BOOKS: ANTHROPOLOGY

The Essential Anti-Essentialist

Richard A. Shweder

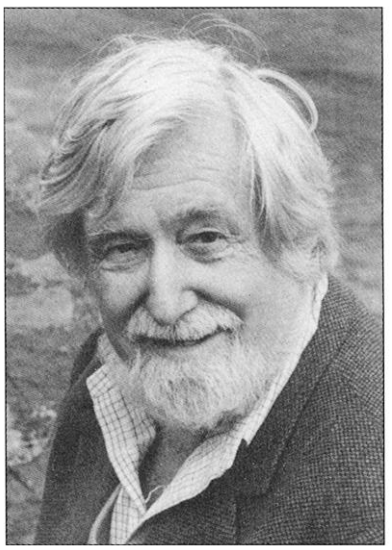
Available Light
Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics
by Clifford Geertz
Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000. 287 pp. $24.95, £15.95. ISBN 0-691-04974-2.

For three decades, Clifford Geertz has been the most influential and most controversial cultural anthropologist in the United States. Throughout his brilliant career, he has put his cognitive and literary skills to work "ferreting out the singularities of other peoples' ways of life," cultivating a provocative variety of philosophical pluralism, and promoting the idea that there is no fixed kernel to human nature, no "mind for all cultures," no "dog under the skin."

In many ways, Geertz's intellectual style has exemplified and given distinctive character to his beliefs. A master of discernment and distinctions, he recoils at typologies, grand theories, and universal generalizations, and he rejects abstractionism and reductionism as methods for the social sciences. Geertz is a discriminating writer with meticulous sensibilities and a broad knowledge and experience of the disciplines. He feels most at home when taking the measure of some complex scene such as contemporary multiculturalism inside and outside the academy. He believes that meaning is use and that reality is a complex continuum of overlapping likenesses and differences that should not be placed in neat boxes. The mahatma of "thick description," he likes most of all to look at actual cases. His antipathy for general laws and formal principles is apparent. Clearly, Geertz is weary of most of the old oppositions (subjective versus objective, humanities versus science, universals versus particulars) that fuel academic debate. He prefers to dwell in the ambiguous middle. But he is also an ironist who loves to quip: "It is important to say something and not just threaten to say something." And he entertains his readers and infuriates his critics with evocative (and, at times, wickedly humorous) turns of phrase, such as "culture-free conceptions of what we amount to as basic, sticker-price *homo* and essential, no additives *sapiens*." For "a *good* rule-of-thumb generalization from anthropology," Geertz suggests, "Any sentence that begins, 'All societies have…' is either baseless or banal."

His critics are many. Almost everyone initially gets side-tracked by the visibility and distinctiveness of Geertz's writing style, which is like Cyrano de Bergerac's nose—conspicuous and spectacular. But it is best to ignore his style for the sake of getting on with a discussion of his ideas. He is a writer, and no one has ever accused him of being obscure.

Beyond their reactions to his style, synthesizers in the social sciences feel frustrated with Geertz because he is a splitter who is not easily dismissed. He argues that knowledge is "local" and most social science generalizations restricted in scope, for which he has no regrets. The universalizers (mistakenly) think he is a radical relativist. The positivists (mistakenly) think he is anti-science. And the skeptical postmodernists—by which I mean those scholars who really are subjectivists, nihilists, and radical relativists—think he is a moderate liberal and an antiquarian who still believes there is good work to be done with that old-fashioned idea of "culture."



A master of discernment.

CREDIT: MARY CROSS/COURTESY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

But I am a fan, and not just because I am a neo-antiquarian. I am a fan of Geertz because he is one of the world's most effective proponents of cultural, moral, and scientific pluralism. And I am a fan of his new book. *Available Light* is a welcome, predictably fascinating, and very elucidative exposition of Geertz's brand of pluralism.

The volume's 11 essays are bound together by a series of interconnected themes: (i) Diversity is inherent in the human condition. (ii) There is no universal essence to human nature that strongly determines human behavior. (iii) Across time and space (history and culture), human nature is continuously transformed by the never-ending attempt of particular groups of people—Balinese, Moroccans, Swedes—to understand themselves and to create a social world that makes manifest their self-understandings. (iv) In science, as in life, securing universal agreement about what is good, true, beautiful, or efficient is rarely possible. Even more importantly, the ecumenical impulse to value uniformity (convergence in belief) over variety and to overlook, devalue, or eradicate "difference" is not a good thing. Culture is not icing, writes Geertz. Biology is not cake. Differences are not necessarily shallow. Likeness is not necessarily deep.

Many of the essays in *Available Light* are gripping. In "Anti Anti-Relativism" Geertz quotes Montaigne: "Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice…for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in." And then Geertz goes on to comment, "That notion, whatever its problems, and however more delicately expressed, is not likely to go entirely away unless anthropology does." I am convinced there is more to moral judgment than Montaigne imagined. Nevertheless, insisting on a non-ethnocentric separation of the parochial from the transcendent (how easy it is to confuse familiar local evaluations with "Universal Reason") is what Geertz's pluralism is all about. In "The Uses of Diversity," Geertz explains that we need pluralism because "the image of a world full of people so passionately fond of each other's cultures that they aspire only to celebrate one another does not seem to me a clear and present danger; the image of one full of people happily apotheosizing their heroes and diabolizing their enemies alas does."

Turning his attention to the disciplines, the author invites us to abandon the idea that there is a "unity to science." But he does not stop there. Geertz is often pigeonholed as a "humanist." In essays on the philosophy of Charles Taylor and the legacy of Thomas Kuhn, he defies all classification by inviting us to forswear the addictive idea that the academy can be divided into "two cultures" (the natural sciences and the humanities; the positivists versus the interpretivists). Quoting the philosopher Richard Rorty, he asks, "what method is common to paleontology and particle physics?" "What relation to reality is shared by topology and entomology?" All this is quite dazzling and refreshing. The biologist E. O. Wilson has widely proclaimed his visions of a state of "consilience" among the disciplines, one that will unify the natural and human sciences under the banner of biology. In contrast, when Geertz inspects the sciences and humanities he finds "polycentric collections" of different, semi-independent, or

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incommensurate projects—"loose assemblages" of assumptions, vocabularies, and research techniques. There are no tears in his eyes when he announces that unity is nowhere in sight. He is wary of imperial decrees and cautions us to beware of all forms of "destructive integrity" (intellectual and political).

Amidst the tumble of the fields of psychology and the cognitive neurosciences, Geertz gives his blessings to "cultural psychology," an interdisciplinary inquiry into the role of meaning in producing and explaining psychological differences across human populations. While parts of cultural anthropology remain stuck in a state of irrational "psycho-phobia," Geertz calls for a semiotic study of the emotions. He fully recognizes that "semiotics" is not simply the study of symbol systems detached from individual experience, bodies, and selves.

In the collections' final essay, "The World in Pieces," Geertz takes on "borderless capitalism" and the connections between globalization, multiculturalism, and the reemergence of ethnic and religious identities. Against the odds, he is searching for a liberalism "with both the courage and the capacity to engage itself with a differenced world." Critics of liberalism, Geertz says, argue that such commitments either prevent liberals "from recognizing the force and durability of ties of religion, language, custom, locality, race, and descent in human affairs" or force them to regard the entry of such considerations into civic life as "pathological—primitive, backward, regressive, and irrational." Characteristically resisting dichotomies, Geertz replies: "I do not think this is the case."

Available Light is also full of sharp judgments about well-known scholars and fashionable schools of thought. But most of all, this collection helps set some records straight. Geertz is critical not only of the intellectual fanatics in the academy (the total systems builders) but of the infidels (the skeptical anti-science postmodernists) as well. This may surprise some of his detractors, who often misread his pluralism as a version of radically skeptical postmodernism.

That is not to say that the author has proved that he can have his cake and eat it too. Rejecting subjectivism while refusing to place anything (other than banalities) outside of culture is not an easy position to defend. It is still a stretch to embrace both liberalism and the durable bonds of community. And reading Geertz (like reading Wittgenstein, his kindred spirit), one is left wanting something more, which he will certainly refuse to provide—namely systematic theorizing about his own philosophy of translation. If there is very little that transcends culture and history, how is it possible for "others" to be simultaneously different from us yet comprehensible to us? But this is where serious engagement with this important book should begin.

Available Light opens with a 1999 autobiographical address, described by the author as an act of "public self-concealment." The G. I. Bill launched him into academia where, as he puts it, he just kept catching the right wave. He progressed from Antioch College to the Department of Social Relations at Harvard to the University of Chicago. For the last 30 years, he has represented anthropology at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. If 30 minutes ago you didn't know who Clifford Geertz is, you should definitely read this book. Everyone who already knew probably grabbed *Available Light* hot off the press.

FILMS: ASTRONOMY

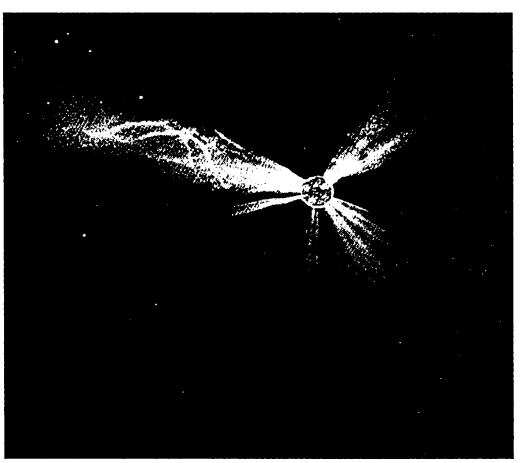
Be Awed, Be Very Awed

IMAX technology, which creates large format film for multistory screens in almost lifelike three dimensions, has come a long way since it was introduced in 1970. Now it has traveled the 93 million miles to the surface of the sun for the creation of *SolarMax*, a 40-minute-long action documentary. The film combines digitally retrieved images of the sun's corona and the solar wind from a bevy of satellites with time-lapse footage of shimmering sun rises and vibrant pastel aurorae captured by IMAX cameras. The pictures from space and ground are woven into an almost apocalyptic journey from the human realization that the sun is the center of the solar system to models of a solar storm deforming the magnetosphere.

SolarMax
John Weiley, Director
Heliograph, in association with the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago. See: www.solarmovie.com

On Earth, the film presents huge, richly colored landscapes from Alaska to the Andes. A 180-degree field-of-view camera captures the never-setting sun circling Earth's north pole. Fast film (800 ISO) and fast lenses (f-stop 1.0) nab sizzling images of aurorae created by solar storms. The aurorae seem so big and so real that you can feel the electricity in the air; you might even fear for your satellite-connected cell phone.

From space, the dynamic nature of the sun explodes from the screen, as if a burst of plasma that would vaporize the audience could be released at any moment. A highlight of the film is the carefully sequenced combination of surface images of the sun from the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO), which show the coronal mass ejections, and images from SOHO's Large Angle Spectrometric Coronagraph, which show 30-million-mile-long flares of the solar wind. Data from the Transition Region and Coronal Explorer spacecraft have been used in a mesmerizing fly-by over the delicate magnetic loops that form on the solar surface. Another must-see sequence is the full 11-year sunspot cycle, dramatically captured in data gathered by the Yohkoh satellite since its 1991 launch. We are currently approaching a solar maximum (from which the movie gets its title), when the sun's surface activity reaches an 11-year peak and its magnetic poles reverse.



CREDIT: FROM *SOLARMAX*

The images make the movie, but the original music score and the sound effects for the solar wind, aurorae, and the "singing sun" heighten the intensity of the experience. The narration is informative and entertaining. At one point in a discussion of the relatively mundane task of sunspot counting, the narrator quips that the sun is "as spotty as a teenager." Perhaps the film's one weakness is the lack of explanatory descriptions of the different views of the sun, which were collected in many wavelengths with various contrasts and resolutions by the cornucopia of satellites and telescopes.

IMAX may be the best medium to contain the big, bright, brawny sun for a general audience. This well-choreographed film is entertaining for everyone from seven-year-olds to solar physicists. *SolarMax* is big, very big; and its star attraction is awesome, very awesome.

—LINDA ROWAN