the most significant paradigmatic change, both from a theoretical and from a methodological point of view. By questioning the conditions of the production of knowledge, it overcomes the positivistic assumption about the autonomy of empirical reality, and the consequent separation between theory and practice, as well as between anthropology and ethnography. From this perspective, to understand objects means to analyse the conditions of their conceivability.

Fieldwork, like laboratory experiments, questionnaires or interviews, coincides with the constructive practices in which the presence of the subject determines the conditions of the construction of his objects. If science results from an interaction between subject and object that produces the conditions of the system and constantly modifies them (Heisenberg, 1959), then fieldwork becomes fundamentally relational and only superficially observational, conducted "from the door of one's tent". The anthropological field loses its scientific connotations of a generic, objective, and neutral container, independent of the ethnographer's practices and of his relations with the interlocutors: a laboratory for "the production of truth" (Pulman, 1986). Rather it emerges as the effect of the ethnographers' experiences, the result of the networks of signification woven by the researchers on the basis of inter-subjective, dialogical, and pragmatic interactions. The field becomes essentially the symbolic place of sense construction which determines the specific characteristics of a

shared experience.

The interpretative approach is deeply rooted in the dynamics of the hermeneutical circularity. It overcomes the dichotomy between subjects and objects in favour of their reciprocal implication: “the other presents himself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 300). On the one hand, the *things in themselves (an sich)* are understood by realizing that their meanings transcend them and appear through the very act of understanding. The objects lose the substantiality of entities with properties independently of the knowing subject. On the other hand, the knowing subject is not the subject that the modern ideal of science removed by means of the ideal of objectivity. The subject is not conceived as a paradigmatic instance, a “neutral” and asexual being: “a eunuch in a harem” or “the popular stereotype of the white-coated laboratory technician as antiseptic emotionally as sartorially” (Geertz, 2000, p. 38). The subject is instead recognized as a linguistic and historical agent, inserted in a form of life and ontologically founded on his culture and his knowledge. He is bound to a set of conceptual and instrumental pre-comprehensions without which understanding would be impossible.

Anthropologists cannot understand themselves as subjects if they do not comprehend that they are formed by their experience, their history and their tradition and by the relations with their interlocutors. Geertz appropriates the hermeneutic perspective and considers that subject and object are linked by the historical (Gadamer, 1960) and linguistic (Ricoeur, 1983) event of pre-comprehension. The pre-comprehension of the interpreter is founded on his belonging existentially to a history determined by the very things that are given to him to be interpreted. There is no objectifying opposition between subject and object, nor extraneousness, but rather a bond of “affinity” and “co-belonging” which links the interpreter to what he interprets. The interpretation of the anthropologist and that of the indigenous merge and refer to each other: one cannot be understood independently of the other. Geertz’s adoption of the hermeneutic circularity is based on a “fusion of horizons” that involves a “rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 304).

Geertz’s perspectives lie beyond objectivism and the “fear of idealism” of the Berkeleyan type “*esse est percipi*”. To state that “cultural description is fashioned knowledge” or to “acknowledge that one has put something together rather than found it glistening on a beach” does not mean “to undermine its claim to true being and actuality” (Geertz, 1995, p. 62). On the contrary, it is precisely the “constructed” characteristic of the object that guarantees its existence and allows to identify the architects of the construction, the dynamics as well as the aims and the interests involved. The “real” reality of the objects of the world lies in their being “made” by someone and not in their being metaphysically “given”:

But a chair is culturally (historically, socially ...) constructed, a product of acting persons informed by notions not wholly their own, yet you can sit in it, it can be well made or ill, and it cannot, at least in the present state of the art, be made out of water or – this for those haunted by “idealism” – thought into existence (Geertz, 1995, p. 62).

## The scientific status of knowledge

As it takes place in the creative spaces opened by the constructive conception of knowledge and by the polysemy of the world, the interpretation poses a problem of choice between the multiplicity of theories, paradigms and research programmes. If the theory is a hypothesis that organizes facts according to a perspective, it is not possible to speak of verification or falsifiability, nor it is possible to separate the explanation from the data and to consider ethnography as proof of the theory and description as proof of the abstraction. The positivistic approaches remain prisoners of the separation between the syntactic and semantic levels. They establish two forms of truth: an analytical truth (empty form, unrelated to experience) and a truth referring to the observable predicates of things (pure content without form). They fail to connect theory and experience and to relate the theoretical vocabulary of science to the terms of observation. In this way they cannot problematize the inherence of form to content, the action of the first in the production of the second, and, more generally, the conditions of the visibility of facts (Borutti, 1999). Geertz discards the Malinowskian method of attaining “truth, verisimilitude, vraisemblance, *Wahrscheinlichkeit*” in a Baconian fashion by “marshaling of a very large number of highly specific cultural details” (Geertz, 1988, p. 3). The relation between theory and referents also excludes the hypothesis of a pure observational theory that can experimentally control another: a theory cannot falsify another since they are two heterogeneous and incommensurable organizations of data.

The constructive nature of knowledge does not contemplate the possibility of conclusive verifications. It proposes what James Clifford (1986) named “partial truths” in place of truth as a representative and totalizing relationship with “the given”. Following Richard Rorty (1980), Geertz identifies the purpose of anthropology “in the enlargement of the universe of human discourse” (Geertz, 1973, p. 14) rather than in its closure by means of some concept of objective truth. One of the fundamental characteristics of cultural analysis is its intrinsic incompleteness:

Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right [...] The fact is that to commit oneself to a semiotic concept of culture and an interpretive approach to the study of it is to commit oneself to a view of ethnographic assertion, to borrow W. B. Gallie famous phrase, ‘essentially contestable’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 29)

To reject what Geertz calls the generalizing “bluff” of “scientism” (Geertz, 2000, p. 136) does not mean questioning the possibility or the rationality of the process of understanding. The acceptance of criteria different from those established by the modern conception of science does not necessarily imply a relaxation of rigour. Instead, it recognizes that there may be different and plural ways to produce science. The admission that we are, as Renato Rosaldo

commented, “positioned observers” (Rosaldo 1989), is a fertile and effective element: “the renunciation of the authority that comes from ‘views from nowhere’ (‘I have seen reality and it is real’) is not a loss, it’s a gain [...] is not a retreat, it is an advance” (Geertz, 2000, p. 137). The hermeneutical conceptions of the circular relationships between subject and object transform into a necessary condition for knowledge what for positivism is a limit. They force the anthropologist to consciously exercise his agency in the implementation of the hermeneutical circularity, and in the control of the relation between his pre-comprehension and the object of inquiry (usually other pre-comprehensions) in a way that the inevitable “author-darkened glass” could be “minimized by authorial self-inspection” (Geertz, 1988, p. 145).

The interpretative method invites the anthropologist to exercise a continuous oscillation between interpretations. As shown by Heidegger (1927) and Gadamer (1960), the dynamic of understanding and interpreting is based on a constant renewal of the project: it implies the continuous revision of the preliminary hypotheses on the basis of the most immediate sense the researcher can exhibit, which is “constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 269). It finds knowledge on the continuous adaptation of pre-comprehensions to the forms of life the ethnographer seeks to understand. This complex intellectual *bricolage* is deeply embedded in the dynamics of everyday life and in the researchers’ commitment to constantly review their perspectives. The task of the ethnographer is to find the explanatory resources in his own language without imposing his own prejudices. He has to avoid the errors derived from pre-comprehensions that are not confirmed by the object. Understanding consists in the elaboration and articulation of anticipations that can only be validated in the relation with the “things”. Interpretations require that the anthropologist relates his own pre-understandings to the forms of life he seeks to understand. They invite the scientists to bring into play and reformulate the theoretical models of departure, the constitutive elements of the horizons from which they interpret reality and the language with which they give meaning to the world. Hermeneutical circularity conceives theoretical elaboration as a dynamic and open process, producing new projects and always capable of reaching new accommodations with reality. It is not based on an unlikely cancellation of one’s own competences, but on the control of one’s own pre-comprehensions and prejudices.

The epistemological problem is formulated outside the scientific model of objectivity, what Geertz calls “‘the God’s truth’ idea” (Geertz, 1983, p. 34). Geertz adheres to a probabilistic argumentative and uncertain logic and to concept evaluation rather than verification. His evaluation criteria lead to something non-ostensive and move within a hermeneutical circularity. They concern the coherence and the agreement between the meanings of the parts and that of the whole: “Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another” (Geertz, 1983, p. 69). As a matter of fact, referring to the classical concept of the hermeneutic circle elaborated by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, he defines it as “a continuous

dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view” (Geertz, 1983, p. 69).

A given reading of society, culture, institutions or practices is valid because it succeeds in giving meaning to its objects. The value of the theory depends on its ability to show its objects, to capture its particularities. The theory – says Geertz – grows out of particular circumstances and, however abstract, “is validated by its power to order them in their full particularity, not stripping that particularity away” (Geertz, 2000, p. 138). If a report is related to the way the interpreter reads the situation or the action, this reading can be explained or justified only by its ability to make sense of the whole. It is the very organization of the discourse that offers the possibility of an evaluation: “texts convince, insofar as they do convince, through the sheer power of their factual substantiality (Geertz, 1988, p. 3).

The persuasive capacity coincides with what Geertz calls the “author-function”, that is, the authority with which the anthropologist manages to authorize his statements. Writing, giving shape to events, configures a “convincing” relationship between the author and the readers of the text: “in discovering how, in this monograph or that article, such an impression is created, we will discover, at the same time, the criteria by which to judge them” (Geertz, 1988, p. 6). If an explanation seems implausible, unintelligible or not persuasive, there is no verification procedure we can refer to. We can only continue to offer interpretations. The “conflict of interpretations” (Ricoeur, 1969) can only be solved by requiring the interlocutor to further elaborate his own intuitions or to change his own orientations. Imprisoned in the immediacy of detail, ethnography, says Geertz, offers no evidence. The “highly situated nature of the ethnographic description” means that what is said implies “a rather take-it-or-leave-it quality” (Geertz, 1988, p. 5):

The besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything – literature, dreams, symptoms, culture – is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist conceptual articulation, and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point of it or you do not, accept it or you do not (Geertz, 1973, p. 24)

The incommensurability of paradigms can generate “persuasions” or “gestalt-shift intellectual ‘conversion” rather than “a relentless approach to a waiting truth” (Geertz, 2000, p. 163). The horizon is Kuhnian: “the transfer of allegiance from one paradigm to another is a conversion experience that cannot be forced” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 151). There are no observational criteria, tests, confirmations or falsifications that can resolve the dispute: “Though each may hope to convert the other to his way of seeing his science and its problems, neither may hope to prove his case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 147).

Subtracting science from the domain of truth and truth from the domain of method, Geertz places the epistemological question in the ethical and political field. The constructive nature of knowledge and the exclusion of exhaustive verifications conceives the interpretation as a moral act, based on the assumption of the responsibility to choose between a plurality of rival

paradigms and theories. Such a decision is necessary. The idea that “cultural description is fashioned knowledge, second hand”, implies the necessity “of taking personal responsibility for the cogency of what one says or writes”. It does not allow one to transpose “that responsibility onto ‘reality,’ ‘nature,’ ‘the world,’ or some other vague and capacious reservoir of incontaminate truth” (Geertz, 1995, p. 62).

### **The particular and the general**

Ethnographic practice is the place of vitality of the Geertzian analysis. It is a process that marked the evolution of his thought: from the first positivistic studies in Java under Talcott Parsons’s supervision, to the “symbolic” experiences in Morocco and Indonesia, matured in the dynamic environments of Chicago and Princeton. Geertz considers fieldwork as a *rite de passage* that initiates the career and marks the identity of the anthropologist and of his science. It constitutes the original activity and the cultural expression of the discipline, the element “capable of sorting out a scramble of ideas” (Geertz, 1995, p.115) as well as the engine of innovations and of the major theoretical contributions. In spite of the “blurring of genres” (Geertz, 1983) between disciplines, Geertz claims the originality of anthropology vis-à-vis the other sciences for “the very identification of the ‘fieldwork cast of mind’ as the thing that makes us different and justified our existence” (Geertz, 2000, p. 94). The result is *nook-and-cranny* anthropology (Geertz, H. Geertz, Rosen, 1979, pp. 1-2) based on the analysis of “specific studies” (Geertz, 1973, p. 25):

If anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens – from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world – is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant (Geertz, 1973, p. 18).

Geertz’s anthropology is alternative to the modern nomothetic and classificatory models which, by resorting to a supra-historical essence inside whose boundaries all human phenomena have to be inserted, subsumes the particularities, excluding them. Geertz’s definitions of both hermeneutics and science are founded on the capacity to conjugate general theoretical understandings with detailed knowledge, synoptic visions with refined searches for details: hermeneutical thought is explained “as a mode of giving particular sense to particular things in particular places” (Geertz, 1983, p. 232) while science is identified “by its power to draw general propositions out from particular phenomena” (Geertz, 1973, p. 67). Arguing “anti anti-relativism” Geertz rejects the opinion that “if something isn’t anchored everywhere, nothing can be anchored anywhere” (Geertz, 2000, p. 46), and elaborates his generalizations on the basis of microsocial and contextual analysis: “small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution” (Geertz, 1973, p. 23):

The notion that unless a cultural phenomenon is empirically universal it cannot reflect anything about the nature of man is about as logical as the notion that because the sickle-cell anemia is, fortunately, not universal, it cannot tell us anything about human genetic processes. It is not whether phenomena are empirically common that is critical in science – else why

should Becquerel have been so interested in the peculiar behavior of uranium? – but whether they can be made to reveal the enduring natural processes that underlie them. (Geertz, 1973, p. 44).

Geertz maintains that definitions are more clearly revealed in the specific traits and “in the peculiarities” than in universal statements: “Cromwell was the most typical Englishman of his time precisely in that he was the oddest” (Geertz, 1973, p. 43). He invites anthropologists to use the “terrifying complexity” of the particulars (Geertz, 1973, p. 54) in order to avoid “vague tautologies” or “large banalities lacking either circumstantiality or surprise, precision or revelation” (Geertz, 2000, p. 134). Discussing the definition of man, he argues that “if we want to discover what man amounts to, we can only find it in what men are: and what men are, above all other things, is various” (Geertz, 1973, p. 52). It is in understanding this variety “its range, its nature, its basis, and its implications” that it is possible to construct a conception of human nature “that, more than a statistical shadow and less than a primitivist dream, has both substance and truth” (Geertz, 1973, p. 52). He thus solicits research to “descent into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture” (Geertz, 1973, p. 53).

From such an idiographic perspective Geertz interprets the Malinowskian principle “to grasp the native’s point of view” stressing the plurality, the specificity and the inevitable partial positioning of interlocutors’ statements. Contrary to Malinowski, he does not identify the scientific effort with the understanding of “stereotyped manners of thinking and feeling” beyond “what A or B may feel *qua* individuals, in the accidental course of their own personal experiences’ (Malinowski, 1922 p. 17). Similarly, Geertz’s positions stand in contrast with the positive views of the sort provided by Radcliffe-Brown’s “natural science of society” (1957), founded on the search for an “account of the form of the structure” and on the act of dealing “only with the general, with kinds, with events which recur” in opposition to the useless concern about “the particular, the unique [...] the actual relations of Tom, Dick and Harry or the behavior of Jack and Jill” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940, p. 4). On the contrary, Geertz urges the elaboration of a social thought that is able to understand the complexity of the differences, overcoming easy reductionisms or empty universalisms. His method seeks to produce generalizations by basing them on detailed analyses, beyond the annihilation of the particular subsumed under large and homogeneous classes.

Geertz’s anthropology approaches the general proceeding from a very extensive knowledge of extremely small matters. It finds in the “concrete”, in the “particular” and in the “microscopic” those general truths that can escape wider views. Geertzian generalizations are not the result of abstractive procedures subsuming objects in formal classes or in the codification of abstract regularities, “across cases”. Rather his theoretical project relies on generalization “within cases” (Geertz, 1973, p. 26). To illustrate his point of view, Geertz refers to the medical and psychological method of the “clinical inference”. Instead of subsuming a set of observations under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of presumptive signifiers and tries to place them within an intelligible frame. The aim is to

elaborate a “diagnosis” that can scan symptoms for their theoretical peculiarities and “ferret out the unapparent import of things” (Geertz, 1973, p. 26). The goal is to understand “how the deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different; the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far away” (Geertz, 1983, p. 48): “What we need, it seems, are not enormous ideas, nor the abandonment of synthesizing notions altogether. What we need are ways of thinking that are responsive to particularities, to individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts, and singularities” (Geertz, 2000, p. 224)

Geertzian generalizations emerge from the contrast between similarities and differences. In doing so they approximate Wittgenstein’s conceptions of the “family similarities” (Wittgenstein, 1953, sections 66-68): they produce non-essentialist general definitions based on complicated and contingent networks of correspondences and differences. Their relevance lies in their heuristic power and in their ability to illuminate the complex meanings of specific phenomena: “when you look into them, their solidity dissolves, and you are left not with a catalogue of well-defined entities to be arranged and classified, a Mendelian table of natural kinds, but with a tangle of differences and similarities only half sorted out” (Geertz, 2000 p. 249). The task of anthropology is to combine the particular with the general and to make generalizations that are open and dynamic, in constant modification, beyond essences, foundations, substances. It can be exemplified by the way Geertz talks about different national “forms of life” and identities:

It is not, to adapt Wittgenstein’s famous image of a rope, a single thread which runs all the way through them that defines them and makes them into some kind of a whole. It is the overlappings of differing threads, intersecting, entwined, one taking up where another breaks off, all of them posed in effective tensions with one another to form a composite body, a body locally disparate, globally integral. Teasing out those threads, locating those intersections, entwinements, connectings, and tensions, probing the very compositeness of the composite body, its deep diversity, is what the analysis of these sorts of countries and societies demands. There is no opposition between fine grained work, uncovering variousness, and general characterization, defining affinities. The trick is to get them to illuminate one another, and reveal thereby what identity is. And what it is not (Geertz, 2000, p. 227)

Geertz advanced a transversal look and rethought the comparative method beyond the scientific ambition to explain the crucial differences between human groups in terms of an objective language that transcends them and interprets them as variants of a universal scheme. These strategies produce high levels of generality and superficiality. The comparability between phenomena is directly proportional to the level of abstraction: the maximum degree is accompanied by generalizations so vast as to be almost empty. The history of anthropological thought shows how the search for “empirical universals” or “invariant points of reference” not only dissolves the specificity of the phenomena, homologated within large classes, but it is also a source of confusion and contradictions. As Geertz writes, “drawing a line between what is natural, universal and constant in man and what is conventional, local and variable” is so difficult that “to draw such a line is to falsify

the human situation or at least to misrender it seriously (Geertz, 1973, p. 36). He thinks there is a logical conflict between asserting that two or more phenomena are universal and then to give them a specific and circumstantial content:

What, after all, does it avail us to say, with Herskovits that ‘morality is a universal and so is enjoyment of beauty and some standards of truth’ if we are forced in the very next sentence, as he is, to add that ‘the many forms these concepts take are but products of the particular historical experience of the societies that manifest them?’” (Geertz, 1973, p. 41)

Geertz wants to overcome the rigid oppositions between a relativism which is hostile to comparisons and generalizations and an objectivism which abdicates understanding of the particularities. His transversal outlook goes through different contexts (Java, Bali, Celebes, Sumatra, Indonesia and Morocco) searching for unexpected relationships between different phenomena, rather than the substantial identities among similar ones. Geertz highlights the creative possibilities that arise from combining incommensurable paradigms, different forms of life and traditions. The important thing is not so much to compare the different phenomena, as if they were “a natural fact”, but to “compare incomparables” (Geertz, 1995, p. 49) to find unpredictable analogies and new metaphors: the state as a theatre or cockfighting as a game or as text.

The interpretative turn involves a profound change in the analogies and metaphors that have shaped scientific enterprises. It substitutes the use of “propulsive metaphors (the language of the pistons)” with the “ludic ones (the language of pastimes)” (Geertz, 1983, p. 26), looking less “for the sort of thing that connects planets and pendulums and more for the sort that connects chrysanthemums and swords” (Geertz, 1983, p. 19).

Geertz acknowledges that the choice of a given rhetorical figure represents a way to impose a particular and specific reading. Following different authors, such as Susan Langer, William Percy, Max Black, Nelson Goodman, Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Locke, he considers the metaphor not as a stylistic fact and therefore paraphrasable, but as a restructuration of meaning and of knowledge. It is a powerful epistemological instrument both in a heuristic sense and in the process of the elaboration of new theories. The history of science can show how “metaphorical redescrptions” lie at the basis of the discovery of new paradigms (Black, 1962; Hesse, 1966).

Geertz’s use of metaphors follows Paul Ricoeur’s interpretation of Aristotle’s Poetics. The metaphor, as a *poietic* re-description, produces new images about reality and inaugurates new meanings: a “living metaphor”, according to Ricoeur’s significant title of one of his books (Ricoeur, 1975). It is a semantic event that constructs objects, allowing them to be seen in a light created by the overlapping of heterogeneous semantic fields. In a passage that recalls the conceptualizations of the New Rhetoric and Max Black’s “interactive metaphor”, Geertz illustrates his own conception of the way the metaphor works:

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 (Geertz, 1973 p. 447).

To read cultural phenomena with ludic, dramaturgical or textual metaphors produces very different implications from seeing them through the biological metaphors that have marked the history of the discipline (evolution, function, structure, homeostasis, machine, organic and superorganic). These analogies, cultivated mainly by the evolutionist and the functionalist schools of thought, have generated an organic and a mechanical image of society subjected to the laws of evolutionistic biology or of mechanics physics. Geertz uses literary analogies to underline the change towards an interpretative and semantic turn, which does not think of society as an organism or a machine to be explained in causal terms, but as a set of meanings to be comprehended:

To put the matter this way is to engage in a bit of metaphorical refocusing of one's own, for it shifts the analysis of cultural forms from an endeavor in general parallel to dissecting an organism, diagnosing a symptom, deciphering a code, or ordering a system – the dominant analogies in contemporary anthropology – to one in general parallel with penetrating a literary text. If one takes the cockfight, or any other collectively sustained symbolic structure, as a means of 'saying something of something' (to invoke a famous Aristotelian tag), then one is faced with a problem not in social mechanics but social semantics. (Gertz 1973, p. 448)

The textual analogy, more than any other, characterizes Geertz's hermeneutical method, constituting the very definition of the concept of culture as "acted document" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10). It solicits the attention to comprehend how the interpretations of the reader are in a constant circular relation with the text: the one cannot exist independently of the other. Besides, the text metaphor underlines the activity of producing texts and stresses the artificial nature of cultural reports, based on the articulation of a variety of conventions, literary forms and rhetorical strategies which shape the fieldwork experience and seek to legitimize it in persuasive terms.

### **The science of symbolic action**

Geertz's method is based on the analysis of the structures of meaning in terms of which individuals and groups of individuals live and on the examination of the symbolic systems through which these structures are formed, communicated, altered and reproduced. His efforts lie in pursuing the construction of "a developed method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time" (Geertz, 1973, p. 364).

This methodological precept, which Geertz defines as “a scientific phenomenology of culture”, is founded on Alfred Schutz’s attempt to fuse the influences stemming from Max Scheler, Max Weber and Edmund Husserl with those stemming from William James, George Herbert Mead and John Dewey (Geertz, 1973, pp. 364-365). It interprets the postulate of the “subjective interpretation” and satisfies the analytical principle to comprehend the meaning that the action has for the agent. According to Schutz, “all the scientific explanations of the social world *can* and, for certain purposes, *must* refer to the subjective meaning of the actions of human beings from which the social reality originates’ (Schutz, 1962, p. 62).

Geertz not only considers man as a cultural animal “suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5), he conceives behaviour as symbolic action, “action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies” (Geertz, 1973, p. 10). His “semantics of action” (Geertz, 1983, p. 182) starts from the examination of ways in which social agents interpret the meaning of their behaviours: “meaning is not intrinsic in the objects, acts, processes, and so on which bear it, but – as Durkheim, Weber and so many others have emphasized – imposed upon them; and the explanation of its properties must therefore be sought in that which does the imposing – men living in society’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 405).

Geertzian analysis investigates the actor’s point of view by placing the action in relation to the configuration of ideals, attitudes and values on which it is based. This approach is defined by Geertz with the term *thick description* which he takes from Gilbert Ryle (Ryle, 1949). The thick description consists of the reconstruction of the levels of meaning belonging to the perspectives of the actors, in the analysis of the multiplicity of the complex conceptual structures that inform them. It represents the search for “a context” within which social events, behaviours, institutions and processes can be intelligibly described. This requires the researcher to orient the analysis towards the actors, considering their “point of view,” and then reconstructs the cultural elements on which the interlocutors construct the sense of their action. Geertz explains the methodological aspects of the thick description in this way:

Such an approach to things does not [...] bring to the center of attention neither rules nor happenings, but what Nelson Goodman has called “versions of the world” and others “forms of life”, *epistemés Sinnzusammenhänge* or “neotic systems”. Our gaze fastens on meanings, on the ways in which the Balinese (or whoever) make sense of what they do [...] by setting it within larger frames of signification, and how they keep those larger frames in place, or try to, by organizing what they do in terms of them (Geertz, 1983, p. 180).

Articulating Gilbert Ryle’s argument with the difference established by Max Weber between behaviour and action, Geertz exposes the meaning of the thick description by comparing “twitches and winks”: the former are simple actions while the latter are examples of significant behaviour, which is the specific object of ethnography. For the external observer, the two types of action are identical. The action receives a meaning by referring to the agent’s perspectives and by inserting it in its contexts or in its form of life. As Ricoeur states, as

regards the Geertzian use of the thick description, it is only “as a function of” a certain symbolic convention that we can interpret the meaning of a gesture: “the same gesture of raising one’s arm, depending on the context, may be understood as a way of greeting, of hailing a taxi, or of voting” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 58).

The perspective is substantially linguistic and communicative. The sense, subjectively understood, can only be expressed through symbols: the language we speak, or rather that, as Heidegger and Wittgenstein underlined, “speaks through us” (*Sprache spricht*), becomes the medium to understand the interlocutors. The linguistic declaration of intent is – as Ricoeur maintains – the equivalent of what is lived phenomenologically as a voluntary intention.

The analysis of the subjective meaning is thus de-psychologized, to use Ricoeur’s expression, and based on the public statement of the action. It focuses on the synchronic study of the objective forms in which experience is organized (Ricoeur, 1977, p. 38). Following this argumentation, Geertz’s method does not involve any private sphere or intimacy. It refuses the dualistic, the reductionistic and the foundationalist forms that postulate realities “inside” the subject qua mental antecedents or final causes of the action. The comprehension does not imply the need to refer, diachronically, to the author’s intentions through empathic relationships, phenomenological reductions, *epoché* or bracketing: the “accounts of other peoples’ subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego effacement and fellow feeling” (Geertz, 1984, p. 70).

On the one hand, Geertz stresses how anthropologists, like all human beings, are ontologically founded on their culture and knowledge. It is thus impossible for the subject to parenthesize his own culture, his knowledge and subjectivity in the name of a foundational substance, an underlying essence or a universal nature. In two articles entitled “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man” and “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 33-87), he clarifies this point in a way that is synthesized by the following quotation:

...there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture would not be the clever savages of Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* thrown back upon the cruel wisdom of their animal instincts; nor would they be the nature’s noblemen of Enlightenment primitivism or even, as classical anthropological theory would imply, intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves. They would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases. (Geertz, 1973, p. 49)

On the other hand, Geertz combines concepts taken from very heterogeneous authors like Husserl, Wittgenstein, Ryle, Dewey, and G.H. Mead, to contrast the attempts to identify the intentional and significant element of behaviour with something mental, prior to action, to which to refer in causal terms. Using Gilbert Ryle’s arguments Geertz opposes the Cartesian dualism and the division of human life into a physical part, observable as any other physical

process, and a mental part, cause of the first, private and inaccessible to observation: the “ghost in the machine”, as Ryle defines the mind-body dichotomy (Ryle, 1949). According to what Ryle calls “the two worlds legend”, one could have a complete knowledge only of the works of one’s mind. The mind of others would be known only through inferences drawn from the observed behaviour of a body, whose motions would be signs of certain mental states, analogous to the mental ones a person can know about himself. As a consequence, doing or saying something meaningful would involve doing two things: to consider certain propositions appropriate and then to put them into practice.

Ryle maintains that the dualistic conception is based on a sort of “category-mistake” which establishes a para-mechanical connection between terms belonging to heterogeneous domains, presenting the facts of mental life by analogy with those illustrated by the natural sciences. Not only is it not possible to inspect a mind as one inspects the world of extended things, but moreover, the laws which govern the works of the mind and their relations with the movements of the body are unknown. Any claim to infer the former from the latter is unjustified. It is not possible to confirm the similarity of the relationship between the motions of two bodies and the acts of their respective minds. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to avoid the solipsism implicit in the Cartesian dualism and the consequent impossibility to demonstrate the existence of other minds distinct from one’s own (Ryle, 1949).

Geertz utilizes the tools developed by means of Ryle’s philosophy to go beyond the unfeasibility of tracing behaviours back to the mental causal antecedents. For Ryle, the exercise of mental qualities means to do one thing *in a certain way*, that is, following certain dispositions that are exercised by observing rules, canons and criteria. Geertz illustrates his position by quoting a passage from Ryle in the exergue of his essay “The Growth of Culture and Evolution of Mind” (Geertz, 1973, p. 55):

The statement ‘the mind is its own place,’ as theorists might construe it, is not true, for the mind is not even a metaphorical ‘place.’ On the contrary, the chessboard, the platform, the scholar’s desk, the judge’s bench, the lorry-driver’s seat, the studio and the football field are among its places. These are where people work and play stupidly or intelligently. ‘Mind’ is not the name of another person, working or frolicking behind an impenetrable screen; it is not the name of another place where work is done or games are played; and it is not the name of another tool with which work is done, or another appliance with which games are played (Ryle, 1949, p. 50).

Accordingly, Geertz holds that to speak of the mind or of the mental attributes of a person is not to speak of a warehouse that keeps the objects excluded from the physical world. The mind is not the Archimedean basis to which the explanation of behaviour can be causally reduced. Rather, the mind is a set of *dispositions* of an organism to perform certain types of action. Combining Ryle’s concepts with Dewey’s, Geertz describes the mind as something fully observable and existing in the real world:

‘Mind’ is a term denoting a class of skills, propensities, capacities,

tendencies, habits; it refers in Dewey's phrase to an 'active and eager background which lies in wait and engages whatever comes its way.' And, as such, it is neither an action nor a thing, but an organized system of dispositions which finds its manifestation in some actions and some things. (Geertz, 1973, p. 58)

Abandoning "the two worlds legend" means rejecting the idea "that there is a locked door and a still to be discovered key" (Ryle, 1949, p. 302). The only events to be analysed and the only ones that can be considered "mental" are human actions and reactions. The characterization of human behaviour by means of mental predicates undoubtedly requires going beyond the perceptible aspect of the action. However, it does not necessarily imply any reference to hidden causes removed from the investigation nor the search for "secret places". Mental actions can be public or private, they can consist of actions performed or imagined, of words told only to oneself or to others (Ryle, 1949, p. 34). In any case they do not refer to "shadow-actions" that would take place "in the mind" as a preamble to "public" ones (Ryle, 1949).

From this perspective, Geertz invites anthropologists to consider the abilities and propensities of which the action is an implementation. He recommends a "practical epistemology" (Geertz, 1983, p. 151), based on the analytical passage from what is conceived as "the comparability between psychological processes" of different peoples to "the commensurability of conceptual structures" between discursive communities (Geertz, 1983, p. 151). The method refers to the ascertainment of data in public settings:

To undertake the study of cultural activity – activity in which symbolism forms the positive content – is thus not to abandon social analysis for a Platonic cave of shadows, to enter into a mentalistic world of introspective psychology or, worse, speculative philosophy, and wander there forever in a haze of 'Cognitions,' 'Affections,' 'Conations,' and other elusive entities. Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture (Geertz, 1973, p. 91).

Geertz can thus understand "ethnographically" the thinking activity and describe how it receives its meaning. Borrowing a phrase from Joseph Levenson, he transforms the study of thought into the "study of men thinking" (Geertz, 1973, p. 405). Mental activity, thus understood, does not happen in any particular secret place, but in the same place – the social world – where men do everything else. Geertz articulates Ryle's themes with G. H. Mead's vision of thought as "traffic in significant symbols" (Geertz, 1973, p. 362) in order to elaborate a scientific methodology based on the principle that thoughts are empirically analysable:

The view that thought does not consist of mysterious processes located in what Gilbert Ryle has called a secret grotto in the head but of a traffic in significant symbols – objects in experience (rituals and tools; graven idols and water holes; gestures, markings, images, and sounds) upon which men have impressed meaning – makes of the study of culture a positive science like any other (Geertz, 1973, p. 362)

Thought is rooted by Geertz in communicative contexts, in forms of life and in experiences: “language, art, myth, theory, ritual, technology, law, and that conglomerate of maxims, recipes, prejudices, and plausible stories the smug call common sense” (Geertz, 1983, p. 153). The analysis of the intentional factor is founded by Geertz on the consideration of thought as a public and intersubjective activity. Taking further cues from Dewey’s works and from the “extrinsic theory” of Eugene Galanter and Murray Gerstenhaber (Geertz, 1973, p. 214), Geertz maintains that thought consists in the construction and manipulation of symbolic systems rather than in phantasmatic internal events:

human thought is basically both social and public [...] its natural habitat is the house yard, the marketplace, and the town square. Thinking consists not of ‘happenings in the head’ [...] but of a traffic in what have been called, by G. H. Mead and others, significant symbols – words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels – anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. From the point of view of any particular individual, such symbols are largely given. He finds them already current in the community when he is born [...]. While he lives he uses them, or some of them, sometimes deliberately and with care, most often spontaneously and with ease, but always with the same end in view: to put a construction upon the events through which he lives, to orient himself within ‘the ongoing course of experienced things,’ to adopt a vivid phrase of John Dewey’s (Geertz, 1973, p.45).

Geertz’s alternative to what he calls “privacy theories of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, p. 12) and to the consideration of symbolization as a “psychological” operation follows Wittgenstein’s theory of meaning: “To abandon the hope of finding the ‘logic’ of cultural organization in some Pythagorean ‘realm of meaning’ is not to abandon the hope of finding it at all. It is to turn our attention toward that which gives symbols their life: their use” (Geertz, 1973, p. 405). The meaning understood subjectively is given by use, by symbolic connections and by social schemes: it depends on a public syntax, incorporated into the action and decipherable starting from the action itself and from the actors living in the social and cultural world. Thought as a private act is a derived capacity. The way we learn to count or to read mentally is used to explain this point:

In fact, thinking as an overt, public act, involving the purposeful manipulation of objective materials, is probably fundamental to human beings; and thinking as a covert, private act, and without recourse to such materials, a derived, though not unuseful, capability. As the observation of how school children learn to calculate shows, adding numbers in your head is actually a more sophisticated mental accomplishment than adding them with a paper and pencil, through an arrangement of tally sticks, or by counting, piggy-fashion, one’s fingers and toes. Reading aloud is a more elementary achievement than reading to oneself, the latter ability having only arisen, as a matter of fact, in the Middle Ages. (Geertz, 1973, pp. 76-77)

By merging the cultural and social analysis inside semiotics, Geertz based the study of

intentions and ideas on the consideration of them as “sociological”. He does not flatten them into a mentalistic or materialistic determinism, neither does he try to assemble types of awareness and types of social organization or to run “causal arrows from somewhere in the recesses of the second in the general direction of the first” (Geertz, 1983, p. 153). His approach conceives ideas as “visible, audible” and, as he writes using a neologism, “tactible” (Geertz, 1983, p. 119). The meanings of motivations and intentions, expressed symbolically, albeit in a vague and elusive way, can be understood through “a systematic empirical investigation”, in the same way as we study “the atomic weight of hydrogen and of the function of the adrenal glands” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 362-363). In this way Geertz can produce an “empirical science of ideas”:

Ideas are not, and have not been for some time, unobservable mental stuff. They are envehicled meanings, the vehicles being symbols (or in some usages signs), a symbol being anything that denotes, describes, represents, exemplifies, labels, indicates, evokes, depicts, expresses – anything that somehow or other signifies. And anything that somehow or other signifies is intersubjective, thus public, thus accessible to overt and corrigible *plein air* explication. Arguments, melodies, formulas, maps, and pictures are not idealities to be stared at but texts to be read; so are rituals, places, technologies, and social formulas (Geertz, 1980 p. 135).

#### **From the anthropologist’s point of view**

Geertz’s phenomenology of culture and the adoption of the principle of the subjective interpretation does not imply any immediate reduction of understanding to the perspectives of the social actors. Rather it is based on the inevitable difference that distinguishes anthropological discourses from those of the informants and it points out that the production of anthropological knowledge is inevitably conducted “from the anthropologist’s point of view”: “The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’ – or ‘by means of’ or ‘through’... or whatever the word should be” (Geertz, 1983, p. 58). Geertz underlines that the anthropological interpretations, by their very nature, are different from the informants’ reports, basing their quality on such heterotopia. The strength of the interpretation lies, hermeneutically, in the gap that authorizes the analyst to construct a sense that transcends the authors’ actions and meanings. As Gadamer maintains, “not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well [...]. Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better [...] we understand in a different way, if we understand at all” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 296).

This hiatus grounds the status and the role of the researcher. It overcomes any naïve empiricist mechanism of delegating to the informants the elaboration of viewpoints that the anthropologist should simply gather more or less immediately. Geertz rejects the claim that the members of a culture can be transformed into authors of the anthropological interpretations in terms not only internal to their culture but also to the translator’s

language. The analytical immersion into the private world of the interlocutors is scientific because it is generated by anthropological language and accepted by the scientific community. Geertz articulates the interpretative relationship through the distinction, originally formulated by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1984), between “experience-near concepts” and “experience-distant concepts”

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. ‘Love’ is an experience-near concept, ‘object cathexis’ is an experience-distant one. ‘Social stratification’ and perhaps for most peoples in the world even ‘religion’ (and certainly ‘religious system’) are experience-distant; ‘caste’ and ‘nirvana’ are experience-near, at least for Hindus and Buddhists. (Geertz, 1983, p. 57)

The study of the symbolic forms through which people represent themselves and others is carried out using not only concepts that come from the interlocutors’ language. Instead, it involves the use of specialized concepts that are distant from the immediacy of the social life and from concepts that are usually ignored by the people analysed. The anthropologist must learn how to use both concepts, without limiting himself to the native’s point of view and without imposing his own. He must avoid, on the one hand, the flattening of the analysis in the representation of the premises of the interlocutors and thus remain “imprisoned within their mental horizons” and in the immediacy of the phenomena studied: “an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch”. On the other hand, he cannot be “systematically deaf” to his objects, in a unilateral projection of the scientific imagination, “an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer” (Geertz, 1983 p. 57). The critical point is the understanding of the role of both concepts and of the modalities of their interrelation:

The difficulty in this is enormous, as it has always been. Comprehending that which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-his-own indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but inconsequent, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having learnt it, always very imperfectly, to work continuously to keep alive (Geertz, 2000, p. 87).

The very task of interpretation consists of understanding “how the deeply different can be deeply known”, as Geertz states, “without becoming any less different”, and “the enormously distant enormously close without becoming any less far away” (Geertz, 1983, p. 48). He deals with the problem of representing the representations of other people, working also with the representations of other ethnographers. Emphasizing the collaborative and communicative nature of the ethnographic situation, he bases ethnography on the interrelationship between the interpretative constructions of the anthropologist and those of his interlocutors. The

comparison becomes a comparison between languages, life-forms, *Weltanschauungen*, points of view.

The hermeneutical work of the anthropologists coincides with the work of the translator, with the ability to trans-late i.e. “to carry across” (from the Latin word *trans*, “across” and *latum*, past participle of *fero* “to carry, to bring”) the language of the natives into the public and specialized language of anthropology, following its specific rules, canons and criteria. As Gadamer writes: “Every translation is at the same time an interpretation. We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 386). Translating does not mean abiding inside one’s knowledge, nor even inside the object. It means to place oneself inside their differences, comparing one’s own language with the one to be translated: he must render “the foreign familiar while preserving its very foreignness”, as Vincent Crapanzano underlined quoting Walter Benjamin (Crapanzano, 1986, p. 52). The Geertzian ethnographer must make sense of what is foreign. Like the translator, he aims at solving the problem of strangeness and at the same time he must communicate it:

‘Translation,’ here, is not a simple recasting of others’ ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them (that is the kind in which things get lost), but displaying the logic of their ways of putting them in the locutions of ours; a conception which again brings it rather closer to what a critic does to illumine a poem than what an astronomer does to account for a star (Geertz, 1983, p. 10).

The translation is not meant as a simple transposition, a mechanical comparison of abstract words and phrases. Any translation is an interpretation that implies an irremediable difference between the original discourse and its reproduction. It is not “simply a re-awakening of the original process in the writer’s mind” (Gadamer 1975, p. 386). Rather it is a mediation determined by the ineliminable difference between languages which cannot be resolved through references to any “requirement that a translation be faithful” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 387). It involves a symbolic transfer, the transition from one language to another, from one form of life to another, from one culture to another. In this sense it is a cognitive and interpretative operation. As Benjamin wrote, “every translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of the languages” (Benjamin, 1955, p. 45).

Translating means to bring “a new light” into the text that “falls on the text from the other language and for the reader of it” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 387): like all interpretations, it “is a highlighting” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 388). The translator “must understand that highlighting is part of his task” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 388). As Geertz maintained, “[t]he reshaping of categories [...] so that they can reach beyond the contexts in which they originally arose and took their meaning so as to locate affinities and mark differences is a great part of what ‘translation’ comes to in anthropology” (Geertz, 1983, p. 12). This “reshaping” is at the base of any interpretation. Ricoeur’s interpretation of the Freudian analogy between analytical practice and linguistic translation explains how the analyst enters the private world of the subject to

read the grammar of his private language in order to go beyond the patient's words. The scientific character of the enterprise depends on the transposition of the subjective language into the public language of the discipline. In Ricoeur's interpretation of Freud, the narration of a dream is an intelligible text which the analysis replaces with a more intelligible text. To understand means to make this substitution (Ricoeur, 1965).

The Geertzian anthropologist, like the translator, uses his language to reconstruct the ways in which the subjects belonging to different cultures give meaning to themselves and to their lives. He reconstructs a foreign symbolic system starting from this extraneousness. He aims at making explicit the latent and hidden meanings, without disregarding those that the subject recognizes and intends, but not limiting himself to them. Anthropological interpretations should not aim at reproducing informants' perspectives, subsumed in standardized and universalizing classes. To disperse the ethnographic authority among the informants would mean denying the discipline its scientific status:

What it means is that descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them. What it does not mean is that such descriptions are themselves Berber, Jewish, or French – that is, part of the reality they are ostensibly describing; they are anthropological – that is, part of a developing system of scientific analysis. (Geertz, 1973, p. 15)

The cultural text does not exist before its interpretation, dictated by perfectly competent informants “by virtue of special knowledge or ability, authority, and quality of intellect or character” (Casagrande, 1960 p. 9) and then explained, at a second level, by the ethnographer. The “native's point of view” is necessarily specific and partial. The natives are original interpreters of their culture and not custodians of an authentic and pure cultural essence. They take part in the dialogue with their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, and their personal knowledge related to different variables, such as their biography, gender, age, role and status. Besides, their words are always mediated. What the informants tell in the ethnographic dialogue is said not from the centre of their world, but from the liminal space of the encounter. They do not convey cultural truths or simple explanations of concepts already present in their mind. Rather they provide detailed answers to the presence and to the questions of the ethnographer. Their words are the result of the interaction between the questions of the anthropologist and the informer's understandings. When the natives become “informants”, their voice is edited by the anthropologist's questions and by his writing aims.

The anthropological data are articulated and complex, “constructions of constructions”, “interpretations of interpretations”. As Geertz puts it, “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). The outcomes to which the anthropologist arrives are highly stratified, consisting of the textual systematization of what the ethnographer recorded, of what he was able to understand, of what his interlocutors wanted and could say on the basis

of their comprehension. The problem of order is, indeed, very complex and intricate. Geertz affirms not only that “anthropological writings are themselves interpretations; and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a ‘native’ makes first order ones: it’s his culture.)” He also mentions anthropological works based on other anthropological works, such as Lévi-Strauss’s, and, in literate cultures, “native” interpretations that can proceed to higher levels: “in connection with the Maghreb, one has only to think of Ibn Khaldun; with the United States, Margaret Mead” (ibid., p. 15).

Geertz’s observations about the relationship between the interpretations elaborated by the social actors and the constructions developed by the anthropologist can be understood in relation to Weber’s conception of “ideal types”. The ideal types, like the concepts “experience distant”, are comparison criteria to which the data have to be referred. They are liminal concepts, different from the empirical reality, which function as conceptual reference schemes. In the face of the multiplicity and polysemy of the empirical reality, they allow the researcher to isolate some significant elements and to coordinate them inside an interpretation. Weber articulates the idiographic element and the nomological one by adopting a model of explanation that does not subsume data to a law but brings events back to a model that makes them thinkable in their individuality. The ideal types are schematisms, formal abstractions that do not replicate the empirical givenness. They rationally configure the possibility of events and, in general, the conditions of thinkability of the world, *comprehending* it (from the Latin *com* “together” and *prehendere* meaning to grasp, to include). By superimposing the ideal type on the real type, Weber understands the concrete through the abstract, without reducing the first to the second: nomological knowledge has a heuristic character which functions to explain the individuality of a phenomenon.

#### **Authority, authorization, author**

Geertzian research methodology highlights the position of the anthropologist in the research process and in its textualization. It forces the analysis of the specific anthropological authority that the ethnographer has to build in the field in order to authorize his role and his discourses, his competences to ask questions as well as their specific quality and pertinence. Geertz also stresses the authority that founds the process of producing texts that are authorized by the scientific community. The specific *authority* constructed in the field *authorizes* the quality of the discourses, selects their anthropological pertinence and their translatability into the specialized language of the discipline and founds the “*author-function*” (Malighetti, 2007).

Geertz’s argument is based on the recognition of the profound transformation, in the contemporary world, of what Talal Asad defined as the “structural preconditions for anthropology” (Asad, 1973), that is to say, the asymmetric power relations between dominant and dominated: “there may be new asymmetries, stemming from everything from economic disparity to the international balance of military force, but the old ones, arbitrary, fixed, and rigidly unilateral, are pretty well gone” (Geertz, 1995, p. 132). These changes entail what Geertz calls the “spatial” and “moral” separation between the researcher and his

interlocutors: anthropologists no longer work in contexts in which they were “intellectual masters of all they surveyed” (Geertz, 1995, p. 132) and held the monopoly of writing:

...the entrance of once colonized or castaway peoples (wearing their own masks, speaking their own lines) onto the stage of global economy, international high politics, and world culture, has made the claim of the anthropologist to be a tribune for the unheard, a representer of the unseen, a kenner of the misconstrued, increasingly difficult to sustain” (Geertz, 1988, p.133).

The history of ethnography makes it difficult to support the “self-assigned (and self-congratulatory) role of the tribune of such voices in the contemporary world” (Geertz, 1995, p. 129). Geertz’s approach goes beyond paternalistic attitudes, romantic claims of political engagement, “cross-cultural communion” or – as he writes – the “passionate wish to become personally valuable to one’s informants – i.e. a friend” (Geertz, 2000, p. 33) in order to maintain “self-respect” and to remove the problems determined by the researcher’s role:

The moral asymmetries across which ethnography works and the discursive complexity within which it works make any attempt to portray it as anything more than the representation of one sort of life in the categories of another impossible to defend. That may be enough. I, myself, think that it is. But it spells the end of certain pretensions” (Geertz, 1988, p. 144).

Geertz invites anthropologists to examine the experience that informants have of ethnographers as well. He notes that anthropologists were not only “the first to insist that we see lives of others through lenses of our own grinding” but they also remarked that “they look back on ours through ones of their own” (Geertz, 2000, p. 65). This “looking back” in the contemporary world has – according to Geertz – assumed complicated tones: “[I]f the anthropologist is indeed largely irrelevant to the informants’ fates and governed by interests which, save in the most glancing of ways, do not touch theirs, on what grounds has one the right to expect them to accept and help one?” (Geertz, 2000, pp. 32-33). In Java Geertz personally experienced how the natives could question “the very right of writing about ethnography” (Geertz, 1988, p. 142). The “radical asymmetry” between the “anthropological” goals and the “natives’ ones” and the impossibility “to regard these goals as near when they are in fact far” (Geertz, 2000, p. 33), increases the current difficulties of anthropologists to legitimate their fieldwork and to build an efficacious ethnographic authority:

All the familiar rationalizations having to do with science, progress, philanthropy, enlightenment, and selfless purity of dedication ring false, and one is left, ethically disarmed, to grapple with a human relationship which must be justified over and over again in the most immediate of terms. Morally, one is back on a barter level; one’s currency is unnegotiable, one’s credits have all dissolved. The only thing one really has to give in order to avoid mendicancy (or – not to neglect the trinkets-and-beads approach – bribery) is oneself (Geertz, 2000, p. 33).

Geertz’s recognizes that today, more than ever, the ethnographic authority has to be

negotiated contingently in the field. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, “authority cannot usually be bestowed, but it is acquired and must be acquired” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 248). Geertz also stresses how, differently from the past, it is mainly based on being competent to write convincing scientific reports. Regardless of whether informants can only speak or can also write, it is the ethnographer who produces the ethnographic text. He alone has the power, albeit contingent, to insert the different contents of the discourses in the field notes or in the final text he is writing. Even if he tries to replace the monologue with the dialogue, the discourse remains inevitably asymmetric, as it emerges from the very choice to organize the text in dialogic or polyphonic terms or in the use of the various writing conventions:

The capacity of language to construct, if not reality “as such” (whatever that is), at least reality as everyone engages it in actual practice – named, pictured, catalogued, and measured – makes of the question of who describes whom, and in what terms, a far from indifferent business. If there is no access to the world unmediated by language (or anyway by sign systems) it rather matters what sort of language that is. Depiction is power. The representation of others is not easily separable from the manipulation of them (Geertz, 1995, p. 130).

To produce an ethnography requires decisions about what to say and how to say it that are influenced by the scientific community, to which the work is mainly addressed. The apparent symmetry at the level of dialogue is always subsumed by a complex asymmetry: at the level of writing, the relationship is inevitably hierarchical. The main purpose of ethnography is to talk about something for someone: although fieldwork is a dialogue between first and second persons, anthropologists must write for third parties (Fernandez, 1985). Ethnography is based on a discursive hierarchy and on the epistemological and scriptural control of the Other’s point of view. It is inevitably unbalanced. Geertz affirms that the “social science discourse, anthropological or any other” is “politically charged, shot through with implicit claims to mastery and control” (Geertz, 1995, p. 130). The asymmetry of the relation, for Geertz, cannot be simply resolved through naïve delegations of authority to the interlocutors themselves or hidden behind a neutral position. Rather it is based on the “author-function”.

It is from these perspectives that Geertz understands Malinowski’s “most consequential legacy”: it is “not about field technique, not about social theory, not even about that sainted object, ‘social reality’”. Rather it is about “‘the discourse problem’ in anthropology”, that is to say, “how to author an authoritative presentation” (Geertz, 1988, p. 83).

### **Ethno-graphy**

Considering ethnography according to the etymological sense of the term (ἔθνος *ethnos* + γραφῆν *graphein* to write), Geertz conceives writing as an integral part of the construction of anthropological knowledge. Writing is placed at the centre of the analysis as an indispensable element to organize and legitimize the field experience. Geertz overcomes “a hundred and fifteen years [...] of asseverational prose and literary innocence” (Geertz, 1988, p. 24) and the idea that “if the relation between observer and observed (*rapport*) can be

managed, the relation between author and text (signature) will follow – it is thought – of itself” (Geertz, 1988, p. 10).

On the contrary, the interpretive turn probes into the “morally, politically, even epistemologically, delicate” problems of “getting ‘their’ lives into ‘our’ works” (Geertz 1988, p. 130). Using the concept of *inscription* taken from Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1965), it comprehends the work of the ethnographer as a synonym of the “transcription of action” or the “fixation of meaning”, that is to say, of the activity of recording the different contents of oral discourses in the notes taken in the field and in the final text. As Geertz writes, “the ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscription and can be reconsulted” (Geertz, 1973, p. 19). Ethnography is thought as a version of social reality that is essentially a textual representation: the anthropologist, by means of writing, decodes one culture by re-coding it for another: “[T]here are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20).

Recalling Ricoeur’s interpretation of Aristotle, Geertz emphasizes how writing is not simple *mimesis* in the Platonic sense. Rather, it alludes to the poietic ability to construct, to “make” reality. As Ricoeur argues, it is a work of *mise en intrigue* that orders actions and constructs their meaning (Ricoeur, 1983). This approach undermines the idea of transparent modes of authority and focuses the attention on the inscription of ethnographic data in conventional forms of writing. These data are themselves in relation with the act of writing. From an ethnographer’s point of view, what can be noticed and transcribed is linked to what can be read and assembled in an ethnographic text.

Writing manifests how the interpretive construction of the object is produced by the integration of the different temporalities that found the knowledge-building process. It accompanies research in all its phases, beginning long before fieldwork and continuing after it finishes. Writing entails a temporality that starts with the elaboration of the research project, it crosses the drafting of the confused notes in the field and it concludes with their transformation into a coherent and readable text. It articulates and follows the very negotiations that characterize the ethnographic work: between anthropologists and natives and between natives; between the different sources of information, oral and written; between the anthropologist, his theoretical models and the scientific community; between the anthropologist and himself through time and among its various aspects – biographical, personal, disciplinary; and between the author and his readers.

The temporal dynamics that, as Geertz puts it, bridge “the gap between engaging others where they are and representing them where they aren’t” (Geertz, 1988, p. 130) is explained with the hiatus between “being there” and “being here”. In reality this double temporality is by its nature ineffable, placing itself in a conflictual relationship with writing. The writing process resists its simple fixation, and inexorably links ethnography to the modalities of its

production, making it intrinsically contingent, partial and incomplete. The time of writing, like that of the research, is not unique and immediate. On the contrary, it constitutes a pervasive process that marks the specific modalities of learning and producing anthropological knowledge. The end of the writing processes always takes place a long time after the end of the last phases of the fieldwork to which it refers. This period of time is inevitably characterized by relevant changes in the world and in the context of the research, in the social actors as well as in the anthropologist and in the possible readers.

The interconnection of the different temporalities inexorably detaches the informant from his historical present and the researcher from the situations of interlocution that have linked him to his informants in the field. Data are extracted from their own time and related to the time of writing and reading, to the moment of fruition of the text by the scientific community. The power of writing develops a textual system against time and makes anthropology something “of a place and in a time perpetually perishing” (Geertz, 1988, p. 146). This dynamic transforms ethnography into a sort of “metanarration” that, although it does not produce “wholly autonomous ‘ontological’ texts” (Geertz, 1988, p. vi) it links ethnography to the constructive processes and to the intertextuality – theoretical, aesthetic, institutional or ideological – in which it is inscribed. It highlights the artificial nature of ethnography and identifies its relevance in terms of its capacity to produce meaningful contributions on scientific topics rather than delivering chronicled reports. In this sense, anthropologists are necessarily linked to a specific genre of “academicized” writing, different from adventure or travel stories, biographies, journalism or cultural speculations:

...the wealthy eccentrics have been pretty well gone from ethnography since the 1920s, and the connoisseurs, the consultants, and the travel writers have never quite made it in (a few missionaries have, but dressed as professors, usually German). That there is some sort of chair or other under every anthropologist, College de France to All Souls, University College to Morningside Heights, seems by now part of the natural order of things. There are a few more completely academicized professions, perhaps – paleography and the study of lichens – but not many (Geertz, 1988, p. 130).

Geertz proposes a complex scriptural practice, open in the narrative style and based on conceptions of the ego and of the other, of culture and its interpreters, as less secure entities. What Geertz called “the question of signature”, that is “the establishment of an authorial presence within a text” (Geertz, 1988, p. 9), is solved with the production of a polyphonic text, hermeneutically founded on the negotiations between the theoretical and scriptural models of the anthropologist and the viewpoints he attributes to his interlocutors. Since fieldwork is the foundation and the hallmark of discipline, Geertz exhorts anthropologists not to remove this activity from analysis, as well as its relations with the writing process:

The problem [...] is to represent the research process in the research product; to write ethnography in such a way as to bring one’s interpretations of some society, culture, way of life, or whatever, and one’s encounter with some of its members, carriers, representatives or

whomever into an intelligible relationship (Geertz, 1988, p. 84)

The dynamics of the hermeneutical circle, based on the dialectics between anticipation of meaning and understanding and on the explicit examination of one's own pre-comprehensions, invites researchers to represent the social reality of the Others through the analysis of their own experience in their world. It solicits thinking on the ethnographic practice as an integral part of the analysis, and of the work of textualization. The textual restitution of an experience in the field should thus not avoid reproducing the process of learning anthropological knowledge according to a reflective and negotiating perspective. Contrary to classical ethnographies which present a point of view that has taken a long time to be worked out in a synthetic manner as intuitively evident, the Geertzian method requires textualization of the complex circumstances, imbricated in the microprocesses of everyday life, that determine the production of anthropological knowledge. The hermeneutic approach pushes the use of writing to emphasize the cooperation, the mutual manipulation and the adjustments between the categories of thought of the interlocutors. It encourages the ethnographer to put "the sort of laborious, winding, and nervously self-conscious tracing of how one has come to say what one has come to say" into the text (Geertz, 1995, p. 62).

The hermeneutic circle is an important mechanism that forces the anthropologist to examine and solve the methodological, theoretical and ethical problems, which arise in the context of the interaction and the continuous dialogue with his interlocutors in the field and at home. The ethnographic text should thus make explicit the complex negotiations, as well as the deformations, the errors and the failures which, far from being negative incidents, become the heuristic modalities of ethnographic practice and qualify the scientific effort as empirical and, as Herzfeld maintains, 'realistic' (Herzfeld, 2018).

Geertz observes "the oddity of constructing texts ostensibly scientific out of experience broadly biographical" (Geertz, 1988, p. 10) and recognizes that "the outstanding characteristic of anthropological fieldwork as a form of conduct is that it does not permit any significant separation of the occupational and extra-occupational spheres of one's life." On the contrary, he adds, "it forces this fusion" (Geertz, 2000, p. 39). He remarks that the negotiation on the field is influenced not only by the theoretical orientation or the institutional role of the researcher, but also by his personal history, by his personality, by his gender, by his emotional, political and ideological involvement and by the different circumstances he encounters. These factors, in turn, are determined by the specificity of the community in its relation to the general context, by the characteristics of the interlocutors and by the way they look at the ethnographer.

However, Geertz underlines how biographical aspects must be controlled by the specific scientific competences that establish the anthropological authority and allow "the difficulties of being at one and the same time an involved actor and a detached observer" (Geertz, 2000, p. 39) to be overcome. He founds anthropological authority on the capacity to mediate between autobiographical components and disciplinary ones, between sensibility and analytical powers. The reflexivity implied by the application of the hermeneutic notion of

circularity to ethnography emphasizes that access to the Other is mediated by an ontology which is rooted in belonging to a community, not just a linguistic (Heidegger, 1927; Ricoeur, 1977) or a historical one (Gadamer, 1960), but, above all, a scientific one. Beyond experience (Turner, Bruner, 1986), beyond the body and the “somatic modes of attention” (Csordas, 1994), the purpose of ethnography is inevitably intellectual, theoretical, linguistic and scriptural.

The interpretive turn solicits the adoption of complex and original writing procedures that combine the “specification of the discourse”, the use of the first person singular and the insertion of reflexive personal memories with the orchestration of polyphony and the relations with the interlocutors in the field and those in the academia. The Geertzian hermeneutical method excludes monographic, monological and monophonic models based on a transcendental perspective organized by the use of the Malinowskian “ethnographic present” or of Evans Pritchard’s “blinding clarity” (Geertz, 1988). In general, Geertz opposes the “ethnographic realism” of the classical ethnographic tradition, founded on the production of objectivity through the recording of pure data, independent of the theoretical views of interlocutors and references to concrete relations in the field as well as the general historical-political contexts in which the research takes place.

Geertz rejects what he calls “text positivism” and the ideology that considers ethnography as a simple recording of the authentic words of the interlocutors. He analysed how that these scriptural configurations hide the author behind a narration, complacent of being the neutral and impersonal representation of states of affairs in the world: the author is passive, represented as the only institutionalized spokesman of the “natives”, the absolute subject, absent and off-screen, the true interpreter of the culture that “he observes, he records, he analyzes – a kind of *veni, vidi, vici*” (Geertz, 1973, p.20). What Geertz names the “Olympianism of the unauthorial physicist” (Geertz, 1988, p. 10) is based on a “dispersed authorship” and on the conviction that the ethnographic discourse can be made, as he writes using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept (1994), “heteroglossial” in such a way that the native “can speak within it alongside the anthropologist in some direct, equal and independent way: a There presence in a Here text” (Geertz, 1988, p. 145).

In this regard, Geertz considers how Dweyer’s extensive use of quotations (Dweyer, 1982), in the attempts to give voice directly to the interlocutors, eliminates anthropological language and restores an improbable authenticity, a confident completeness, and an impossible representative purity.

According to Geertz, Dweyer remains prisoner of a renewed realism: the extensive quotations and narrations are well separated by the objectifying reports which they accompany (in prologues or prefaces). Dominated by aspiration to a total authenticity and transparency, the text focuses on the interlocutors’ “words, the whole words, nothing but the words” (Geertz, 1988, p. 96) letting the natives speak in an inverted monological dialogue that occupies the totality of the field. In this way, Geertz states that “the ethnographer’s role dissolves into that of an honest broker passing on the substance of things only with the most

trivial of transaction costs” (Geertz, 1988, p. 145). The anthropologist is curtailed, and his role is limited to that of an interviewer and an editor of footnotes: his ethnographic authority “neither floats through his text nor engulfs it. It apologizes for being there at all” (Geertz, 1988, p. 95). The result combines “a radically factualist approach to the reporting of his ‘dialogues’ [...] with a radically introversive approach to his role in them” (Geertz, 1988, p. 96).

On the other hand, although Geertz recognizes that the process of constructing anthropological knowledge develops in a reflective key, he does not want to suffocate ethnography in what he calls “the sovereign consciousness of the hyperauthorial novelist”, the “confessional” or “autobiographical” (Geertz, 1988, p. 10). These practices, as he states, “lead more to rumination and self-inspection, and to a curious interiorization of what is in fact an intensely public activity” (Geertz, 1995, p. 120). Geertz rejects what he defines as a sort of “ethnographic ventriloquism” that is “the claim to speak not just about another form of life but to speak from within it [...] the taking of the ethnographer’s experience rather than its object as the primary subject matter of analytical attention” (Geertz, 1988, p. 145). These perspectives, which Geertz analyses in relation to Michel Leiris’ work with his informant Emawayish (Leiris, 1934), want “to represent a depiction of how things look from ‘an Ethiopian (woman poet’s) point of view’ as itself an Ethiopian (woman poet’s) depiction of how they look from such a view” (Geertz, 1988, p. 145).

In general, these outlooks are not able to emancipate themselves from a confession that engulfs the informer. The Other enters the representation only for the effects he produces on the ethnographer, “a There shadow on a Here reality” (Geertz, 1988, p. 145). The anthropologist’s sensitivity rather than his analytic competences or his professional and disciplinary codes are placed at the centre of the ethnographic activity. These styles of confessional writing reproduce – as Geertz writes – what Roland Barthes calls “diary disease” (Geertz, 1988, p. 89, Barthes, 1979), an “endemic” pathology especially in the “more searching and original” (Geertz, 1988, p. 90) part of ethnographic writings, evident in “the journal-into-work mode of text-building and the literary anxieties that plague it” (Geertz, 1988, p. 90). For Geertz, these writing practices are based on a “highly ‘author-saturated,’ supersaturated even” (Geertz, 1988, p. 97) in which “the self the text creates and the self that creates the text are represented as being very near to identical” (Geertz, 1988, p. 97) and are absorbed by the goal of understanding oneself through the understanding of others. In this regard, Geertz discusses the works of what he defines as two “inheritors of the Malinowskian ideal of immersionist ethnography” (Geertz, 1988, p. 92): Paul Rabinow (Rabinow, 1977) and Vincent Crapanzano (Crapanzano, 1980).

Rabinow’s discourse, according to Geertz, determines an irreducible difference between the Self and the Other, omitting to indicate the process through which the meanings are produced. His ethnography is organized in a sequence of encounters aimed at a “discouraging” classical form of sentimental education. Geertz notices how the anthropologist is conceived as an “unfinished man, vague to himself, vague to others” and analyses his role by analogy with Frédéric Moreau, the Gustave Flaubert autobiographical

character thought of as “the pal, comrade, companion – copain to stay in the idiom – knocking about here and there, going as the occasion goes, with various manners of men [...], a rather obliging figure, as much bemused as anything else, carried along in a flux of largely accidental, generally shallow, often enough transient sociability” (Geertz, 1988, p. 93).

Crapanzano, on the other hand, is criticized for the way he builds his authority, very incisively, over an extensive encyclopaedia of knowledge. His “psychoanalytic and hyper-interpretive” horizon is configured by Geertz as a sort of “ethnographer-curer, self-conscious to a fault”. Crapanzano, says Geertz, “tells a rather random story of a rather random life in short-takes”. As a well-refined “homme de lettres”, he connects “what he is hearing, chimeras and fragments” of Tuhami, “the illiterate Moroccan tilemaker” to the “dizzier heights” of modern European culture: “Lacan and Freud, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, D’Annunzio and Simmel, Sartre and Blanchot, Heidegger and Hegel; Genet, Gadamer, Schutz, Dostoyevsky, Jung, Frye, Nerval” (Geertz, 1988, p. 94). Crapanzano’s text produces an analysis of Moroccan life which neglects to consider the context in which the meanings are produced as well as the consideration of the relations between the ethnographer and Tuhami, and the importance of the Arab translator.

From a Geertzian horizon, these authors fail to apply the circular logic of the ethnographic work and to take into account the modifications of the conceptual models of the anthropologist in the dialectical process of the negotiation of the meanings in the field. They thus reproduce the forms of realism and objectivism from which they cannot emancipate themselves. As a matter of fact, the critiques Geertz addressed to his colleagues can be applied to his own ethnographic production as well. Also Geertz’s ethnographic texts fail to apply his own teachings and to affranchise themselves from the limits effectively denounced in his theoretical and critical reflections. His works do not apply hermeneutic circularity and do not expose the actual, pragmatic dimensions of fieldwork: the interrelations between the ethnographer and his interlocutors, the articulation of the processes through which meanings emerge from the negotiations in the field and are produced and shaped by the anthropologist. In this sense Geertz’s texts end up generating what Dweyer defines as a “contemplative model” (Dweyer, 1982) based on univocal relationships between an observer, holder of method, and independent objects, conceived as ‘given’ and organized linguistically in a set of all-encompassing meanings. The anthropologist is not a social actor who is part of the *mise-en-scène*. He retains an active role only in the moment of writing. He brings out meanings but not subjects. The interlocutors are simply absent, or, at most, objectified in a generic way: “the Balinese”, the “Javanese” etc. The “native’s point of view”, his explanations, are transcribed in their independence, elaborated in isolation and not in response to the anthropologist’s solicitations. In general, Geertz’s logocentrism thinks the object as a scene that presents itself in a flat figurative space, something to be linguistically organized into a set of totalizing meanings (Cosrda, 1990; Ingold, 2000).

### **The social role of the anthropologist**

In spite of their problematic ethnographic implementations, Geertz’s epistemological and

methodological metadiscourses marked the “interpretative turn” in the conditions of cultural representation. They encouraged anthropologists to rethink the scientific status of knowledge and the complex connections among researchers, episteme, method, reality and social actors. His assumptions on the contingency and precariousness of scientific efforts transformed the difficulties in codifying a unique epistemology and a univocal method into the possibility of decoding the codification itself.

The Geertzian analysis of the intersections between symbolic systems and systems of power had a profound impact on the ethical and political dimensions of anthropology as well. They forced the reconsideration of a series of founding *topoi* of the anthropological discourse: culture, community, identity, ethnicity, race, tribe, nation. Geertz stimulated a revision of the dichotomies of modernist discourse (modernity-tradition, centre-periphery, globality-localism, etc.) and the conceptualizations of the world based on anachronistic categories that reproduce the colonial binary models through which science and politics have organized and thought cultural difference: ‘the we-they othering contrast seems extreme and old-fashioned, a relic of departed binaries – *Gemeinschaft- Gesellschaft*, savage-civilized, mechanical-organic, backward-advanced, traditional-modern” (Geertz, 2007, p. 220).

Constructivist and polyphonic positions opened new spaces to analyse the complexity of contemporaneity. First of all, they allowed Geertz to oppose the “configurational” idea of the world seen as a “puzzle” and made up of uniform “framed units, social spaces with defined edges” (Geertz, 2000, p. 85). This concept, while reifying and essentializing cultures, underlines their internal homogeneity, constructed alternatively around cultural, genealogical, territorial, religious or linguistic variables. It produces a “pointillist” image, which sees culture indexically as a multiculturalist mosaic, like “a file card view” which, however, refuses to be “cross-indexed” (Geertz, 2000, p. 254). A country, from this perspective, becomes a set of “peoples” of different sizes, importance and character “held within a common political and economic frame by an overarching story, historical, ideological, religious, or whatever” (Geertz, 2000, p. 254). In this homologating way, Geertz observes that “all the levels and dimensions of difference and integration save two – the minimal consensual grouping called ‘a culture’ or ‘an ethnic group’ and the maximal one called ‘the nation’ or ‘the state’ – are occluded and washed out” (Geertz, 2000, p. 254).

According to Geertz, the use of a concept of culture that emphasizes borders and mutual distinction responds to the precise political intentions of nation states. It reproduces what he calls “monodic nationalism” and “primordial” or “standing loyalties” (Geertz, 1994) introduced by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberal nationalisms promoted by the protagonists of the different nation-building processes: “Cavour, Pilsudski, Masaryd, Parnell, Bismarck, Herzen and Woodrow Wilson” (Geertz, 1994, p. 2). By attributing internal systematic coherence and pervasive unity, persistence and homogeneity, European nation-building policies founded an ideology of purity and authenticity of the *Idem* based on the inevitable cleansing of the *Alter*, necessarily conceived as a threat: “culture fairs and ethnic cleansing, *survivance* and killing fields, sit side by side and pass with frightening

ease from the one to the other” (Geertz, 2000, p. 250). These identitarian practices lead in dangerous directions:

...toward blood, race, descent, and the mysteries and mystifications of biological likeness; toward political and civic loyalty and the indivisibilities of law, obedience, force, and government; toward geographical aggregation, territorial demarcation, and the sense of origin, home, and habitat; toward interaction, companionship, and practical association, the encounter of persons and the play of interests; toward cultural, historical, linguistic, religious, or psychological affinity – a quiddity of spirit (Geertz, 2000, pp. 231-232).

Under the hegemony of positivism, anthropological collusion with the pragmatism of colonial administrations played a leading role in exporting the notion of the nation state to different geographical contexts, inventing tribal or ethnic configurations (Southall, 1970). Reflecting on the use of the anthropological categories for the construction of Indonesian realities, Geertz mentions the role played by anthropology in the construction of “pristine” entities:

The usual way this is done, also whether from within or without, is by what might be called (indeed, in my still rather classificational, *àge classique*, discipline, is called) ‘peoples and cultures’ discourse. The various ‘ethnic’ or quasi-ethnic groups – the Javanese, the Batak, the Bugis, the Acehnese, the Balinese, and so on down to the smaller and more peripheral examples, the Bimans, the Dyaks, the Ambonese, or whomever – are named, characterized by some configurations of qualities or other; their subdivisions are outlined, their relations to one another defined, their position within the whole assessed (Geertz, 2000, pp. 253-254)

Arguing that “those people with pierced noses or body tattoos, or who buried their dead in trees, may never have been the solitaries we took them to be” (Geertz, 2000, p. 92) Geertz conceives “a world of pressed-together dissimilarities variously arranged” rather than “all-of-a-piece nation-states grouped into blocs and superblocs (the sort of thing that is visible from a balloon)” (Geertz, 2000, p. 226). Geertz’s composite image of the world as “conglomerate of differences, deep, radical, and resistant to summary” (Geertz, 2000, pp. 223-224) rejects essentializing political and epistemological programmes in favour of the idea of “social spaces whose edges are unfixed, irregular and difficult to locate” (Geertz, 2000, p. 85). Each culture is perceived as the product of a long history of appropriations, resistances and compromises in continuous transformations, produced by negotiations, antagonisms, inconsistencies and contradictions: “The blocs being gone, and their hegemonies with them, we are facing an era of dispersed entanglements, each distinctive. What unity there is, and what identity, is going to have to be negotiated, produced out of difference” (Geertz, 2000, p. 227). Cultures did not become “hybrid” in recent times because of a globalization which, in fact, is an historical phenomenon having shaped the history of humanity: “the Caesars’ Rome was not at all that homogeneous” (Geertz, 2000, p. 79).

Against the dangerous ideologies of the “clashes of civilizations” (Huntington 1996), Geertz

invites social scientists to reflect on the composite and stratified internal structure of every culture and society (Geertz, 2000, p. 222). On the one hand he refuses to share the idea that “Shi’is, being other, present a problem, but, say, soccer fans, being part of us, do not” (Geertz, 2000, p. 76). On the other he shows that “they” have always been “here”, “with us”: “The social world does not divide at its joints into perspicuous we’s with whom we can empathize, however much we differ *with* them, and enigmatical they’s, with whom we cannot, however much we defend to the death their right to differ *from* us. The wogs begin long before Calais” (Geertz, 2000, p. 76)

The Geertzian outlook articulates reality in a multiplicity of complex articulations, “ubiquitous patchworks” “panoramas”, “collages”, “great assemblage of juxtaposed differences” that shape today’s “glocalization” processes:

There is a paradox, occasionally noted but not very deeply reflected upon, concerning the present state of what we so casually refer to as ‘the world scene’: it is growing both more global and more divided, more thoroughly interconnected and more intricately partitioned, at the same time. Cosmopolitanism and parochialism are no longer opposed; they are linked and reinforcing. As the one increases, so does the other (Geertz, 2000, p. 246)

Geertz’s thought introduces a horizon capable of organizing, in non-dichotomous terms, the relationships between the local and the global, the particular and the general, centralization and decentralization, homogeneity and individuality. It refuses to see the global as the union or mixture of separate and distinct segments and it understands the local as something that is constantly created and re-created in the course of everyday experience and in the relationship with the broader and encompassing contexts. Geertz highlights the networks of interconnections that penetrate the most peripheral contexts and produces the vision of a complex world, in which cultural borders are increasingly confused and changeable, systematically hybridized by the syncretic aggregation of heterogeneous traits in new and unstable configurations: “It is difficult to find a commonality of outlook, form of life, behavioral style, material expression... whatever... that is not either itself further partitioned into smaller, infolding ones, boxes within boxes, or taken up whole and entire into larger, incorporative ones, selves laid on top of selves” (Geertz, 2000, p. 253).

By questioning the exoticizing relationship between distance and difference and the immediate coincidence between place, culture and identity, the Geertzian perspective proposes the possibility of comprehending the local reworkings of modernity. It allows analysis of the ways in which the ideas and practices of modernity are appropriated and reinserted into the local ones, producing the fragmentation and dispersion of modernity into more modernities built “from below” and in constant proliferation. These pushes generate powerful countertendencies to globalizing strategies, showing a dynamism based on fusion, intermingling and opposition. They substituted the idea of processes that should replace the traditional with modern, with the idea of composite realities produced essentially by the “co-belonging” of modernity and tradition, of the global and the local: “the coexistence, in most

parts of the world, indeed in virtually all, of great cultural traditions, rich, distinctive, and historically deep (civilizations in the proper, not the polemical, sense of the term), with an endless progression of differences within differences, divisions within divisions, jumbles with jumbles” (Geertz, 2000, pp. 224-225). These articulations force us to rethink “traditional” cultures in the context of their transformative involvement with modernity, not in homologating terms, but as products of the interrelation between the old and the new. Their “originality and distinctiveness”, Geertz maintains, arise out of “the ways in which the variety of the practices which make them up are positioned and composed” (Geertz, 2000, p. 227)

In such complex contexts, Geertz can read the creative potential of the social actors to rethink social organizations and to rearrange economies and policies. The so-called Third World agents can be valued for their capacity to contribute to cultural configurations and to intellectual and political efforts. Marginalized subjectivities, marked by multiple traditions, can thus be comprehended in their ability to re-establish the thread of a history interrupted by slavery, colonialism, modernization, industrialization, wild urbanization and deep economic inequalities. Geertz tried to acknowledge the innovative potentialities of the countries originated by the “collapse of colonial empire” (Geertz, 2000, p. 251) to overcome the simple reproductions of the homogenizing model of nineteenth-century European nationalisms: “The contribution of the Third World upheaval to the twentieth century’s self-understanding lies less in its mimicries of European nationalism [...] than in its forcing into view the compositeness of culture such nationalism denies” (Geertz, 2000, p. 251). The so called “underdeveloped” and “backward” post-colonial countries can actively challenge European models: “[R]ather than converging toward a single pattern these entities called countries were ordering themselves in novel ways, ways that put European conceptions, not all that secure in any case, of what a country is, and what its basis is, under increasing pressure” (Geertz, 2000, pp. 230-231).

The awareness of the “hybrid” quality of every culture and every society leads Geertz to invite scholars to experiment with new interpretive possibilities: “It would seem, in short, that a number of serious adjustments in thought must occur if we, philosophers, anthropologists, historians, or whoever, are going to have something useful to say about the disassembled, or anyway disassembling, world of restless identities and uncertain connections” (Geertz, 2000, p. 226). These “adjustments” are founded on the opening of the vocabulary of cultural description and analysis, “to divergence and multiplicity, to the noncoincidence of kinds and categories” (Geertz, 2000, p. 246), that is to say, “toward the fragments and fragmentations of the contemporary world” (Geertz, 2000, p. 250).

The transversality and obliquity of the anthropological method introduce eminently subversive elements with respect to codified and institutionalized truths: “If we wanted home truths, we should have stayed at home” (Geertz, 1988, p. 65). Geertz stresses how anthropologists as “merchants of astonishment”, have always played a critical role by “hawking the anomalous and peddling the strange”. As he wrote, “We have, with no little

success, sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers. It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle” (Geertz, 2000, p. 64). Anthropologists, for Geertz, have been the first to insist on a number of things: “...that the world is not divided into the pious and the superstitious; that there are sculptures in jungles and paintings in deserts; that political order is possible without centralized power and principled justice without codified rules; that the norms of reason were not fixed in Greece, the evolution of morality not consummated in England” (Geertz, 2000, p. 65).

Geertz disputes the civilizing claims made in the name of values proclaimed as universal by the contemporary forms of ethnocentrism “of either the louse eggs or the here-but-for-the-grace-of-culture sort” (Geertz, 1988, p. 86). Discussing an article written by Rorty, Geertz argues for the need to convince post-modern bourgeois liberalism “that loyalty to itself is loyalty enough [...] that it need be responsible only to its own traditions” (Rorty, 1983, p. 269; Geertz, 2000, p. 73). He believes, together with Rorty, that “there is no ‘ground’ for [our] loyalties and convictions save the fact that the beliefs and desires and emotions which buttress them overlap those of lots of other members of the group with which we identify for purposes of moral and political deliberation” (Rorty, 1983, p. 269, in Geertz, 2000, p. 73).

Cultural diversities, according to Geertz, are neither “equally consequential” nor “equally immediate”, nor do “all stem from cultural contrast of a clear-cut sort”. Rather “the world is coming at each of its local points to look more like a Kuwaiti bazaar than like an English gentlemen’s club [...] les *milieux* are all *mixtes*. They don’t make *Umwelte* like they used to do” (Geertz, 2000, p. 86). This pushes anthropology to assume its important role of identifying the appropriate “uses of diversity” as “one of the major moral challenges we these days face, ingredient in virtually all the others we face, from nuclear disarmament to the equitable distribution of the world’s resources” (Geertz, 2000, p. 86). He thus proposes the development of ways of thinking “responsive to what Charles Taylor has called ‘deep diversity,’ a plurality of ways of belonging and being” and capable of producing “a sense of connectedness [...] that is neither comprehensive nor uniform, primal nor changeless, bus nonetheless real” (Geertz, 2000, p. 224). Founding this possibility on the concept of “limit” – in a way that we could consider as Kantian because it opens from the inside the possibility of knowledge and of action – and referring to Wittgenstein’s famous expression (“the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”), Geertz configures that transversal and comparative look that defines his approach in bifocal terms:

The greater that is [the limit], the greater we can make it become by trying to understand what flat earthers or the Reverend Jim Jones (or Iks or Vandals) are all about, what it is like to be them, the clearer we become to ourselves both in terms of what we see in others that seems remote, what we see that seems reminiscent, what attractive and what repellent, what sensible and what quite mad; oppositions that do not align in any simple way, for there are some things quite appealing about bats, some quite repugnant about ethnographers” (Geertz, 2000, p.77).

It could be said that Geertz thus interprets Kluckhohn’s definition of anthropology (probably

taken from James Joyce) as the “longest way round” that is also “the shortest route home” (Kluckhohn, 1949, pp. 9-16). His view of the critical function of anthropology, which has created many problems for its acceptance by disciplines that are “too self-confident” – makes it possible to play an increasingly important social and political function. This function lies, mostly, in the capacity “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, p. 143):

But, for all that, it seems likely that whatever use ethnographic texts will have in the future, if in fact they actually have any, it will involve enabling conversation across societal lines – of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, race – that have grown progressively more nuanced, more immediate, and more irregular. The next necessary thing (so at least it seems to me) is neither the construction of a universal Esperanto-like culture, the culture of airports and motor hotels, nor the invention of some vast technology of human management. It is to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way (Geertz, 1988, p. 147).

From this perspective, anthropology can contribute to developing policies aimed at promoting the identification – in cooperative and negotiated, hence fully political, ways – of common values among different social components. Avoiding the choice between ‘parochialism without tears’ and “cosmopolitanism without content”, Geertz’s anthropology recommends the hermeneutic capacity to “live in a collage”, without abandoning one’s own position (a collage itself): “To live in a collage one must in the first place render oneself capable of sorting out its elements, determining what they are (which usually involves determining where they come from and what they amounted to when they were there) and how, practically, they relate to one another, without at the same time blurring one’s own sense of own location and one’s own identity within it” (Geertz, 2000, p. 87).

Far from being paralyzing, this orientation invites anthropology to fulfil its important vocation to rearrange the relations between the contemporary Holy Offices, Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei, combining them with the possible forms of life, the variegated ways to organize social groups, to formulate needs and values, to exercise power:

That this led some to think the sky was falling, solipsism was upon us, and intellect, judgment, even the sheet possibility of communication had all fled is not surprising. The repositioning of horizons and the decentering of perspectives has had that effect before. The Cardinal Bellarmine you have always with you; and as someone has remarked of the Polynesians, it takes a certain kind of mind to sail out of the sight of land in an outrigger canoe (Geertz, 2000, p.65).

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