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Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation

CLIFFORD GEERTZ IS SURELY THE MOST INFLUENTIAL American anthropologist of his generation. Although others—for example, Marshall Sahlins or Victor Turner—may rival his standing within anthropology, none approaches his influence on readers outside his home discipline.¹ As Renato Rosaldo once remarked, Geertz has become the “ambassador from anthropology.”

The ambassador’s slot was already in existence when Geertz emerged as an anthropological superstar in the early 1970s. It had previously been occupied by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. Mead, whose ambassadorial service overlapped Geertz’s, had gained a huge popular following, writing a regular column in *Redbook* and dispensing advice in various media on topics as wide-ranging as the nuclear arms race, juvenile delinquency, world hunger, and sex education. Geertz’s ambassadorial role has been much closer to that of Ruth Benedict, who, like Geertz, was more interested in the bearing of anthropology on issues of social and moral philosophy than on current social problems. Like Geertz, Benedict was a gifted literary stylist with a penchant for ethnographic *contes philosophiques*—her superb essays on the Zuni, Dobu, and Kwakiutl in *Patterns of Culture* are surely among the classics of a genre that Geertz has subsequently made his own. But Geertz and Benedict have been ambassadors to somewhat different publics. *Patterns of Culture*, in particular, was intended for and read by the educated public at large.² Geertz may well have been aiming for such a public, but his major impact has actually been on practitioners and students of other academic disciplines—the social sciences, literary studies, philosophy, and beyond.³

Geertz’s rise to ambassadorial dignity has given him an iconic status in the American academy. This has also made him vulnerable to iconoclasm, particularly in his home discipline of anthropology, where he is a favorite target of critique among anthropologists of the most varied intellectual provenances—he has been attacked by positivists, postmodernists, and materialists alike.⁴ The positivists criticize Geertz for abandoning the scientific values of “predictability, replicability, verifiability, and law-generating capacity” in favor of the more “glamorous” or “alluring” qualities of interpretive method.⁵ The postmodernists, by contrast, reproach him for not pushing his interpretive method far enough—in particular,

for failing to subject his own interpretive ethnographic practice to critical interpretation.⁶ The materialists, finally, criticize him for his neglect of history, power, and social conflict.⁷

This rather edgy relationship between Geertz and his anthropological colleagues is in sharp contrast to his relationship with historians, who embraced his ambassadorial efforts early and warmly. Historians have generally simply quoted him favorably and then gone about applying his methods or ideas in their own work.⁸ Of course, historians are generally far less prone than anthropologists to engage in theoretical disputes, and it is also true that Geertz does not serve as a marker in generational struggles among historians. Moreover, the history profession has never had many convinced positivists nor, at least until very recently, many convinced postmodernists. Nevertheless, it seems odd, on reflection, that some version of the materialist critique of Geertz has not been embraced by more historians.

The materialist critique—as elaborated, for example, by William Roseberry in “Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology”—should be quite compatible with the theoretical and methodological commitments of most social and cultural historians. Roseberry argues that Geertz, by conceptualizing culture as a text, adopts an effectively idealist position, separating cultural products from their historical production and from the relations of power and domination in which they are necessarily enmeshed. He points out that Geertz fails to indicate how the contemporary Balinese cockfight has been shaped by gender relations, by the legal regulations of the Dutch colonial and Indonesian states, or by the changing politics of Balinese status formation—all of which are referred to, but never really taken up, in Geertz’s text.⁹ The cockfight, Roseberry asserts, “has gone through a process of creation that cannot be separated from Balinese history,” but in Geertz’s account it is in fact separated from that history by being treated as a text.¹⁰ Rather than conceptualizing culture as a text, Roseberry suggests, we should think of it as a “material social process,” as “production” rather than as a “product,” constantly asking how, by whom, and for what ends it is being produced.¹¹ This, Roseberry asserts, would “move cultural analysis to a new level” and would render “the old antinomies of materialism and idealism irrelevant.”¹²

Most of Roseberry’s specific criticisms of Geertz’s cockfight essay are bound to resonate with historians’ predilections. However, his proposal that we overcome the “antinomy between the material and the ideal” by adopting a “materialist” concept of culture hardly seems promising: one doesn’t normally overcome an antinomy by simply embracing one of the antinomic poles.¹³ But on closer inspection the issue of materialism versus idealism is quite beside Roseberry’s real point, which has more to do with diachrony versus synchrony. The problem is not a matter of Geertz’s metaphysical commitments—indeed, I shall later argue that his materialist metaphysical credentials are impeccable—but of his methodological

practices. By treating a cultural performance as a text, Roseberry points out, one fixes it and subjects it to a synchronic gaze, bracketing the question of the processes that produced it in order to work out its internal logic.

I would argue that every cultural analysis *necessarily* entails a synchronic moment of this sort, but I would also argue that the synchronic moment should be dialectically related to an equally necessary diachronic moment.¹⁴ And I agree with Roseberry that Geertz's practice of cultural interpretation too often slights the diachronic—that, as I would put it, in Geertz's work the necessary dialectic between synchronic and diachronic tends to be seriously truncated. A number of Geertz's essays, including the cockfight article, feature an event in real historical time, in which particular individuals in specific social and political relations engage in interested social action—in this case, a police raid that scatters observers of a village cockfight. But introduction of such temporal and social particulars serves Geertz as a literary device to move the essay to the real goal: specifying the synchronic and aesthetically satisfying coherence that underlies the cultural practice in question. Geertz does not usually circle back from the synchronic analysis to enrich our understanding of the contingent historical circumstances or structured social tensions that produced the cultural performance in the first place.¹⁵ Thus, although I believe that Roseberry's invocation of the problem of materialism and idealism is confused, I find his critique of Geertz considerably more troubling than those of the positivists or the postmodernists. It gets at precisely the kinds of weaknesses that are bound to seem serious to a social historian.

Geertz and Historians

Yet social historians, myself included, have been enormously responsive to Geertz's work. Roseberry's critique therefore poses a paradox: why should so many historians, who are professionally concerned with questions of change over time, be so strongly influenced by an anthropologist whose work is insistently synchronic?

In her pathbreaking article "The Traffic in Women," Gayle Rubin thanks her undergraduate teacher Marshall Sahlins for what she calls "the revelation of anthropology."¹⁶ The phrase is apt. The revelation, I take it, is that our world is contingent rather than necessary; that there exist forms of life radically different from ours that are nonetheless fully human, and that, consequently, our own future is potentially more open than we usually imagine. This is the perennial message of anthropology to the world, and its delivery is the core duty of its long-standing ambassadorial function, certainly as carried out by Benedict, Mead, and Geertz. Indeed, I suspect that virtually all anthropologists were initially "allured" or "seduced" into their field by the exhilaration of discovering simultaneously the

radical otherness and human comprehensibility of exotic cultures. Most have learned in the course of their professional training to suppress this initial thrill of recognition-in-difference, to replace it with an effort to encompass exotic facts in supposedly universal but actually very Western scholarly codes. Geertz, like Benedict before him, has striven to keep alive and to communicate to his readers the revelation of anthropology. It is precisely this quality that has made him so effective as an ambassador.

If historians have been particularly susceptible to Geertz's charms, it is partly because history is built on an analogous seduction. In the pasts they study, historians find worlds structured differently from ours, worlds where people's motives, senses of honor, daily tasks, and political calculations are based on unfamiliar assumptions about human society and the cosmic order. Many of the greatest works of history—Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society*, E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*—reveal to us worlds hardly less strange than Bali, Zuni, or the Trobriands.¹⁷ History, like anthropology, specializes in the discovery and display of human variety, but in time rather than space. It reveals that even our own ancestors lived lives stunningly different from ours. Geertz's brand of anthropology, which attempts to plumb the cultural logic of exotic societies, was thus prealigned with an important form of historical sensibility.

Anthropology had an additional claim on history as it was being practiced in the early 1970s, when Geertz published *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Geertz's emergence as an academic superstar took place at a time when social history was approaching dominance in the history profession. The rise of social history introduced fundamental changes to the field, representing a shift from the study of high politics and the actions of political and cultural elites to the study of social structures and the actions of ordinary people. In the United States, the first wave of social history was marked above all by the borrowing of theories and methods (particularly quantitative methods) from sociology, but by the early seventies a second generation of American social historians, myself among them, were beginning to feel that purely quantitative approaches could never grasp adequately the textures and meanings of ordinary people's lives.¹⁸ Anthropology, as practiced by Geertz, seemed to offer a means of reaching deeper. Like social history, it was focused not on the practices of political leaders and intellectuals but on those of ordinary people. And it revealed—in their rituals, social conventions, and language—lives rich with complex symbolism and overflowing with meaning.

But anthropologists had a huge advantage over historians when it came to studying the kinds of people whose thoughts and deeds are seldom recorded in writing. They could live with them, learn their languages, engage them in conversation, observe their rituals, and participate in their daily routines. Historians

working on peasants, workers, slaves, women, or colonized peoples were limited to what was written down and saved in archives or libraries—often not in such people’s own words but in those of their “betters” or governors. But here Geertz’s particular theory of culture gave historians reason for hope—and for emulation. Geertz continually stressed that meaning was not locked away in actors’ heads but was embodied in publicly available symbols. He insisted that the symbol systems that make up a culture “are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture.”¹⁹ Good ethnographic fieldworkers, Geertz told us, do not achieve some miracle of empathy with the people whose lives they briefly and incompletely share; they acquire no “preternatural capacity to think, feel, and perceive like a native.”²⁰ The ethnographer does not “perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’—or ‘by means of’ or ‘through.’” He or she does this “by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another.”²¹

It should be apparent that such a conceptualization of the study of culture is epistemologically empowering to social historians. It is obvious that those of us who study the dead cannot hope to share their experiences directly, as a naive ethnographer might imagine she or he directly shares the experiences of her or his “natives.” But some of the symbolic forms through which the dead experienced their world are available to us in surviving documents—often piecemeal and secondhand, to be sure, but by no means beyond recovery. Geertz’s particular conceptualization of culture as made up of publicly available systems of symbols provided an important epistemological guarantee to social historians. It powerfully authorized the use of anthropological methods in studies of past societies.

The Uses of Synchrony

The vein of anthropological revelation opened up to historians by Geertz’s methods was essentially synchronic in character. What Geertz analyzes most brilliantly, or describes most thickly, are what he frequently called “cultural systems.”²² To portray an ensemble of symbols and the practices in which they are employed as a cultural system is to trace how these symbols and practices mutually sustain each other as an integrated whole. For instance, the cultural system of a religion is composed of two complementary symbolic orders—an ethos (a people’s “moral and aesthetic style and mood”) and a worldview (“their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are”)—that mutually imply one another.²³ Thus, for Navahos, “an ethic prizing calm deliberateness, untiring persistence, and dignified caution complements an image of nature as tremendously powerful, mechan-

ically regular, and highly dangerous.” And for Hindus, “a transcendental moral determinism in which one’s social and spiritual status in a future incarnation is an automatic outcome of the nature of one’s action in the present, is completed by a ritualistic duty-ethic bound to caste.”²⁴ Religions, in short, seek to harmonize a people’s conceptions of the real with their conceptions of the appropriate way to live. It is this mutual reinforcement that gives religions their systemic character. But such systems of mutual implication are by no means limited to the sphere of religion. Geertz argues in “Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali” that Balinese naming practices fit tightly with Balinese modes of calendrical reckoning and that both reinforce a particular mode of conduct; the three symbolic domains “are hooked together by a definable logic.”²⁵ Again and again, whether the subject is religions, conceptions of persons, hermaphroditism, aesthetic practices, cock-fights, ideologies, state funerals, or royal progresses, Geertz’s version of cultural analysis constantly returns to the trope of culture as interlaced and mutually sustaining systems of meaning.

Analyzing culture in this way is a synchronic intellectual operation. Although a synchronic description or analysis is often glossed as a “snapshot” that “freezes” time or as a “slice” of time, this is not quite right. Such a description is, rather, one in which time is *suspended* or *abolished* analytically so that things that actually occur in the flow of time are treated as part of a uniform moment or epoch in which they simply coexist. Just as “synoptic” means that all views are present in a single glance (as in one of those medieval paintings in which the far-flung scenes of a saint’s life and martyrdom are depicted in a single continuous landscape), so “synchronic” means that different times are present in a continuous moment. To put it otherwise, in synchronic description acts of cultural signification, rather than being treated as a temporal sequence of statement and counterstatement or as linked by causal chains of antecedent and consequence, are seen as components of a mutually defined and mutually sustaining universe of (at least momentarily, until the analytic spell breaks) unchanging meaning.

Such a procedure of suspending time would appear on the surface to be unhistorical, but this is not necessarily the case. The term “historical” actually has two quite distinct meanings in contemporary speech. On the one hand, it has the obvious adjectival meaning derived from its root “history”—that is, it designates happenings that take place over time, as in “historical sequence,” “historical continuity,” or “historical narrative.” But historical also implies “in the past,” standing at a distance from the contemporary world—as in “historical novel,” “historical costume,” or “historical significance.” I would argue that this is actually the primary meaning of the term in both everyday and academic language, since it is only when connected to nouns that themselves imply temporal flow, like “sequence,” “continuity,” or “narrative,” that “historical” implies the continuous passage of time. Consequently, when we admonish someone to “think historically,” we give an ambiguous message. We might mean “recognize more consciously and explic-

itly the ‘pastness’ of the past you are thinking about.” Or we might mean “place the happening you are thinking about in a temporal sequence of transformations.” Or we might mean both.

These two meanings of “historical” and “history”—what we might call “history as temporal context” and “history as transformation”—are the synchronic and diachronic faces of history. History as temporal context is historical in the sense that it is placed in some past era, but it is concerned not with the process of change during that time but with the distinct character and atmosphere of what we might call a *block* of time. Indeed, we convince our readers—and ourselves—that we have truly understood the pastness of that time by showing how a wide range of different beliefs, practices, judgments, and forms of action were linked by some common but now foreign logic.

Both history as transformation and history as temporal context are recognized in the practice and training of professional historians. We would regard as incompetent any historian not capable of arguing in both modes. But as in ordinary language, it is actually the synchronic mode that is privileged in historical judgments, not the diachronic. A historical work that makes no effort (or only the most passing effort) to explicate or explain a historical transformation but portrays effectively the context of some past lifeworld can be hailed as a masterpiece. Think of Louis Namier’s *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Le carnaval de Romans*, the already mentioned works by Huizinga and Burckhardt, or Robert Darnton’s essay on the “Great Cat Massacre” (a work that was strongly influenced by Geertz).²⁶ By contrast, a history that recounted a series of changes over time but failed to indicate the distance of the lifeworld being described from the present would be dismissed out of hand as “anachronistic”—the historian’s equivalent of the anthropologist’s “ethnocentric” and perhaps the most damning term in the historian’s lexicon of judgment.

It is significant that *anachronism*, which means “in the wrong time,” is an indispensable term in the historian’s vocabulary and has unambiguously negative connotations, whereas *achronism*, a perfectly good word that means “without time,” has no negative connotations—indeed, is not a part of the historian’s critical vocabulary at all. Here, as any good Geertzian would expect, the language used by historians tells us something about the shape and meaning of their lifeworld.²⁷ It tells us, perhaps surprisingly, that adequately realized synchrony is more important to good historical analysis than adequately realized diachrony. In the eyes of professionals, it is more important for a historian to know how to suspend time than to know how to recount its passage. Geertz’s synchronic methods, therefore, may be just what historians need.

But even if historians’ language indicates that they value synchronic adequacy over diachronic adequacy, most also care about history as transformation. Here Geertz is of little direct assistance, but indirectly his synchronic methods remain extremely valuable.²⁸ I would argue that the study of history as transformation

has typically been haunted by an *excess* of diachrony. It was not without reason that insurgent social historians, whether the American “new social historians” or the French historians of the *Annales* school, consistently defined themselves against “narrative history.”²⁹ And even though it was the social historians (and their successors, the cultural historians) who won these battles, historians’ long-standing habit of trying to narrate themselves out of tight conceptual spots has hardly disappeared. If I think of the many history articles I have advised journals not to publish in the course of my long service as a peer reviewer, their most common failing by far was attempting to solve—or to avoid—a conceptual problem by retreating to the obvious archival sources and stringing together a narrative of “what actually happened.” My ethnographic research in the daily routines of “historyland,” in other words, tells me that leaving the synchronic element out of historical analysis—neglecting to pause long enough to work out the structure of a given historical moment—remains an extremely common failing of historical research and writing.³⁰

A proper appreciation of synchrony is the secret ingredient of effective diachronic history. I would argue that no account of a historical transformation can be cogent unless it performs a dialectical oscillation between synchronic and diachronic thinking. We should, in my opinion, pay more literal attention to the word “transform,” whose two roots—“trans” and “form”—signal precisely the necessary joining of diachrony and synchrony. Unless we can represent to ourselves and our readers the *form* of life in one historical moment or era, unless we can describe systematically the interlocking meanings and practices that give it a particular character, how are we to explain its transformation—or, for that matter, even to recognize when and how it has been transformed? An account of historical change typically shows how initial changes in some particular sector or sectors of a lifeworld have ramifying effects on others, with the ultimate consequence that the lifeworld as a whole is cast into a different shape. An account of this sort can only be convincing if the pretransformation interrelationships have already been cogently demonstrated: otherwise the claims about ramifying effects of initially local changes will seem insubstantial. No account of change will be judged deep, satisfying, rich, or persuasive unless it is based on a prior analysis of synchronic relations.

In short, the fact that Geertz’s work is so resolutely synchronic hardly makes it irrelevant to historians. Indeed, the most signal virtue of his work for historians may be its cultivation of a synchronic sensibility. If the trope of the cultural system, the image of deep play, or the ideal of thick description can enable historians to suspend time more effectively—and consequently to portray past lifeworlds and their transformations with greater clarity, complexity, consistency, or depth—then they have been far from foolish to take seriously even Geertz’s most unrelentingly synchronic work.

Cultural Systems as a Material Fact

Geertz's concept of the cultural system posits a very tight fit between publicly available clusters of symbols and the moods, motivations, affects, and activities that these symbols shape. It is this assumed tightness of fit that makes his theorization of culture problematic for explaining cultural change. Geertz never explicitly raises the question of why cultural systems determine human behavior so closely. But I think the basic assumptions can be found in two essays written in the 1960s: "Religion as a Cultural System" and, especially, "The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind," one of the most brilliant and underappreciated essays in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. In these essays, Geertz argues that cultural patterning must be understood as an analogue of genetic programming.

Although I disagree with Geertz's conclusions about the overwhelmingly determining character of cultural systems, I regard his extended meditation on the relationship of genes and symbols as the necessary starting place for any theory of culture. This meditation, moreover, provides the vindication of Geertz's materialist metaphysical credentials that I promised earlier. It does so by demonstrating that "mind"—seemingly a suspiciously "idealist" concept—has a substantial biological basis in human evolution. I will therefore present Geertz's fundamental theory of the symbolic patterning of behavior in some detail in this section before going on to criticize and modify it in the next.

Systems or complexes of symbols, Geertz writes in "Religion as a Cultural System,"

are extrinsic sources of information. By "extrinsic," I mean only that—unlike genes, for example—they lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism as such in that intersubjective world of common understandings into which all human individuals are born, in which they pursue their separate careers, and which they leave persisting behind them after they die. By "sources of information," I mean only that—like genes—they provide a blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to themselves can be given a definite form. As the order of bases in a strand of DNA forms a coded program, a set of instructions, or a recipe, for the synthesis of the structurally complex proteins which shape organic functioning, so culture patterns provide such programs for the institution of the social and psychological processes which shape public behavior.³¹

This analogy between genes and culture is not a mere metaphor, Geertz claims: it has a basis in the biology of human evolution.

[The] comparison of gene and symbol is more than a strained analogy of the familiar "social heredity" sort. It is actually a substantial relationship, for it is precisely because of the fact that genetically programmed processes are so highly generalized in [humans], as compared with lower animals, that culturally programmed ones are so important; only because human behavior is so loosely determined by intrinsic sources of information that extrinsic sources are so vital.³²

Human cultures, or systems of symbols, provide a supplementary source of information that is not just a convenience to humans but a physiological necessity of our biological endowment.

As against an earlier view that culture arose in human evolution only after the huge cerebral cortex had developed, Geertz, following the lead of such anthropologists as S. L. Washburn and W. W. Howells, argues persuasively that culture and the human brain must have evolved in tandem. In the Pleistocene period, early hominids began to manufacture and use primitive tools and, relatedly, to engage in symbolic communication. Evolutionary pressures then selected for the kinds of neural structures that made such behavior possible, thereby enabling more sophisticated cultural patterns to develop, which in turn increased the selective pressures favoring cerebral development. Eventually, when the growing forebrain had allowed culture to accumulate to the point that “its importance as an adaptive factor almost wholly dominated its role as a selective one,” the organic changes in neural structures effectively ceased. From that time forward, having long since acquired language, religion, moral regulation, and the incest taboo, *Homo sapiens* has remained more or less neurologically constant. It was, in short, the development of culture that called into existence the large forebrain that distinguishes our nervous system from that of the earliest hominids.³³

Not only did culture and the large forebrain evolve together, but they remain organically linked today. “Man’s nervous system does not merely enable him to acquire culture, it positively demands that he do so if it is to function at all.”³⁴ Culture, extrinsic information coded in symbols, is a condition of our viability as a species. This is true because the large and astoundingly complex human brain responds to stimuli not by producing specific behavioral responses but rather with highly general affects.

The lower an animal, the more it tends to respond to a “threatening” stimulus with an intrinsically connected series of performed activities which taken together comprise a comparatively stereotyped . . . “flight” or “fight” response. Man’s intrinsic response to such a stimulus tends to consist, however, of a diffuse, variably intense, “fear” or “rage” excitability accompanied by few, if any, automatically preset, well-defined behavioral sequences. Like a frightened animal, a frightened man may run, hide, bluster, dissemble, placate, or, desperate with panic, attack; but in his case the precise patterning of such overt acts is guided predominantly by cultural rather than genetic templates.³⁵

The only way for humans to produce specific behavior appropriate to the challenges thrown up by their environment is to use the manifold cultural codes that their peculiar neural structure has made possible. Because humans’ genetically programmed responses are so generalized, they need the extrinsic information supplied by culture in order to accomplish the diverse tasks of life—whether those be responding to threats, constructing shelter, reproducing the species, seeking companionship, killing other species for food, or constructing political regulations. Humans proceed, and can *only* proceed, by gathering and manipulat-

ing information (including information about how to gather information), which is stored not in the physiological structure of the body but in the intersubjective space of human signifying practice and in the objects—books, maps, clothing, tools, sacred goods, illustrations, the built environment—that give it material form.

Intellectually unviable without culture, humans would be emotionally unviable without it as well. Geertz remarks that “man is the most emotional as well as the most rational animal.”³⁶ He might have added the most emotional *because* the most rational. The emotional diffuseness or uncertainty of the human neural response to stimuli is the flip side of the existence of the complex neural apparatus that makes us capable of reasoning. The response to stimuli *can* be diffuse because our reasoning brain makes possible tremendous and adaptively useful flexibility in how we deal with a problem; it *must* be diffuse if we are to deal with a problem flexibly rather than in a stereotyped fashion. But this makes the human “a peculiarly high-strung animal,” subject to all sorts of emotional excitement but lacking built-in patterns to guide responses to that excitement.³⁷ It is cultural patterns that provide the necessary control of emotionally upsetting stimuli. They give “specific, explicit, determinate form to the general, diffuse, ongoing flow of bodily sensation,” thereby “imposing upon the continual shifts in sentience to which we are inherently subject a recognizable, meaningful order, so that we may not only feel but know what we feel and act accordingly.”³⁸

This provision of specific form for diffuse and unsettling human emotion is, according to Geertz, precisely what religions are about. They provide us with conceptions and practices that enable us to live with the ever-present threat of chaos. In “Religion as a Cultural System,” Geertz specifies three sources of such threat: events or problems that seem beyond our powers of explanation, suffering that seems impossible to endure, and ethical paradoxes that seem impossible to resolve. What religious symbolism does is not to deny the existence of the uncanny, of suffering, or of evil, but to provide concepts that make them thinkable (such as divine mystery, imitation of Christ, or original sin) and ritual practices that give them an experiential reality (such as the Eucharist, extreme unction, or penance). Religious doctrine, mirrored and experienced in ritual acts, does not, for example, spare us from suffering: it teaches us “how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others’ agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable.”³⁹ In short, our neural organization necessitates as well as makes possible the shaping of both our cognitive and emotional lives by systems of symbols.

This account of the evolutionary origins and the biological necessity of human culture is a brilliant piece of materialist argumentation. It transcends the material/ideal dichotomy not by some verbal formula but by a substantial, scientifically based account of the inescapable complementarity of “material” and “ideal” in the human condition. It enables us to recognize the simultaneous rootedness of cul-

ture (or “mind”) in bodily needs and its irreducibility to bodily needs. It enables us to pursue the autonomous logic of cultural systems without worrying that we are becoming “idealists” and therefore losing touch with the “real” world. If Geertz is right, as I firmly believe he is, semiotic systems are not unworldly or ghostly or imaginary; they are as integral to the life of our species as respiration, digestion, or reproduction. Materialists, this suggests, should stop worrying and love the symbol.

How Cultural Systems Change

The theory of culture Geertz builds on this impressive ontological foundation provides wonderful tools for analyzing synchronic cultural relations but clumsy tools for explaining cultural change. This means that a historian who wants to take advantage of Geertz’s synchronic insights but also wants to investigate cultural transformations must modify Geertz’s concepts in practice. This is precisely what historians—or historically inclined anthropologists—ought to expect: after all, virtually none of the social theory we use in our work has been developed to deal with problems of historical change. The overriding problem posed by most social theory has been accounting for social order or structure. This is true, for example, not only of Geertz’s work but of nearly all of anthropology before 1980; of the entire Durkheimian tradition; of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu; of Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, and Erving Goffman. And even those theorists who have made the explanation of change a central problematic—principally Karl Marx, Max Weber, and such successors as Louis Althusser, Jürgen Habermas, or Immanuel Wallerstein—have usually employed such teleological notions of temporality that their concepts must be extensively revised to be useful to historians.⁴⁰

What is needed is a theoretical critique that acknowledges and embraces what is most valuable in Geertz—for example, his epistemology of ethnographic research, his powerful sense of synchronic relations, and his ontological founding of the concept of culture in human biology—but that modifies his theories so as to make the possibility of change in cultural systems not an afterthought or an externality but integral to the very notion of culture.⁴¹

A useful starting point for such a critique is Geertz’s famous statement that symbols are both “models of” and “models for” reality. They are “models for” in the sense that they are templates for the production of reality—whether architectural ideals that guide the construction of houses or male- and female-coded forms of public behavior that guide the construction of men and women. But they are at the same time “models of” reality: the architectural principles used to construct houses are also used to make sense of or judge existing buildings and the difference between men’s and women’s public behavior is taken as an index

of the difference between the sexes. This double quality of symbols, Geertz points out, makes them different from genes, which are only models for, not models of.⁴²

This is an exceptionally fruitful observation, but in my opinion Geertz fails to exploit some of its most interesting implications. He concludes that the “model of” and “model for” doubleness of symbols means that they give “objective conceptual form to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.”⁴³ He assumes, in other words, that the models of the social world will simply reflect back the reality that models for the social world have produced—and, correlatively, that models for the social world will simply produce in the world the “realities” that models of the social world describe. He assumes a relationship of mirroring or circularity, of complementarity and mutual tuning.

What Geertz fails to explore is that the doubleness of symbols also raises the possibility of a *disjunction* between their “model of” and “model for” aspects, a disjunction that opens up for actors a space for critical reflection about the world. The disjunction could open up on either of the symbol’s two sides. To say that symbols are models of reality means that they are the product of humans’ attempts to make sense of or represent the world. The “model of” dimension of the symbol implies active human thought or consciousness, the very process of intellection that our large brains and diffuse responses to stimuli render both possible and imperative. This process of representation employs the symbols made available by the culture, of course, but these symbols may be used in a creative or open-ended fashion. One makes sense of and evaluates buildings by using the existing store of architectural principles, but doing so might lead the evaluator to discover, to formally elaborate, and to integrate into architectural theories hitherto unrecognized principles that she discovers in the buildings being evaluated. The result is a change in architectural principles.⁴⁴ Because the world is always far more manifold than our representations of it, the representations are always potentially susceptible to change.

There is also a possibility of disjunction on the “model for” side. “Social reality,” as Geertz would insist, is produced by shaping human action in the world according to cultural templates. But the world may prove quite recalcitrant to our attempts to shape it. After all, every attempt to apply a template takes place in a situation not quite the same as those in which the template was initially constructed. Hence, even if we assume that people always try to reproduce conscientiously that which they have known, what they actually produce is bound to vary—sometimes significantly—from what is intended. An attempt to produce men and women whose forms of public behavior fit the existing pattern may prove impossible if new forms of employment open up for women—say, in spinning mills—in which existing “feminine” forms of public behavior are no longer adequate. When this happens, a gap opens up that can be closed only by some change in the gender coding of forms of public behavior.⁴⁵ Because the world so frequently resists our

attempts to shape it, cultural symbols that model the world (in both senses) are, once again, susceptible to change.⁴⁶

What this implies is that we cannot unproblematically assume that the “model of” and “model for” aspects of symbols or symbol systems will automatically mirror each other. That they frequently do so, or even that humans normally attempt to make them do so, may well be true; I am no less inclined than Geertz to believe that people normally attempt to impose coherence on their world. But as the notional examples given above would seem to indicate, this attempt to impose coherence can be a force for *transformation* of cultural systems no less than a force for stability. The double character of symbols, far from constituting a guarantee of stability, guarantees that whatever stability is achieved can only be impermanent.

Geertz's ideas about the relations between culture and human neural structure may also be interpreted as implying a certain potential for instability in cultural systems. They do so because they imply considerable variation among individuals in response to a given problem. Because humans react to environmental stimuli in diffuse or general rather than in specific and biologically programmed fashions, they must search for extrinsic information in order to find solutions to challenges. In some cases, cultural codes are so highly stereotyped that this search for information will be very brief, determinate, and uniform for all persons facing the same stimuli. But this is certainly not always the case. Because initial neural responses are diffuse, because there is often ambiguity about what cultural code might apply, and because there is considerable flexibility about precisely how it might be applied, any stimulus is likely to be met by a range of responses, some of which might be quite innovative. If for some reason an innovative response gains salience—for example, because it is particularly successful in dealing with the problem at hand or because the person who responds innovatively is powerful or influential—the cultural codes might be permanently altered. The kind of reproductive mirroring of cultural pattern and social action that Geertz implicitly assumes as the norm may indeed be the norm. But Geertz's explicit ontological model of human cognitive activity seems to imply that significant departures from reproductive mirroring are bound to occur as well.

A similar point might be made about the emotional implications of Geertz's model of the person. He stresses that humans are peculiarly high-strung, that without the assistance of cultural patterns a human “would be functionally incomplete . . . a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions.”⁴⁷ Geertz moves from this insight about the fundamental emotional instability of the human condition to an account of how culture provides the controls that are somatically lacking. He points out—very astutely, in my opinion—that the control does not always or even primarily take the shape of repression, but rather of channeling emotions into knowable forms: the flamboyant courage of the Plains Indian, the Manus' guilt-ridden compunctiousness, or the quietism of the Javanese.

But if the organic human emotional response to the environment is so diffuse and unstable, it hardly seems plausible that even the culturally thick, aesthetically appealing, and affectively powerful patterns of emotional self-expression that Geertz analyzes in so many of his articles could consistently generate patterns of behavior that are genuinely constant over time.⁴⁸ Instead, one might expect the fundamentally vagrant quality of human emotion to lead to occasional experimentation with new forms of emotional patterning; to periodic dissatisfaction with existing moral and religious systems; and to spasmodic bouts of intense political, religious, and artistic activity. Here, as Geertz himself so often does, we might turn to the theoretical legacy of Weber, who insisted on the crucial role of charisma in certain cases of profound historical change. The emergence of prophets, heroes, congregations of disciples, or bands of revolutionaries can harness diffuse emotional energies into specific, historically potent social forces.⁴⁹ Both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of Geertz's theory of mind imply that cultural systems will not be reproduced automatically. An animal so high-strung and so prodigiously talented as the human is bound to produce significant episodes of cultural transformation.

One reason Geertz's cultural systems appear impervious to change is that few of his works explore differences or variations in the beliefs, values, or idioms embraced by different groups within societies. On this point, the practices of cultural anthropologists have diverged sharply from Geertz's over the past decade and a half: examination of cultural difference has become one of their major preoccupations. Probably the most important source of the interest in difference has been feminist anthropology, which has problematized the apparent unity of cultural systems by demonstrating that cultures look very different from the perspective of women than they do from that of men.⁵⁰ But the interest in difference has also been central to "reflexive anthropology," which has advocated the ethnographic representation of multiple voices, and to the anthropology of colonialism, which has focused on the freighted cultural negotiations between European rulers and their colonial subjects.⁵¹ Social historians, of course, have been interested in questions of difference for some time: "history from below," as practiced ever since the 1960s, explicitly endeavors to rescue the voices of the poor and marginalized and to relate their cultural experiences to those of the dominant classes.⁵² Indeed, the more recent anthropological practices of multivocality have surely been influenced in part by the example of social history.⁵³

As much of this anthropological and historical work demonstrates, cultural change often arises out of conflict, communication, rivalry, or exchange between groups with different cultural patterns and social relations. Group difference implies the possibility of conscious challenges to practices or values that might otherwise be reproduced automatically, and of continual negotiations or struggles about meanings. Moreover, internal social differentiation also makes possible the development in specific social niches of new cultural complexes. It is usually the

case that cultural innovations do not take place uniformly over an entire society but are concentrated in or originate from specific social and geographical locations. The possibility of a workers' revolt, which haunted European politics for the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, initially arose out of a very particular dispute between weavers and silk merchants in Lyon in 1831; the cultural innovations we think of as the Renaissance were remarkably concentrated in the town of Florence; the early-twentieth-century transformation of Sherpa Buddhism was initiated by a handful of wealthy traders and monks.⁵⁴

Geertz certainly does not deny the existence or the significance of internal difference, but he usually brackets such difference in his texts. The difference he emphasizes is that *between* societies or peoples—between “the Plains Indian’s bravura, the Hindu’s obsessiveness, the Frenchman’s rationalism, the Berber’s anarchism, the American’s optimism.”⁵⁵ It is remarkable how frequently Geertz makes assertions about “the Balinese,” “the Javanese,” “the Berbers,” “the French,” “the Hindus,” “the Manus,” or “the Zuni” without considering the possibility that there are culturally important differences within these categories—of outlook, belief, and comportment, or of wealth, gender, power, and status.

Yet here again, there are theoretical resources in Geertz’s work for conceptualizing cultural difference at the intrasociety as well as intersociety level. For example, Geertz argues that the sort of cultural diversity that makes possible such different lifeworlds as those of the Plains Indians, the Hindus, the Manus, and the French is a consequence of humans’ inescapable reliance on extrinsic cultural codes. Although the neural equipment of humankind is everywhere essentially the same, the cultural codes that provide our minds with specific content are fundamentally diverse. “To be human,” Geertz states, “is thus not to be Everyman; it is to be a particular kind of man, and of course men differ: ‘Other fields,’ the Javanese say, ‘other grasshoppers.’” According to Geertz, it is the anthropologist’s particular calling to study the different modes of being human; it is only by understanding the particulars of these forms of life that “we shall find out what it is, or can be,” to be human.⁵⁶

To this I would add three points. First, the cultural production of different forms of life takes place at many levels, not just at the level of the “society” or the “people.” Differences between the forms of life of peasants and landlords, workers and students, men and women, priests and nobles, or slaves and masters are as legitimate an object of anthropological scrutiny as those between “societies.” Second, examining the relations between such different categories of people—whether of conflict, domination, exchange, emulation, or self-conscious differentiation—is a crucial task for cultural analysis. And third, the value of studying relations between categories of people is as great for what we conventionally label “societies” as for classes, genders, or status groups. “Societies” are themselves interpenetrating and mutually constituting social categories, in this respect analogous to the classes, genders, or status groups that constitute them. And they too

are animated by relations of conflict, domination, exchange, emulation, and self-conscious differentiation with one another.

Geertz actually provides a good metaphor for the sort of dynamic, relational, differentiated cultural analysis I am advocating here. In “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” he explicates and draws lessons from the tangled Moroccan story of the Jewish peddler Cohen, a tribe of Berber horsemen, and a French colonial official—a story whose “confusion of tongues” he takes as paradigmatic for the situation facing the ethnographic interpreter.⁵⁷ In this instance, the confusion of tongues arises from the encounter of three “peoples” in the traditional anthropological sense: Jews, Berbers, and the French. But the metaphor could easily be extended. Analogous cultural misunderstandings, conflicts, and negotiations occur all the time among people who share language, religion, territory, or a sense of ethnic identity but differ in status, gender, class, age, power, caste, or occupation. And it is precisely in these various episodes of confusion of tongues—where social encounters contest cultural meanings or render them uncertain—that cultural systems are transformed. Once we admit social diversity, we can no longer see cultural systems as always self-reinforcing; instead, they must also be seen as sites of conflict, dialogue, and change.

To make sense of historical transformations, then, we must adopt a different theory of culture than Geertz’s. But unlike Roseberry and many other of Geertz’s anthropological critics, I think we would be gravely mistaken to respond by rejecting his theory outright. Instead, I think we should *appropriate* his theoretical categories—engaging them, weighing their strengths and weaknesses, reworking them from within, but also supplementing them where necessary with foreign grafts. There is still enough untapped richness, insight, and analytical power in Geertz’s work to make it a continuing inspiration for historical analysis.

Notes

1. For example, a quick check of the *Social Sciences Citation Index, 1995 Annual* (Philadelphia, 1996) indicates that Marshall Sahlins was cited slightly more often than Clifford Geertz in anthropology journals, but that Geertz received more than twice as many citations overall (roughly 350 as opposed to 150), including citations in journals in fields as far-flung as agriculture, nursing, environmental studies, business, social work, information science, gerontology, and public relations.
2. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York, 1934), and Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (New York, 1946).
3. This difference between Benedict’s and Geertz’s audiences probably reflects the changing contours of American intellectual life more than it does their own specific

proclivities: the community of lay public intellectuals for whom Benedict could write in the 1930s hardly exists in the present—it has increasingly been either snuffed out by the rampant commercialization of the media or engulfed by universities.

4. Again a comparison with Marshall Sahlins is revealing. Sahlins is as frequently cited as Geertz by anthropologists, and his work is highly controversial. See, especially, Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, 1992), and Marshall Sahlins's response, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago, 1995). Yet the eleven annual volumes of *Anthropological Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984–94) since 1984 list twenty-four critical works on Geertz and only ten on Sahlins.
5. The quotations are from Paul Shankman, whose "The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Paradigm of Clifford Geertz," *Current Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (1984): 261–79 (quotes from 264, 270) is the most systematic critique from a positivist perspective. As is the norm in this journal, the article itself is followed by comments from an assortment of scholars and a response by the author. Five of the fifteen published comments—those of Erika Bourguignon, Linda Connor, John R. Cole, A. D. Fisher, and Robin Riddington—indicate that Shankman's positivist distrust of Geertz is far from unique among anthropologists. Shankman's thorough bibliography is a good guide to the critical literature on Geertz as of 1984.
6. See, e.g., Vincent Crapanzano, "Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986), 68–76; James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 40–41; Graham Watson, "Definitive Geertz," *Ethnos* 54, nos. 1 and 2 (1989): 23–30; and Graham Watson, "Rewriting Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, 1991), 80–81.
7. Examples are William Roseberry, "Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology," *Social Research* 49, no. 4 (1982): 1013–28, republished in *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, and Political Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1989), 17–29; and Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, no. 2 (1982): 237–59. See also Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), esp. chap. 1.
8. Ronald Walters gives an account of Geertz's early reception by historians in "Signs of the Times: Clifford Geertz and the Historians," *Social Research* 47, no. 3 (1980): 537–56.
9. Roseberry, "Balinese Cockfights," 1020–23. Roseberry's critique centers on Clifford Geertz's "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 412–53. This article is the sole or primary example discussed in a number of critical articles devoted to Geertz—including those by Clifford and Crapanzano cited earlier. Although there is far more to Geertz than the cockfight article, there is a certain poetic justice in the way critics have treated as a synecdochic representation of Geertz an article in which he claims that the cockfight synecdochically represents Balinese culture.
10. Roseberry, "Balinese Cockfights," 1022.
11. *Ibid.*, 1023–24.
12. *Ibid.*, 1026–27.
13. *Ibid.*, 1024. For a discussion of Roseberry quite consonant with mine, see Nicholas B. Dirks, "Is Vice Versa? Historical Anthropologies and Anthropological Histories," in *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, ed. Terrence J. McDonald (Ann Arbor, 1996), 17–52.

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14. On the necessity of synchronic moments in historical analysis, see William H. Sewell Jr., "How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Oxford, 1990), 57–59.
15. The only exception that comes to mind is an article written early in Geertz's career (1959), which treats a politically fraught funeral: "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 142–69. This article was written before Geertz had freed himself from his Parsonian heritage, at a time when he was preoccupied with the problematic of modernization. Although it is now fashionable to equate modernization theory with an unreflexive teleology, Geertz used it in this article and in a number of his early works to examine the contradictions of a Javanese society that, in the 1950s, was experiencing the throes of transition from colony to independent state. See, e.g., *Agricultural Involvement: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley, 1963), *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (Chicago, 1963), and *The Social History of an Indonesian Town* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965). In an exceptionally subtle critical evaluation of Geertz's work, Diane J. Austin-Broos points out the contrast between Geertz's early work on Java, which was undertaken from a modernization perspective but treated culture as ambiguous and manipulable, and his later work on Bali and Morocco, which is characterized by a "new stillness" that results from "the rendering of life as aesthetic." "Clifford Geertz: Culture, Sociology, and Historicism"; in *Creating Culture: Profiles in the Study of Culture*, ed. Diane J. Austin-Broos (Sydney, 1987), 156.
16. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York, 1975), 157.
17. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York, 1958); Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Garden City, N.Y., 1954); Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (Chicago, 1964); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York, 1978).
18. Representative works from the first wave are Charles Tilly, *The Vendée* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); and Lawrence Stone, *Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford, 1967).
19. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 91.
20. Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), 56. This essay originally appeared in the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* in 1974.
21. Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View," 58.
22. Geertz has written four essays that use the term "cultural system" in the title: "Religion as a Cultural System" and "Ideology as a Cultural System," in *Interpretation of Cultures*; and "Common Sense as a Cultural System" and "Art as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge*.
23. Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 127.
24. *Ibid.*, 130.
25. Clifford Geertz, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 404.
26. Louis B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le carnaval de Romans: De la Chandeleur au mercredi des*

- Cendres, 1579–1580* (Paris, 1979); Huizinga, *Waning of the Middle Ages*; Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance*; and Robert Darnton, “Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin,” in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), 75–106.
27. On the use of academic languages of judgment to understand the preoccupations of different disciplines, see Clifford Geertz, “The Way We Think Now: Ethnography of Modern Thought,” in *Local Knowledge*, 157–58.
 28. In fact, his early monographs on Indonesian modernization, cited in note 15, might have been of direct assistance. But they were so similar in style to studies already being done by social historians that they were not much noticed. It was the later, more synchronic essays that captured historians’ imaginations.
 29. On the French case, see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Stanford, 1990).
 30. The invocation of “historyland” is of course a reference to the immortal Bernard Cohn’s “History and Anthropology: The State of Play,” in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1990), 18–49.
 31. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 92.
 32. *Ibid.*, 92–93.
 33. Clifford Geertz, “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind,” in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 66–69; quote from 69.
 34. *Ibid.*, 68. 35. *Ibid.*, 75.
 36. *Ibid.*, 80. Geertz quotes this phrase from D. O. Hebb and W. R. Thompson, “The Social Significance of Animal Studies,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Gardner Lindzey (Reading, Mass., 1954), 532–61.
 37. *Ibid.* 38. *Ibid.*
 39. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 104.
 40. I have made attempts at such revisions in “Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology,” in McDonald, *The Historic Turn*, 245–80, and “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1–29. So has Marshall Sahlins, e.g., in *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (Ann Arbor, 1981), and *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985). The work of classical social theory that most fully embodies what I regard as a historian’s appreciation of contingency is Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958). But even here the possibility of contingency gives way to teleology; once capitalism is established, it becomes, in Weber’s memorable phrase, an “iron cage” (181).
 41. Clifford Geertz’s most recent book, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, one Anthropologist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), is much more concerned with issues of diversity, power, struggle, and social transformation than were either *The Interpretation of Cultures* or *Local Knowledge*. A kind of poetic autobiographical meditation on changes in anthropology and the world over the course of Geertz’s career, it takes up these issues obliquely in the course of the narrative rather than addressing them head on. But as I read it, the book is actually quite compatible with the critiques and revisions of his earlier theories that I spell out here.
 42. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 93.
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. See the example of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).
 45. See Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–60* (New York, 1979).

46. Here my arguments are very close to and have been strongly influenced by those of Marshall Sahlins: "The worldly circumstances of human action are under no inevitable obligation to conform to the categories by which certain people perceive them. In the event they do not, the received categories are potentially revalued in practice, functionally redefined"; Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, 67.
47. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 99.
48. For such analyses, see, e.g., Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," "Ethos, World View," "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali," and "Deep Play," all in *Interpretation of Cultures*; Geertz, "Found in Translation: On the Social History of the Moral Imagination," "From the Native's Point of View," and "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in *Local Knowledge*; Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960); and Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, 1968).
49. Max Weber, "The Types of Legitimate Domination" and "Charisma and Its Transformations," in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1978), 1:241–54, 2:1111–56. See also Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*. Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York, 1995) also has extremely interesting things to say about the role of emotion in social life. For an attempt to use some of Durkheim's insights in the analysis of cultural transformation, see William H. Sewell Jr., "Historical Events as Structural Transformations: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25, no. 6 (1996): 841–81.
50. Three examples among many are Annette Wiener, *Women of Value, Men of Renown: New Perspectives in Trobriand Exchange* (Austin, Tex., 1976); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, 1986); and Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston, 1987).
51. The best known manifesto of reflexive anthropology is Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*. See also George E. Marcus, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986). The pioneering anthropologist of colonialism is Bernard Cohn, *Anthropologist Among the Historians, and Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996).
52. Perhaps the most celebrated examples are Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, and Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974).
53. On "history from below" and anthropology, see Renato Rosaldo, "Celebrating Thompson's Heroes: Social Analysis in History and Anthropology," in *E. P. Thompson*, 103–24.
54. On the place of Lyon in the development of workers' revolts, see William H. Sewell Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980), esp. 206–7. On Sherpa religion, see Sherry B. Ortner, *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (Princeton, 1989).
55. Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 53.
56. *Ibid.*
57. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 9.