

## THE THIRD STREAM: WEBER, PARSONS, GEERTZ<sup>1</sup>

'All you need to know is Boas and the French.' Thus did Professor Clyde Kluckhohn advise a group of graduate students in Anthropology at Harvard University during the spring of 1960. By that remark, Kluckhohn presumably meant that socio-cultural anthropology boasts only two significant streams - the American, beginning with Boas and continuing through Kroeber, Lowie, and their successors; and the French, beginning with Durkheim and continuing through British social anthropology to Lévi-Strauss.

Only weeks later, Kluckhohn, still in his early fifties, died. Not long after, Alfred Kroeber, then in his mid-eighties, died also. These events were among the signs of the end of the grand tradition in American anthropology. But in the year of Kluckhohn's death, Clifford Geertz published his first book: *The Religion of Java*.<sup>2</sup> Following a 'the King is dead, long live the King' convention of historical interpretation, one could take Geertz's debut as a sign of a revitalization of the American tradition - a revitalization stimulated through the injection of a third stream, the Weberian.

Regardless of one's view of Geertz's scholarly work, one must accept that he occupies a critical place in the discipline. He is of strategic importance in the rebirth of an American cultural anthropology which by the death of Kluckhohn and Kroeber had already entered a dark age symptomized by excessive devotion

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<sup>1</sup> This paper summarizes remarks made to an Oxford seminar in the history of anthropological theory directed by Dr. Godfrey Lienhardt during Trinity term 1981. I am grateful to Dr. Lienhardt and members of the seminar for comments made during discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press 1960.

to certain narrowly technical pursuits and a failure of nerve among those heirs of Boas who aspired to sustain the endeavour of a holistic and humanistic perspective. Without Geertz - or someone like him - the birthright of Boas, Kroeber, and others in the American tradition seemingly would have been sold for thin porridge.

This is the first point. The second is that in reconstructing the American cultural anthropological tradition, Geertz inserted a new element: to Boas and the French he added Max Weber.

Two objections to this assertion come immediately to mind. First, Geertz is not the only anthropologist influenced by Weber. Secondly, Geertz cannot be reduced to the label 'Weberian'.

In response to the first objection, one may simply note that although Geertz is not the only Weberian anthropologist he is perhaps the most influential. Response to the second can follow two lines: the tracing of historical relations between Weber and Geertz and the demarcation of conceptual parallels between the two. The latter is the focus of this essay, but the former can be briefly addressed.

In the dedication of his latest book, *Negara*,<sup>3</sup> Geertz acknowledges the influence of the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons, who is perhaps the most important English-language translator and interpreter of Weber. Geertz studied with Parsons, and one may surmise that Parsons was an important vehicle in transmitting the Weberian perspective to Geertz. It should be illuminating to compare the perspective of Parsons with that of Weber and Geertz, since Parsons apparently mediated between the two. While such a comparison is of course not sufficient to demonstrate a stream of historical influence from Weber to Parsons to Geertz, still it may help to locate Geertz in an intellectual tradition.

We turn, then, to the comparison, which can be outlined as follows:

WEBER	PARSONS	GEERTZ
Action	Action	Action
Meaning	Meaning	Meaning
Geist	Culture as System	Culture as Text
Society subordinate	Society subordinate	Society subordinate
Verstehen	---	Thick Description
Ideal Type	Pattern variables and Functional Requisites	Ethnographic Type

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<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Negara*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980.

Weber<sup>4</sup>

'Action' (*Handeln*) is, in Weber's conception, not simply an act but a pattern of meaningful acts, and action is the basic unit of analysis. The analyst's first task is to comprehend action in terms of its meaning (*Sinn*) to the actor. Such comprehension entails relating action to a configuration of ideals, attitudes, and values - a spirit or *Geist* - in which action is grounded. The mode of analysis is termed *Verstehen*, which translates simply as 'understanding' but for Weber entails grasping the actor's viewpoint empathetically and analytically, then constructing the logic through which his actions follow from his premises.

When Weber moves from analysis of particular actions to generalization about patterns of action, he does so by means of ideal types. Here Weber proposed a kind of generalization different from the plotting of statistical regularities and the formulation of deterministic laws after the fashion of a kind of social physics. Instead, one abstracts the premises that underlie a pattern of action, then depicts that pattern in a form more idealized or pure than can exist in empirical reality. The point of this is to depict sharply the implication of the logic which underlies the action. Perhaps the best known of Weber's ideal types is the Calvinist-Capitalist, that monster of rationality who expressed the Protestant Ethic by turning 'tallow into candles and money into men into money' in order to prove that he was of the Elect. Weber portrayed such a type in broad strokes in order to exemplify its logic - a point missed by those who nit-pick about his statistics and history. Other well-known Weberian ideal types include the types of authority (bureaucratic, charismatic, and traditional) and the types of rationality (*Zweckrationalität* and *Wertrationalität*). Weber saw the ideal type as ultimately aimed at illuminating the particularities of culture and history. Juxtaposing case and type, one illuminated the concrete by the searing beam of purified abstraction.

Weber resembled the German philosophers (and differed from the French sociologists) in awarding to the spirit - in a word, culture, with a capital K - autonomy from society. He argued, for example, that the Protestant Ethic developed not as a response to social and economic forces but as an independent theological solution which for a while took control over social and economic forces. Society is subordinate to culture.

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<sup>4</sup> The concepts summarized here are discussed in Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1925, Pt. 1 (trans. T. Parsons, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, London and New York 1947).

*Parsons<sup>5</sup>*

Parsons followed Weber in regarding 'action' as the basic unit of analysis. Like Weber, Parsons based analysis on the premises of the actor, the relation of these premises to action, and their grounding in a system of meanings which Parsons termed the cultural system. Parsons conceived of the cultural, social, and personality systems as forming a 'hierarchy of control' - after the cybernetic model in which information systems control resource systems. The cultural system, defined as a configuration of values, symbols, and beliefs, directs and controls the social system, defined as a network of roles and groups guided by norms. The social system in turn controls the personality system, which is a configuration of id, ego, and super-ego grounded in an 'identity' which links person to role. The three levels are 'analytical', i.e. perspectives employed by the analyst, but they are also considered empirical, i.e. to denote patterns which exist in reality. The three levels are aspects of a single phenomenon - as Parsons put it they 'interpenetrate' - but each is also functionally somewhat independent of the others. Thus, the cultural system solves such problems as defining meaning and morality, while the social system must solve the rather separate problem of avoiding a war of all against all. Because cultural and social problems differ, the patterns of the two systems differ as well, hence advantage is gained by treating the two as distinct before delineating how they interpenetrate.

While conforming to the Weberian 'action' perspective, Parsons placed more emphasis on the 'system', whether cultural, social, or personal. This emphasis led Parsons toward a mode of generalization that differed from Weber's ideal type. The ideal type defined a pattern of action which could conceivably be pursued by the individual (e.g. rational action, ascetic action, this-worldly or other-worldly action), and Parsons criticized such types because they were difficult to integrate into a conception of the total social system. Parsons therefore sought to abstract a set of analytical variables which could be combined in such a way as to define social systems. He formulated essentially two sets of such variables, the first figuring prominently in his work prior to 1960 and the second after 1960.<sup>6</sup> The first were the 'pattern variables', which were defined from the viewpoint of the actor, and the second were the 'functional requisites', which were defined from the standpoint of the system. Pattern variables

<sup>5</sup> The concepts discussed in this section were set forth in Talcott Parsons' *Structure of Social Action*, New York: McGraw Hill 1937 and elaborated in his later works.

<sup>6</sup> Parsons explains this transition in 'Pattern Variables Revisited: A Response to Professor Dubin's Stimulus', *American Sociological Review* (1960).

(which included such oppositions as particularism/universalism and achievement/ascription) defined the ways an actor could orient toward an object. Functional requisites (adaptation, goal-attainment, integration, and pattern-maintenance) defined all the problems that a system might face.

*Verstehen* as a mode of empirical investigation does not receive much attention from Parsons, for he did not attempt to formulate a methodology of empirical research. He did more or less follow that approach, however, in his own suggestive empirical analyses.

### Geertz

Unlike Weber and Parsons, Geertz has not set down a complete theoretical schema. Instead, he has expounded his perspective ethnographically, especially in his work on Java and Bali, and in essays which have a form more literary than Weber's definitional encyclopedias or Parsons' system diagrams. Still, one may abstract from Geertz an underlying frame of reference.

Geertz would seem to resemble Parsons and Weber in taking 'action' as his basic unit. Thus, he begins his exposition of a programme for ethnographic analysis by comparing the 'twitch' and the 'wink' in a way Weber would compare behaviour and action; a twitch is merely behaviour, while a wink is meaningful behaviour, and as such is the stuff of ethnography.<sup>7</sup> One begins with such actions (or forms) then constructs the layers of culture in which they are grounded and which render them meaningful. Such an approach, which Geertz terms 'thick description', is similar to *Verstehen*, but for Geertz is applied to ethnographic materials drawn from fieldwork as well as to historical materials drawn from documents (whereas Weber dealt primarily with the latter) and with a more explicit reference to culture than in the case of Weber.

'Culture' was defined by Geertz initially in the fashion of Parsons, as a system of logically and meaningfully integrated values, beliefs, and symbols. Later he shifted to the analogy of a literary text - culture as a text to be read over the native's shoulder by the ethnographer - and emphasized an aesthetic as well as a logical mode of integration. The transition is exemplified by comparing his analysis of the Javanese funeral with that of the Balinese cockfight a decade or so later.<sup>8</sup>

Like Weber, Geertz accords the system of meaning a certain autonomy from the social system - an emphasis that British social anthropology, which stems from Durkheimian sociology rather than German idealism, has sometimes questioned.

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<sup>7</sup> This distinction, drawn from Ryle, is explicated in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books 1973, pp. 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 6 and 15.

Like Weber, Geertz proposes a kind of ideal typical mode of generalizing. In his programmatic statement concerning 'thick description', Geertz rejects the search for laws or statistically-grounded statements of regularity, and he proposes instead that cultural anthropology seek to elucidate generalized principles through delicately crafted description which embodies the universal through the particular.<sup>9</sup> What he here proposes resembles Weber's ideal type, now construed to serve ethnography. It also resembles, of course, what much of the more memorable ethnography has achieved, from Evans-Pritchard's Nuer to Geertz's Balinese and Javanese: the way of life summarized and monumentalized through a portrayal that reveals fundamental principles by concrete description.

Where Parsons took Weber toward greater abstraction in accord with the aspirations of sociology, Geertz has elaborated the Weberian viewpoint in accord with the more particularistic strengths of anthropology. Certainly Geertz's contributions are not confined to this elaboration of Weber, but certain core themes in Geertz's viewpoint do match those of Weber. Like Weber, Geertz focuses on the construction of the meaning of action through a kind of interpretative methodology which elucidates the relation of action to culture. Like Weber, Geertz awards culture a transcendent status in relation to social forces. Like Weber, Geertz proposes generalization through the ideal type. Where Geertz elaborates Weber, he carries forward Webrian implications for ethnography. *Geist* becomes cultural text, *Verstehen* thick description, and the ideal type the richly textured ethnographic slice of life, subtly depicted to address universal questions.

### *Implications*

What does Geertz add to Boas and the French? Put more abstractly, what does the Weberian stream add to cultural and social anthropology as these reflect the American and British traditions, respectively?

Social anthropology of the orthodox era in Britain can be exemplified by Evans-Pritchard's laconic explanation of culture. Comparing Muslims and Christians at prayer, Evans-Pritchard observed that the Muslim removed his shoes while retaining his hat, while the Christian removed his hat while keeping on his shoes. The difference is trivial, and it is cultural, said Evans-Pritchard, while the significant pattern which the two hold in common has to do with social structure: a relationship to God.<sup>10</sup> This view of culture as the content of social relationships can be found among other influential British social

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, London: Cohen & West 1951, pp. 16-17.

anthropologists of the period<sup>11</sup> and, in fact, was adopted by at least one standard Oxford-inspired textbook.<sup>12</sup>

In what might be termed the structuralist or post-structuralist era, British social anthropology became more like American cultural anthropology in the sense that culture in itself came to be regarded - at least by some - as a legitimate object of inquiry. No longer merely a medium of social relationships, culture is now viewed as a structure of categories the logic of which deserves elucidation aside from any implications such categories may have for social function. In this regard, compare Leach's 1954 definition of culture noted above with that implied by the title of his 1976 book: *Culture and Communication, the Logic by Which Symbols are Connected.*<sup>13</sup> This image of culture is similar to that of Weber, Parsons and Geertz, but with a difference. For the structuralist, culture is viewed more as an inert structure, elucidated more in the abstract than in dynamic relationship to actions on which it bestows meaning; it is the latter relationship that is of special concern to the Weberian.

The image of culture projected by the American tradition is difficult to summarize, as Kluckhohn and Kroeber have explained at length.<sup>14</sup> 'Culture' became for the American anthropologists a comprehensive and rather vague label for all that is entailed in human life which cannot be deemed biological or environmental. When Kroeber wrote of 'configurations of culture growth' or Benedict on 'patterns of culture', they portrayed total ways of life, diachronically and synchronically. Weberian theory, carried over into anthropology by Geertz and others, refines this inchoate though fertile conception, distilling from it the ideational component, which it terms 'culture', and distinguishing that from the action component. The distinction then permits a more precise analysis of the relationship between ideas and action.

In sum, a primary contribution to both social and cultural anthropology that derives from the Weberian perspective is a richer conception of the relationship between meaning and action: the character of cultural meaning, the way in which meaning frames action, and the methodology of portraying this relationship through the ethnographic variant of the ideal type. Especially in studies of the complex processes of change in major cultures of the Third World and in the joining of ethnography and history,

<sup>11</sup> See for example Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1954, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Paul James Bohannon, *Social Anthropology* (New York 1963).

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication, the Logic by which Symbols are Connected: An Introduction to the Use of Structural Analysis in Social Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts*, Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Vol. XLVII (1952).

as in Geertz's studies of Islam, of Balinese states, of great syncretic civilizations such as that of Java, does the utility of such a perspective become apparent. Stated abstractly, the contribution may seem trivial. Viewed concretely, as embodied in the works, it is significant.

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The O.U.A.S., founded in 1909, continues to promote interest in all aspects of anthropology. Generally four meetings are held each term to which visiting speakers are invited. For Michaelmas Term 1981 these will be Brian Murdoch, Tsehai Berhane Selassie, Peter Ucko and Brian Street. Meetings for the 1981-82 academic year will be held on alternate Tuesday evenings at 8 o'clock in The Buttery, Wolfson College. Further information is available from the Secretary, O.U.A.S., c/o The Institute of Social Anthropology, 51 Banbury Rd., Oxford.

Officers for 1981-82 are: President, Godfrey Lienhardt, Treasurer, Vernon Reynolds and Secretary, Alaric Pugh.

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