



Clifford J. Geertz

1926-2006

Founder of Symbolic Anthropology

Major Contributions

Clifford Geertz is considered a founder of symbolic anthropology and is best known for his work in cultural interpretation. His book *The Interpretation of Cultures* proposes that culture is semiotic: "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 89).

Anthropology, according to Geertz, is an interpretive science in search of the meanings of the symbols. Geertz's ethnographic research method, adopted from Gilbert Ryle, is "thick description" which looks to inscribe not only the symbols, actions, and behaviors of subjects but also the motivations and meaningful structures in which they occur.

Education

- A.B. Antioch College, 1950 (Philosophy)
- Ph.D. Harvard University, 1956 (Anthropology) - Department of Social Relations

Work History

- Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, 1958-60.
- Assistant Professor of Anthropology - Divisional Professor of Social Sciences, University of Chicago, 1960-70.
 - Assistant Professor of Anthropology, 1960-61; Associate Professor, 1962-64; Professor, 1964-68; Divisional Professor in the Social Sciences, 1968-70.
- Professor of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, 1970-. (Harold F. Linder Professor of Social Science, 1982-2000). Professor Emeritus, 2000-.
- Visiting Lecturer with Rank of Professor, Department of History, Princeton University, 1975-2000.

Awards and Honors

- Social Science Prize (Talcott Parsons Prize), American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974.
- Sorokin Prize, American Sociological Association, 1974.
- Distinguished Lecturer, American Anthropological Association, 1983.
- National Book Critics Circle Prize in Criticism, 1988.

Important Works

The Interpretation of Cultures (1973)

Considered Geertz's seminal work, this book contains several chapters exploring his view of culture as a semiotic one as well as the method of thick description. Other chapters in the book are anthropological accounts of various cultures (in the thick description style). "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is one of Geertz's most frequently cited essays.

Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author" (1988)

This book, which examined four major figures in anthropology (Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Claude Lévi-Strauss), won the National Book Critics Circle Prize in Criticism in 1988.

Influences and Related Researchers

Max Weber – sociology, economics

Weber, a proponent of methodological anti-positivism, proposed that sociology is a field which must study social action through interpretive means with the goal of understanding the meanings and purposes that individuals attach to their own actions. Weber is credited with being one of the founders of modern social science.

Susanne Knauth Langer – philosophy

Langer's research explored the human process of meaning-making through the power of symbolism. Langer believed that symbolism was core to philosophy because it underlies all human knowing and understanding.

Edwin Hutchins – cognitive science

Hutchins' distributed cognition theory posits that cognition is not merely limited to the individual's cognitive processes, but is disseminated among the socio-cultural material world and time. Hutchins stresses ethnographic methods ("cognitive ethnography") to understand cognitive processes.

Selected References

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http://www.indiana.edu/~wanthro/theory_pages/Geertz.htm

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