
**ANTHROPOLOGI
AND
HISTORIE**

*Essays in Culture, History,
and Political Economy*

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RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW BRUNSWICK AND LONDON

Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology

Few anthropologists in recent years have enjoyed wider influence in the social sciences than Clifford Geertz. Sociologists, political scientists, and social historians interested in popular culture and *mentalités* have turned increasingly to anthropology, and the anthropologist most often embraced is Professor Geertz.

A number of factors can be adduced to account for this trend. In the first place, Geertz's position at the Institute for Advanced Study has allowed him to transcend the disciplinary and subdisciplinary involution that characterizes anthropology and other social sciences. At the Institute, he is able to attract scholars from a variety of disciplines, adopting an antidisciplinary mood and focus that is rare in current academic practice. Second, Geertz is an excellent ethnographer who writes with an eloquence and sophistication uncommon for the social sciences. His cultural essays can be read with profit by introductory students or graduate students in advanced seminars. And his descriptions of life in Bali or Java or Morocco call to mind one of the aspects of anthropology that has always been so seductive: the lure of distant places and other modes of being. Thus, in part, the title of this essay. But the title is intended to suggest another aspect of Geertz's work as well, for there is a sense in which anthropologists—and other social scientists—have been seduced by Geertz's writings on culture.

To explore this claim, we must first examine a third aspect of Geertz's prominence: his participation in anthropological debates between materialists and idealists. Although the apparent antinomies between explanation and interpretation, science and history, and materialism and idealism have served as constant themes in anthropological debates over the years, the discourse became increasingly acrimonious during the 1960s and 1970s. Over a period of approximately twenty years after World War II, many American anthropologists turned away from Boasian relativism and toward more scientific, explanatory approaches to culture and society. With this trend, a type of materialism dominated anthropological discussions, especially through the cultural ecology of Julian Steward and the cultural evolutionism of Leslie White. By the late 1960s, however, increasing numbers of social scientists were rejecting explanatory accounts as positivist and were rediscovering German historicism and the interpretive sociologies that had influenced the early Boasians. Yet, at approximately the same time, the position of public dominance in anthropological materialism passed to Marvin Harris upon the publication of his *Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968). With that book and subsequent volumes, most notably his *Cultural Materialism* (1979), Harris mapped out a materialist terrain that was resolutely scientific, although it exhibited much less caution regarding what we can know about social and cultural processes than did the cultural ecology of Julian Steward.

In such a context, Geertz's prominence is hardly surprising. The 1973 publication of a collection of his essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973a), and especially an essay entitled "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" (1973b), written especially for that volume, provided a persuasive text for those anthropologists who were dissatisfied with the vision of a science of culture offered by Harris. Given Geertz's background in Weberian perspectives and his familiarity with the phenomenological and hermeneutic literature that Harris dismisses as "obscurantist," Geertz can, with a short discussion of winks and blinks, call into serious question Harris's unmediated understanding of social and cultural facts.

And he is able to make a persuasive case for an anthropology that is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (ibid.: 5).

The difference between Harris and Geertz, and their particular versions of explanation and interpretation, can be demonstrated with a discussion of their approaches to culture. For Harris,

The starting point of all sociocultural analysis for cultural materialism is simply the existence of an etic human population located in etic time and space. A society for us is a maximal social group consisting of both sexes and all ages and exhibiting a wide range of interactive behavior. Culture, on the other hand, refers to the learned repertory of thoughts and actions exhibited by the members of social groups. (1979: 47)

Harris goes on to make rigid distinctions among infrastructure, structure, and superstructure and tells us that "The etic behavioral modes of production and reproduction probabilistically determine the etic behavioral domestic and political economy, which in turn probabilistically determine the behavioral and mental emic superstructures" (ibid.: 55–56). Note that culture is reduced to a set of ideas, or, less imaginatively, a "learned repertory of thoughts and actions." Culture is seen as a product; it is not seen simultaneously as production. There is, then, no concern in Harris's work with *meaning*—the socially constructed understandings of the world in terms of which people act. But as long as we are working with such an ideational view of culture, whether from a materialist or idealist perspective, we remove it from human action and praxis and therefore exclude the possibility of bridging the anthropological antimony between the material and ideal. We may explore this assertion by turning to Clifford Geertz.

The promise of Geertz's project, especially as elaborated in "Thick Description," is that he seems to be working with a concept of culture as socially constituted and socially constituting. He explicitly criticizes ideational definitions of culture,

concentrating on symbols that carry and communicate meanings to social actors who have created them. Unfortunately, at no point does he say what he means as clearly and rigorously as does Harris. Instead, he places his definitions in a more elegant and elusive prose. For example: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs . . ." (1973b: 5). Or: "culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive insults and answer them . . ." (ibid.: 13). Or: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (1973c: 452). The last quote comes from the well-known essay, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," to which more attention is devoted here. It was noted earlier that Geertz *seems* to be working with a concept of culture as socially constituted and socially constituting. We must now question whether he has realized this promise. This essay compares Geertz's claims for himself in "Thick Description" with one of his own pieces of description. Because Geertz's ethnographic work is voluminous, and the aims of this chapter are modest, we shall concentrate on his essay on Balinese cockfights.¹

Geertz's essay is at once an attempt to show that cultural products can be treated as texts and an attempt to interpret one such text. The metaphor of the text is, of course, a favorite of the practitioners of both structuralism and hermeneutics, though Geertz takes his lead from Ricoeur rather than Lévi-Strauss. The reference to culture as a text, given Geertz's project, calls for an exercise in interpretation. Geertz interpretation must be summarized before we can ask some questions of it. "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" begins with an account of the Geertz's difficulties when first arriving in the field, their response to a police raid on a cockfight, and their final acceptance, given that response, by the villagers. The essay then moves into a description of the cockfight itself, including

a discussion of the psychological identification of men and cocks, the procedures associated with cockfights and wagers, and so on. Preliminaries out of the way, Geertz moves toward an interpretation of the fight itself. He begins with Jeremy Bentham's notion of deep play, or games in which the consequences for losers are so devastating that participation in the games is irrational for all concerned. Noting that the central wagers in Balinese cockfights seem to correspond to such a high stakes game, he then counters:

It is in large part *because* the marginal disutility of loss is so great at the higher levels of betting that to engage in such betting is to lay one's public self, allusively and metaphorically, through the medium of one's cock, on the line. And though to a Benthamite this might seem merely to increase the irrationality of the enterprise that much further, to the Balinese what it mainly increases is the meaningfulness of it all. And as (to follow Weber rather than Bentham) the imposition of meaning in life is the major and primary condition of human existence, that access of significance more than compensates for the economic costs involved. (1973c: 434)

Geertz then looks to two aspects of significance in the cockfight. Both are related to the hierarchical organization of Balinese society. He first observes that the cockfight is a "simulation of the social matrix," or, following Goffman, a "status blood-bath" (ibid.: 436). To explore this, Geertz mentions the four descent groups that organize factions in the village and examines the rules involved in betting against the cocks owned by members of other descent groups, other villages, rivals, and so on. Although he has not yet referred to the cockfight as a text, as Geertz moves toward the second aspect of significance, he begins to refer to it as "an art form" (ibid.: 443). As an art form, it "displays" fundamental passions in Balinese society that are hidden from view in ordinary daily life and comportment. As an atomistic inversion of the way Balinese normally present themselves to themselves, the cockfight relates to the status hierarchy in another sense—no longer as a status-based organization of

the cockfight but as a commentary on the existence of status differences in the first place. The cockfight is "a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (ibid.: 448). What they tell themselves is that beneath the external veneer of collective calm and grace lies another nature. At both the social and individual level, there is another Bali and another sort of Balinese. And what they tell themselves they tell in a text that "consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits" (ibid.: 449).

After this basic interpretation of the Balinese cockfight in terms of status organization and commentary, Geertz closes with a discussion of culture as an ensemble of texts. He notes that their interpretation is difficult and that such an approach is not "the only way that symbolic forms can be sociologically handled. Functionalism lives, and so does psychologism. But to regard such forms as 'saying something of something,' and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis that attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them" (ibid.: 453).

Accepting this criticism of reductive formulas, we must question whether Geertz's analysis has sociologically handled the Balinese cockfight or paid sufficient attention to its substance. In what follows, no fundamental reinterpretation of the Balinese cockfight is attempted. Such a reinterpretation is the task of a writer more familiar with Bali and Indonesia than is the present one. This essay simply points to a few elements present in Geertz's essay but omitted from the interpretive exercise that should form a part of a cultural and sociological interpretation of the cockfight. Although Geertz might regard reference to these elements as a form of functionalist reductionism, no attempt is made here to account for or explain the existence of the cockfight. Rather, by pointing to other aspects of Balinese society and history with which the cockfight may be involved, this essay calls into question the metaphor of culture as text (cf. Keesing 1987).

Accepting for a moment that metaphor, we might briefly turn to three aspects of Balinese society not included in the interpretation. The first has to do with the role of women. In a

footnote early in the article, Geertz notes that while there is little apparent public sexual differentiation in Bali, the cockfight is one of the few activities from which women are excluded (1973c: 417–418). This apparent anomaly may make sense in terms of Geertz's interpretation. As with status differences, so with sexual differences. The cockfight, and betting on the cockfight, are the activities of men, serving as commentaries on the public denial of difference. But sex cannot be subsumed so simply within status. The sexual exclusion becomes more interesting when we learn in another footnote that the Balinese countryside was integrated by rotating market systems that would encompass several villages and that cockfights were held on market days near the markets and were sometimes organized by petty merchants. "Trade has followed the cock for centuries in rural Bali, and the sport has been one of the main agencies of the island's monetization" (ibid.: 432). Furthermore, in yet another footnote in his more recent *Negara*, Geertz tells us that the traditional markets, which were "staffed almost entirely by women," were held in the morning, and that the cockfights were held on the same afternoon as the market (1980: 199).

Aside from sexual differentiation and the connection with markets, Geertz also notes throughout the early part of the essay (1973c: 414, 418, 424, 425) that the cockfight was an important activity in precolonial Balinese states (that is, before the early twentieth century), that it was held in a ring in the center of the village, that it was taxed and was a significant source of public revenue.² Further, we learn that the cockfight was outlawed by the Dutch and later by Indonesia, that it is now held in semisecret in hidden corners of the village, and that the Balinese regard the island as taking the shape of a "small, proud cock, poised, neck extended, back taut, tail raised, in eternal challenge to large, feckless shapeless Java" (ibid.: 418). Surely these matters require some interpretive attention. At the very least they suggest that the cockfight is intimately related (though not reducible) to political processes of state formation and colonialism. They also suggest that the cockfight has gone through a significant change in the past eighty years, that if it is

a text, it is a text that is being written as part of a profound social, political, and cultural *process*.

This, finally, brings us to the third point, which is less an aspect omitted from the interpretation than one that is not sufficiently explicated. Geertz refers to the cockfight as a "status bloodbath" and tells us that as a commentary on status, the cockfight tells the Balinese that such differences "are a matter of life and death" and a "profoundly serious business" (ibid.: 447). Yet, in this essay at least, we learn very little about caste and status as material social process and the connection that process does or does not have with cockfighting. In *Negara*, Geertz turns his attention to elaborate cremation ceremonies and sees them as an "aggressive assertion of status" (1980: 117). Comparable in spirit to the potlatch, the cremation is "conspicuous consumption, Balinese style" (ibid.: 117) and is one of various rituals that elaborately tell the Balinese that "status is all" (ibid.: 102). In this case, we are dealing in part with political competition among high-caste lords and princes. But lords are also communicating to their commoners that the hierarchy is divinely ordained. Status in Bali has to do with inherited caste but also with positions achieved in life through various forms of political maneuver—most clearly among lords but also among low-caste Sudras. With so much maneuver, and with so many cultural "texts" relating to status, some attention should be paid to the different messages of these texts and to their construction in the context of status formation as a historical process.

These three problems lead to a basic point. The cockfight has gone through a process of creation that cannot be separated from Balinese history. Here we confront the major inadequacy of the text as a metaphor for culture. A text is written; it is not writing.³ To see culture as an ensemble of texts or an art form is to remove culture from the process of its creation.⁴ If culture is a text, it is not everyone's text. Beyond the obvious fact that it means different things to different people or different sorts of people, we must ask who is (or are) doing the writing. Or, to break with the metaphor, who is doing the acting, the creating of the cultural forms we interpret. This is a key question, for example, in the transformation of the cock-

fight after the arrival of the Dutch. In a recent essay, Geertz has pointed to the separation of the text from its creation as one of the strengths of the metaphor. Referring to Ricoeur's notion of "inscription," or the separation in the text of the said from the saying, Geertz concludes:

The great virtue of the extension of the notion of text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on precisely this phenomenon: on how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events—history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior—implies for sociological interpretation. (1983: 31)

The reader should not assume that I am calling for the reduction of culture to action (see Chapter 2). Geertz correctly points to meanings that persist beyond events, symbols that outlast and transcend the intentions of their creators. But neither should culture be separated from action; otherwise we are caught in yet another of anthropology's antinomies. Unfortunately, the text as metaphor effects precisely this separation.

The emphasis on cultural creation brings out two aspects of culture that are missing from Geertz's work. The first is the presence of social and cultural differentiation, even within an apparently uniform text. Reference to differentiation is, in part, reference to the connections between culture and relations of power and domination, as implied in the previous comments on state and status. Some might think that to refer to culture and power is to reduce culture to power, to treat values as "glosses on property relations" (Geertz 1973c: 449) or to "run on about the exploitation of the masses" (1973b: 22). But there are reductions, and then there are reductions. And the denial of such connections is but one of many classical reductions in American anthropology. The second aspect that is missing is a concept of culture as material social process. Without a sense of

culture as material process or creation—as writing as well as what is written—we once again have a conception of culture as product but not as production.⁵ The reference to culture as material social process is not intended to take us back to the anthropological materialism of Marvin Harris. Indeed, the criticism I have directed at Clifford Geertz is similar to the criticism I directed at Marvin Harris: both treat culture as product but not as production. There the similarity ends, of course. But both have removed culture from the process of cultural creation and have therefore made possible the constant reproduction of an antinomy between the material and the ideal.

The resolution of the antinomy, and the concept of culture that emerges from that resolution, must be materialist. But the materialism invoked in this essay is far removed from the reductive scientism that has come to dominate materialism in American anthropology. Rather, what is needed is something close to the “cultural materialism” of Raymond Williams (1977; cf. 1980; 1982), who notes that the problem with mechanical materialism is not that it is too materialist but that it is not materialist enough. It treats culture and other aspects of a presumed “superstructure” simply as ideas. It therefore makes room for, indeed requires, idealist critiques that share the ideational definition but deny the material connection or, as in the case of Geertz, that reject the ideational definition in favor of one that sees a socially constructed text that is, nonetheless, removed from the social process by which the text is created. In contrast, Williams suggests that cultural creation is itself a form of material production, that the abstract distinction between material base and ideal superstructure dissolves in the face of a material social process through which both “material” and “ideal” are constantly created and recreated.

Yet Williams does not leave his analysis at this elementary assertion. He also pays attention to the socially constructed meanings that inform action. He does this in part by means of a reevaluation of the idea of tradition, defining it as a reflection upon and selection from a people’s history (1961; 1977). The process of selection is political and is tied to relations of domination and subordination, so that Williams can talk of a dominant

culture, or hegemony, as a selective tradition. Although this dominant culture is related to and supports an order of inequality, Williams does not view it simply as a ruling-class ideology imposed upon the dominated. Rather, as a selection from and interpretation of a people’s history, it touches aspects of the lived reality or experience of the dominant and dominated alike. It is, in short and in part, “meaningful.” But Williams also notes that no order of domination is total. There are always relationships and meanings that are excluded. Therefore, alternative meanings, alternative values, alternative versions of a people’s history are available as a potential challenge to the dominant. Whether such alternative versions are constructed depends upon the nature of the cultural and historical material available, the process of class formation and division, and the possibilities and obstacles presented in the political process. Williams’s concept of culture, then, is tied to a process of class formation but is not reduced to that process. Dominant and emergent cultures are formed in a class-based social world, but they are not necessarily congruent with class divisions.

The themes of culture as material social process and of cultural creation as (in part) political action are further developed in an article by Peter Taylor and Hermann Rebel (1981; cf. Rebel 1988). In a masterful analysis of culture in history, the authors concentrate on four “texts”—four of the Grimm’s folk tales that deal with common themes of inheritance, disinheritance, family dissolution, and migration. After criticizing psychological interpretations, they place the tales in the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century context in which they were collected. They then take two innovative methodological steps that are of great importance for the concept of culture. First, they ask who is telling the tales and in what context. They also note that while the tales are *traditional*, they are not *timeless*; that is, the form and content of the tales may change in the telling. The question of who is telling the tales and in what context therefore becomes important. Taking a form of culture as a text, the authors take the first step toward an analysis of text as writing, as material social process. Second, they assume that the peasant women who are telling the tales form a “peasant intelligentsia” that is trying to

intervene in the social process. That is, the tales are commentaries on what is happening to them and their families that call for particular forms of action to alter the situation. This is a crucial methodological step in the construction of a concept of culture not simply as a product but also as production, not simply as socially constituted but also as socially constituting. Given this framework, the authors then embark on a detailed symbolic analysis of the tales and, finally, suggest that the tales were attempts by peasant women to respond to the disruption of families and the drafting of their disinherited sons. The suggested response: inheriting daughters should renounce their inheritance, move from the region, marry elsewhere, and offer a refuge for their fleeing brothers. Taylor and Rebel show that such a response is in accord with demographic evidence from late-eighteenth-century Hesse, although it cannot yet be demonstrated whether the process they suggest actually occurred. Nonetheless, the authors have produced a cultural analysis that goes significantly further than does Geertz's in his "Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." To ask of any cultural text, be it a cockfight or a folk tale, who is talking, who is being talked to, what is being talked about, and what form of action is being called for, is to move cultural analysis to a new level that renders the old antinomies of materialism and idealism irrelevant.⁶

It might be argued that this is precisely what Geertz does. As one of our most able ethnographers, he is one of the few anthropologists who can provide detailed ecological, economic, and political information at the same time that he engages in sophisticated symbolic analysis. His examination of the theater state in nineteenth-century Bali is an example of this: we find treatments of political and social structure at hamlet, irrigation system, and temple levels, of caste divisions, of trade, and of the rituals of hierarchy. That Geertz sees all of these as necessary for a cultural argument, and that he sees his inclusion of these elements as rendering an "idealist" charge absurd, is clear from his conclusion to *Negara*. Although all the elements are presented and connected in a fashion, they are never fully joined. Culture as text is removed from the historical process that shapes it and that it in turn shapes. When we are told that in Bali "culture came

from the top down . . . while power welled up from the bottom" (1980: 85), the image makes perfect sense given the analysis of state structure that precedes it. But the image implies separation, a removal of culture from the wellings-up of action, interaction, power, and praxis.

We return, then, to the comparison of Geertz's promise with his practice. Although this essay already contains more quotations than it can easily bear, it closes with yet another. The quotation returns us to the promising approach to culture expressed in "Thick Description," and it is a statement of connection rather than separation. The passage establishes a standard for cultural interpretation that is in accord with the premises of this essay. That it also serves as a standard in terms of which Geertz's cultural analysis can be criticized should be apparent.

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. A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us into the heart of that of which it is an interpretation. When it does not do that, but leads us instead somewhere else—into an admiration of its own elegance, of its author's cleverness, or of the beauties of Euclidean order—it may have its intrinsic charms; but it is something else than what the task at hand . . . calls for. (1973b: 18)

Interpretation cannot be separated from what people say, what they do, what is done to them, because culture cannot be so separated. As long as anthropologists are seduced by the intrinsic charms of a textual analysis that takes such separation as a point of honor, they will continue to do something other than what the task at hand calls for.