



# Subjectivity and cultural critique

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## Abstract

In the many works that try to bring back 'the actor' in some sense, there is a tendency to avoid questions of subjectivity, that is, complex 'structures of feeling' (in Raymond Williams's phrase). This article returns to the work of Max Weber and Clifford Geertz to consider various issues of subjectivity, including both fundamental existential anxieties, and specific cultural and historical constructions of 'consciousness'. The article concludes with a rereading of several recent texts on postmodern consciousness as a specific configuration of anxieties, tied in turn to formations of 'late capitalism'.

## Key Words

anxiety • consciousness • late capitalism • structures of feeling • subjectivity

This is an article about the importance of the notion of subjectivity for a critical anthropology.<sup>1</sup> Although there is no necessary link between questions of subjectivity and questions of power and subordination, and indeed there is a great deal of work both inside and outside of anthropology that explores subjectivity as a relatively neutral arena of inquiry, my particular interest will be in extending those lines of work that do see a close linkage between subjectivity and power. Hence the significance of investigating subjectivity as part of 'anthropology as cultural critique' (Marcus and Fisher, 1986).

By subjectivity I will mean the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on. Indeed this article will move back and forth between the examination of such cultural formations and the inner states of acting subjects.

Given that the idea of the subject is itself a bone of contention, however, I begin with:

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEBATE OVER THE SUBJECT

One could look at the unfolding of social and cultural theory over the whole 20th century as a struggle over the role of the social being – the person, subject, actor, or agent – in society and history. Although the origins of the struggle over the significance of the subject can be pushed back much further within philosophy, the 20th-century version

appears as a debate largely between the newly evolving social sciences on the one hand, and certain lines of philosophic thinking on the other.<sup>2</sup> In the first half of the century, the debate took shape as a philosophical reaction to the emergence of theories of social 'constraint' (Durkheim) and 'determinism' (Marx), with Sartre in particular arguing instead, in *Being and Nothingness*, (1966 [1943]), for the primacy of human 'freedom'.

Responding directly to Sartre, in turn, Lévi-Strauss pushed Durkheim in new and more extreme directions, and also to some extent shifted the terms of the debate away from the freedom/determinism categories. Where Durkheim argued for a level of 'the social' which could be analyzed with little reference to subjects, nonetheless the subject (which he usually called the individual) remained important as a presence in the theoretical edifice, as that upon which and through which 'society' does its work, and which even occasionally puts up a little struggle. Lévi-Strauss took Durkheim's notion of the social fact that exists over and above the individual, and that almost has a life of its own, and sought to purify it of the presence of and necessity for subjects at all. Thus in the 'Overture' to *The Raw and the Cooked* he wrote:

I therefore claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact . . . it would perhaps be better to go still further and, disregarding the thinking subject completely, proceed as if the thinking process were taking place in the myths, in their reflection upon themselves and their interrelation. (1969: 12)

Here it is no longer exactly a matter of freedom and constraint. It is not only the idea that the freedom of the subject is illusory, but that human thinking itself is simply an effect of, or a medium for, the pure play of structure. As Lévi-Strauss said in *The Savage Mind*, the aim of the human sciences was 'not to constitute but to dissolve man' (1966: 247). As Nik Farrell Fox summarizes in a recent biography of Sartre:

. . . structuralism embarked upon a concerted critique of humanism and anthropocentrism, inverting humanist premises by prioritizing structure over the subject, the unconscious over the conscious, and the objective analyses of scientific laws over ego-based epistemologies. (2003: 24)

The present landscape of social and cultural theory must be viewed against a backdrop of this history. There are in effect three lines of discussion. The first is so-called post-structuralism itself, which emphatically drops the Durkheimian positivism still present in Lévi-Strauss ('the objective analyses of scientific laws') and which focuses even more actively on 'dissolving man'. The terms of the critique take another slight turn here as the critique of the concept of 'man' begins to emphasize not only its illusory qualities from a philosophical point of view (the self as an originary locus of coherence, intentionality, creativity and so on), but its ideological specificity. In the hands of feminist post-structuralists (e.g. Joan Scott, see Scott, 1988), the issue is its masked gendered nature: what pretends to be man in the universal sense is, literally, man in the gendered sense – men. In the hands of post-colonial post-structuralists (e.g. Gayatri Spivak, see Spivak, 1988), the issue is the location of the idea of a supposedly universal man in what is actually a specifically western project of domination: (colonial) white men.

Looked at in these terms, one can understand the continuing appeal of post-structuralism in many academic quarters, including major areas of anthropology. Nonetheless its anti-humanism poses real problems for an anthropology that wishes to understand not just the workings of power, but the attempts of subalterns (in the Gramscian sense) to attain to the privilege of becoming subjects in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

We must turn then to a second important line of post-Lévi-Straussian (but not 'post-structuralist') thinking; one that does attempt to restore a subject in some form to the center of social theory, but at the same time seeks to re-theorize the subject in ways that do not reinstate the illusory universalism of 'man'. Here I would place the various versions of so-called practice theory, as seen in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g. 1977, 1990, 2000), Anthony Giddens (esp. 1979), Marshall Sahlins (esp. 1981), William H. Sewell, Jr. (1992), and several works of my own (e.g. 1984, 1996, 1999a). Leaving aside my own work, which in any event I am trying to develop further here, we can see that the various thinkers just listed have a variety of theorizations of the subject. For Bourdieu, the subject internalizes the structures of the external world, both culturally defined and objectively real. These internalized structures form a *habitus*, a system of dispositions that incline actors to act, think, and feel in ways consistent with the limits of the structure. While there are aspects of the concept of *habitus* that can be mapped onto a notion of subjectivity in the sense of 'feelings' – perhaps we can shorthand it as that – the main emphasis of Bourdieu's arguments about *habitus* is on the ways in which it establishes a range of options and limits for the social actor. Sahlins, also influenced by French structuralist thought, and also at the same time resisting its anti-humanism, constructs a subject very similar to Bourdieu's, very structurally driven. On the other hand, since Sahlins writes about real historical actors (e.g. Captain Cook), his descriptions of their actions sometimes show them to be subjectively more complex than he captures in his theoretical account of their actions.

For Giddens and Sewell on the other hand, while subjects are understood to be fully culturally and structurally produced, there is also an emphasis on the importance of an element of 'agency' in all social subjects. As against Bourdieu's insistence on the deeply internalized and largely unconscious nature of social knowledge in acting subjects, Giddens emphasizes that subjects are always at least partially 'knowing', and thus able to act on and sometimes against the structures that made them. And as against the heavy structural determinism of Bourdieu, Sewell marshalls his historian's perspective to argue that '[i]n the world of human struggles and strategems, plenty of thoughts, perceptions, and actions consistent with the reproduction of existing social patterns fail to occur, and inconsistent ones occur all the time' (1992: 15).

All of these thinkers who have in one way or another brought back the acting subject to social theory have significantly inspired my own thinking, and I have written about the importance of their work in many other contexts. Having said this let me suggest that there is a particular lack or area of thinness in all of their work that opens up the space of this article: a tendency to slight the question of subjectivity, that is, the view of the subject as existentially complex, a being who feels and thinks and reflects, who makes and seeks meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Why does this matter? Why is it important to restore the question of subjectivity to social theory? In part of course it is important because it is a major dimension of human existence, and to ignore it theoretically is to impoverish the sense of the human in the

so-called human sciences. But it is also important politically, as I said at the beginning of the article. In particular I see subjectivity as the basis of 'agency', a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings.

Let me start with a preliminary definition. By subjectivity I will always mean a specifically cultural and historical consciousness. In using the word consciousness I do not mean to exclude various unconscious dynamics as seen, for example, in a Freudian unconscious or a Bourdieusian habitus. But I do mean that subjectivity is always more than those things, in two senses. At the individual level, I will assume, with Giddens, that actors are always at least partially 'knowing subjects', that they have some degree of reflexivity about themselves and their desires, and that they have some 'penetration' into the ways in which they are formed by their circumstances.<sup>5</sup> They are, in short, conscious in the conventional psychological sense, something that needs to be emphasized as a complement to, though not a replacement of, Bourdieu's insistence on the inaccessibility to actors of the underlying logic of their practices. At the collective level I use the word consciousness as it is used by both Marx and Durkheim: as the collective sensibility of some set of socially interrelated actors. Consciousness in this sense is always ambiguously part of people's personal subjectivities and part of the public culture, and this ambiguity will run through much of what follows. At times I will be addressing subjectivity in the more psychological sense, in terms of the inner feelings, desires, anxieties, intentions and so on, of individuals, but at other times I will be focusing on large scale cultural formations.

The question of complex subjectivities in the more psychological (which is not to say acultural) sense is most often to be seen in studies of dominated groups. Questions not only of 'agency' (and 'resistance') but of pain or fear or confusion, as well as various modes of overcoming these subjective states, have been central to this kind of work. Examples would include Lila Abu-Lughod on Bedouin women's structures of feeling as shaped and expressed in poetry and narratives (1986, 1993); José Limón on the sense of fragmentation among poor Mexican-Americans (1994); Ashis Nandy on the disorientation and reorientation of Indian 'selves' under colonialism (1983); Purnima Mankekar on Indian women's complex reactions to television epics (1999); Tassadit Yacine on the gendered nature of fear among the Kabyle (1992).<sup>6</sup> In all these cases there is an exploration of how the condition of subjection is subjectively constructed and experienced, as well as the creative ways in which it is – if only episodically – overcome.

In addition to this kind of investigation at the level of individual actors or groups of actors, there is also of course a tradition of research and interpretation at a broader cultural (and political) level, concerning the ways in which particular cultural formations shape and provoke subjectivities. At this point I want to shift to that level. I will begin by returning to some of the classic work by Clifford Geertz. Writing over the same period as Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Sahlins, and others discussed earlier, Geertz was the only major social and cultural thinker to tackle the question of subjectivity in the sense discussed here, and we must give serious attention to his work.

## ANOTHER LOOK AT GEERTZ'S CONCEPT OF CULTURE

In a few celebrated essays in the 1960s and 1970s, Geertz drew on philosophy and literary theory to articulate a specifically cultural approach to subjectivity and, one could also say, a specifically subjectivity-oriented theory of culture.<sup>7</sup> The two are so closely interrelated that one cannot discuss one without the other. I will start with culture.

There are two identifiable dimensions to Geertz's theory of culture. On the one hand there is the classic American concept of culture, identified with Boas, Mead, Benedict and so on, and defined substantively as the world-view and ethos of a particular group of people. On the other hand there is a philosophical/literary theory of the cultural *process*, inspired particularly by Wittgenstein, which emphasizes the construction of meaning, and of subjectivities, through symbolic processes embedded in the social world.

As anyone tuned to the anthropological literature over the past several decades will know, the concept of 'culture' has come under severe attack. I have discussed the culture debate elsewhere (Ortner, 1999b), but one cannot proceed with a discussion of Geertz's work without addressing it anew each time. I will, however, take the discussion in a somewhat different direction here.

If Geertz's concept of culture has two strands, it is fairly clear that the problematic strand is culture in the first, American, sense, that is, the idea that particular groups 'have' particular cultures, each its own, and that this culture is 'shared' by all members of the group. The critiques of culture in this sense take several forms. On the one hand the culture concept is too undifferentiated, too homogeneous: given various forms of social difference and social inequality, how could everyone in a given society share the same view of the world, and the same orientation towards it?<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, and this was the more fatal critique, the homogeneity and lack of differentiation in the culture concept tied it closely to 'essentialism', the idea that 'the Nuer' or 'the Balinese' had some single essence which made them the way they were, and which, moreover, explained much of what they did and how they did it. One can see the dangers of this position when one looks at the kinds of representations of 'Arab culture' or 'Muslim culture' that are being bandied about in the post-9/11 world. Geertz of course never subscribed to this kind of thinking. His interest in understanding cultural difference was precisely the opposite, as a way of opening up 'conversations' across cultural lines. But the concept itself turned out to be more politically slippery than it appeared in an earlier era.

Geertz defends what I am calling the American culture concept in *After the Fact* (1995), mainly on the grounds that culture is real, and that critics are burying their heads in the sand to deny it. I agree, but the critique calls for a more articulated defense in terms of the politics involved in using the concept. Thus while recognizing the very real dangers of 'culture' in its potential for essentializing and demonizing whole groups of people, one must recognize its critical political value as well, both for understanding the workings of power, and for understanding the resources of the powerless.

Looked at on the side of power, one can recognize a cultural formation as a relatively coherent body of symbols and meanings, ethos and worldview, and at the same time understand those meanings as ideological, and/or as part of the forces and processes of domination. Perhaps the most important figure in recasting the culture concept in this direction has been Raymond Williams, with his adaptation of the Gramscian notion of

hegemony.<sup>9</sup> Williams's work launched a virtual scholarly revolution, part of the creation of that enormous, fertile, and unruly field called 'cultural studies'. While the American version of cultural studies came to be dominated by (mostly French) literary theory, in Britain it was much more anthropological, involving ethnographic fieldwork (especially Paul Willis's classic, *Learning to Labor* (1977), and productively deploying Williams's view of culture as hegemony, that is, as an interworking of the American culture concept and the Marxist concept of ideology (Williams, 1977: 108–9).<sup>10</sup> The discussions of post-modern culture as part of the larger hegemony of late capitalism, to be considered later in this article, will illustrate this kind of work.

Looked at from the side of the less powerful, culture in the American anthropological sense, but again with a more critical edge, lives on in studies of 'popular culture'. These are studies of the local worlds of subjects and groups who, however much they are dominated or marginalized, seek to make meaningful lives for themselves: race/ethnic cultures (e.g. Limón, 1994), working-class cultures (e.g. Lipsitz, 1994), youth cultures (e.g. Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995; Taylor, 2001; Thornton, 1995), and so forth. As in classic American anthropology, culture is here seen as being shared by a group, part of their collective form of life, embodying their shared history and identity, world view and ethos. Studies of popular culture in this sense also tend to introduce, implicitly or explicitly, a Bakhtinian perspective, seeing culture as embodying some sort of resistance, some sort of mischief, or alternatively as playful and pleasurable, part of making a life on the margins of structures of domination. Robin Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Dysfunctional!* (1997), about African-American popular culture, is a wonderful example of this kind of work.

In sum, 'culture', even in something like the old American sense, is not *inherently* a conservative or dangerous concept; there is a kind of category mistake in seeing it as such. It is a flexible and powerful concept that can be used in many different ways including, most importantly, as part of a political critique.

The American-style culture concept was, however, only one dimension of Geertz's theory. The other was a set of ideas about how cultural processes work and what they do. Geertz argued that culture should be understood as public symbolic forms, forms that both express and shape *meaning for actors* engaged in the ongoing flow of social life. And although the idea of 'meaning' too may go off in many different directions, Geertz's specific interest has been in the forms of subjectivity that cultural discourses and practices both reflect and organize. Which brings us back to subjectivity and consciousness.

## THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

In two of his most famous articles, 'Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali' (1973c [1966]), and 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' (1973d [1972]), Geertz provides powerful displays of his method at work, interpreting Balinese cultural forms – person terms, calendrical systems, rules of etiquette, cockfighting events – for the modes of consciousness they embody.

It is important to keep the interpretive method and the concern with subjectivity (historical and cultural consciousness) together. There are forms of cultural analysis today, mostly inspired by Foucault or other lines of post-structuralist thought, that emphasize the ways in which discourses construct subjects and subject positions, and that thus have a superficial resemblance to Geertzian interpretation. But the subjects in

question in those kinds of analysis are defined largely in terms of political (usually subordinate) locations ('subject positions') and political (usually subordinate) identities – subaltern (in the British/historical sense), woman, racialized other and so on. This is not an unimportant exercise by any means, but it is different from the question of the formation of *subjectivities*, complex structures of thought, feeling, reflection, and the like, that make social beings always more than the occupants of particular positions and the holders of particular identities.<sup>11</sup>

Geertz makes clear that he traces his ways of thinking about subjectivity back to Max Weber, and there is no better place to begin than with Weber's discussion of the ways in which Protestantism shaped the consciousness of early modern subjects. Starting from the Protestant doctrine of predestination and its assumption of the remoteness and inaccessibility of God, Weber argues that Calvinistic Protestantism instilled in its subjects a particular structure of feelings: 'In its extreme inhumanity this doctrine must above all have had one consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency. That was a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual' (1958: 104).

Weber builds a picture of the ways in which Protestantism intensified religious anxieties at every turn. For example, Calvinism allowed the practice of the 'private confession' of sin to lapse, with the result that 'the means to a periodical discharge of the emotional sense of sin was done away with' (Weber, 1958: 106). And of course the ultimate source of religious anxiety was the psychologically unbearable situation of having one's fate predestined, and yet having no means of discovering what that destiny is.

Weber's entire strategy for constructing the links between Protestantism and 'the spirit of capitalism' rests on showing how specific Protestant doctrines and practices both induced these anxieties and prescribed solutions to them. The solutions – 'intense worldly activity' (1958: 112), 'conduct [in worldly affairs] which served to increase the glory of God' (1958: 114), 'systematic self-control' (1958: 115), and more – in turn were productive not simply of a certain kind of religious subject but, Weber famously argues, of an early capitalist subject as well. I will not follow Weber's argument about this connection further. My point here is simply that this culturally/religiously produced subject is defined not only by a particular position in a social, economic, and religious matrix, but by a complex subjectivity, a complex set of feelings and fears, which are central to the whole argument.

As for Weber, so for Geertz: Cultures are public systems of symbols and meanings, texts and practices, that both represent a world and shape subjects in ways that fit the world as represented. Geertz lays out the theoretical bases of this argument in 'Religion as a Cultural System' (1973a [1966]), and also provides some brief examples there. But the fullest displays of both his point and his method are to be found in two extended interpretations of Balinese cultural forms.

The first, 'Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali' (1973c [1966]), is a reading of multiple Balinese symbolic orders – one could perhaps call them discourses – to try to get at the kind of subjectivity they both reflect and shape. These include Balinese 'orders of person-definition' (personal names, birth-order names, kinship terms, status titles, and so on); Balinese discourses of time; and Balinese rules and patterns of social etiquette. Geertz does a detailed interpretation of all these forms, first individually, and then in terms of



how they reinforce one another, all with an eye to understanding the kind of consciousness they converge to produce.

He argues (to jump to the conclusion of an enormously complex analysis) that the discourses of personhood are such as to produce a kind of 'anonymization of persons', and that the systems of time-reckoning are such as to produce an 'immobilization of time' (1973c: 398). Both, he argues, should be seen as cultural attempts to 'block the more creatural aspects of the human condition – individuality, spontaneity, perishability, emotionality, vulnerability – from sight' (1973c: 399). They converge, then, with a cultural passion for the 'ceremonialization of social intercourse' which, ideally at least, has largely the same effect: of keeping many relationships in a 'sociological middle distance' (1973c: 399).

At one level all of this both enacts and induces a certain cultural style, what Geertz calls 'playful theatricality' (1973c: 402). But Geertz pushes further into the underlying shape of subjectivity involved, by examining the Balinese emotional category/state of *lek*, which he translates as 'stage-fright . . . a diffuse, usually mild, though in certain situations virtually paralyzing, nervousness before the prospect (and the fact) of social interaction, a chronic, mostly low-grade worry that one will not be able to bring it off with the required finesse' (1973c: 402). The elaborate cultural architecture, the interlocking discourses and practices, the person terms, the calendars, the rules of etiquette, both stoke and assuage this set of anxieties:

What is feared – mildly in most cases, intensely in a few – is that the public performance that is etiquette will be botched, that the social distance etiquette maintains will consequently collapse, and that the personality of the individual will then break through to dissolve his standardized public identity . . . *Lek* is at once the awareness of the ever-present possibility of such an interpersonal disaster and, like stage fright, a motivating force toward avoiding it. (Geertz, 1973c: 402)

What is interesting about the structure of feeling articulated here is its reflexive complexity. Cultural forms – discourses, practices – produce a certain kind of cultural mind-set – towards holding people at a distance, towards the ceremonialization of social intercourse – and at the same time a set of anxieties about the ability to carry it off. The subjectivity in question has a certain cultural shape, but also a way of inhabiting that shape which is reflexive and anxious concerning the possibilities of one's own failures.

The second of Geertz's two major essays on culture and subjectivity is 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' (1973d [1972]). Broadly speaking, the approach to the discussion is similar to that in 'Person, Time and Conduct'. Geertz first carefully establishes the centrality of the cockfight to Balinese social life, cultural thought, and individual passions. He then performs a virtuosic interpretation of the cockfight as a public text. He spends a long time on the social organization of participation and betting, arguing that the cockfight, especially a 'deep', or socially meaningful one, is 'fundamentally a dramatization of status concerns' (1973d: 437). But then he asks, what does it mean for Balinese actors that the public dramatization of status rivalry takes the form of 'a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits?' (1973d: 449). His argument follows his model of/model for distinction without explicitly invoking it. On the one



hand – the model-of – the cockfight is read as a text, a set of representations and orderings of cultural themes that endow them with particular meanings:

What [the cockfight] does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, *Lear* and *Crime and Punishment* do; it catches up these themes – death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance – and, ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature. It puts a construction on them, makes them, to those historically positioned to appreciate the construction, meaningful – visible, tangible, graspable – ‘real’, in an ideational sense. (1973d: 443–4)

At the same time it is more than a text, or rather, texts do more than simply articulate and display meanings. Thus, and this is the model-for aspect, ‘[a]ttending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education’ (1973d: 449). It is in this context that Geertz presents his most explicit theorization of the formation of subjectivity. He first talks about the ways in which participating in cockfights ‘opens [a man’s] subjectivity to himself’ (1973d: 451). But then he moves to the stronger, constructionist position:

Yet, because . . . that subjectivity does not properly exist until it is thus organized, art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display. Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility. (1973d: 451)

At the heart of this sensibility is once again a set of anxieties, different from, though not unrelated to, those brought out in ‘Person, Time and Conduct’. In this case the anxieties revolve around issues of the eruption of animality into human life: Geertz tells us that Balinese are revolted and/or threatened, but also fascinated, by manifestations of animality in the human world, including most actual animals, animal-like human behavior, and vicious demons who all take animal forms (1973d: 420).

I emphasize the centrality of anxieties in Geertz’s analyses of subjectivity in part because it connects back very closely to Weber’s anxiety-centered discussion of the Protestant ethic. But Geertz gives an even larger role to anxiety in his theoretical framework than we have seen thus far; it is one of the central axes not only of particular cultural subjectivities, but of the human condition as a whole, that is, the condition of being a cultural creature. To see this, we must return to the essay that launched his theoretical project, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’ (1973b [1966]). Geertz uses the religion essay to discuss what he sees as human beings’ most basic fear, the fear of conceptual chaos. He begins by quoting William James on the subject:

[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe – the ‘uncanny’ . . . Therefore our most important assets are always the symbols of our general *orientation*

in nature, on the earth, in society, and in what we are doing. (James, in Geertz, 1973b: 99; italics in the original)

Geertz goes on to sort out the different kinds of fears embodied in this fear of chaos:

There are at least three points where chaos – a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability* – threatens to break in upon man: at the limits of his analytic capacities, at the limits of his powers of endurance, and at the limits of his moral insight. Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all, if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough, radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it. (1973b: 100)

These anxieties of interpretation and orientation are seen as part of the generic human condition, grounded in the human dependency on symbolic orders to function within the world. Geertz had argued in an earlier article (1973a) that symbolic systems are not additive to human existence, but constitutive of it. Because human beings are relatively open creatures, vastly unprogrammed compared to most other animals, they literally depend on external symbolic systems – including especially language, but more generally ‘culture’ – to survive.

This larger foundational point concerning the core human anxieties, anxieties about the fragility of order and meaning, has taken a new turn in a major arena of cultural studies, studies of the ‘postmodern condition’, argued to be a powerful new configuration of the dominant culture.

## **FROM THE INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE TO CULTURAL CRITIQUE: TWO READINGS OF POSTMODERN CONSCIOUSNESS**

In this final section I will present readings of two works on the cultural/subjective formations of late capitalism, with a number of objectives. First I want to display the point that a concern for complex structures of subjectivity persists beyond Geertz’s foundational essays in the 1960s, flourishing in certain kinds of work up into the present. I want to contrast these kinds of work, in other words, with both the anti-humanist (structuralist and post-structuralist) work I critiqued at the beginning of this article, and with the much more satisfactory work of the practice theorists, which nonetheless fails to attend to these issues of subjectivity. Second, I want to show both the continuity with, and the transformations of, the Geertzian interpretive method. The Geertzian method of interpreting public cultural forms to get at the *conscience collective* is still visible, but in the hands of the authors to be discussed here, it has taken what might be called the Raymond Williams turn – from the interpretation of culture to cultural critique.

There is in fact a certain irony here, namely, that while Geertz’s ‘culturalism’ has been increasingly cast as conservative, yet it has been the basis for a radical approach to cultural studies. Raymond Williams cross-fertilized a recognizably Geertzian version of the American culture concept with a Marxist conception of ideology to try to understand the ways in which culture forms and deforms subjectivities – what he called ‘structures of feeling’ – in specific historical contexts of power, inequality, commodification, and the like. In the discussions of the two works that follow, both of them in this critical

cultural studies tradition, I want to show not only the general debt to Geertzian interpretive methods but also some surprising echoes of more specific elements of Geertz's world view, particularly the centrality of issues of anxiety over meaning and order.

The first of the works in question is Fredric Jameson's classic essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', which was published (appropriately enough) in 1984. This was the launching point for a line of thinking about contemporary culture that is still going on, and the second work to be discussed, Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, represents a further, and more recent (1998), development of some of the same issues.<sup>12</sup> I should say before going on that, while I find both of these works quite interesting, I do not necessarily agree with everything in them. The following then is not meant to be a substantive exploration of the postmodern condition or a total endorsement of these two works. I present them here primarily to illustrate a certain form of contemporary cultural analysis, one that is centered, as is the work of Geertz, on questions of (anxious) subjectivity, and that turn Geertz-style cultural interpretation into cultural critique.

Jameson, first, sees postmodernism as a set of newly emerging styles in architecture, painting, literature, film, and academic theory, and at the same time a newly emerging form of consciousness with particular characteristics. Both the styles and the consciousness are explicitly tied to 'late capitalism' in a variety of ways – through the commodification of 'aesthetic production' (1984: 4); as 'the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world' (1984: 5); and as an analog of 'the great global multinational<sup>13</sup> and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught' (1984: 44).

Jameson reads postmodern culture/consciousness (as in Geertz, or for that matter Durkheim or Marx, the boundary between the two is fuzzy) from a variety of public cultural forms and texts. He begins with a comparison of a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh, and Andy Warhol's painting, 'Diamond Dust Shoes'. He argues that Van Gogh's painting can, perhaps must, be read as responding to a particular real condition in the world, 'the whole object world of agricultural misery' (1984: 7), while the Warhol painting disallows this kind of reading: 'There is . . . in Warhol no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments that whole larger lived context' (1984: 8). The Warhol embodies, according to Jameson, 'perhaps the supreme formal feature of all . . . postmodernisms flatness or depthlessness' (1984: 9, word order rearranged). This depthlessness is the first of Jameson's major 'constitutive features of the postmodern', which also include 'a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality . . . [and] a whole new type of emotional ground tone – what [he calls] "intensities"' (1984: 6).

Jameson goes on to compare Warhol's work to the Edvard Munch painting, *The Scream*, 'a canonical expression of the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation' (1984: 11). These thematics, however, are grounded in what Jameson calls 'depth models' of the subject, models which presume various kinds of complex subjectivities, including the distinction between an inner self and an outer world. Under postmodernism, however, 'depth is replaced by surface' (1984: 12), and 'the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation'

(1984: 14).<sup>14</sup> The interpretation is then punched home by a photograph of Wells Fargo Court, a building that appears to be 'a surface unsupported by any volume' (1984: 13).

The postmodern subject, in short, has been drained of subjectivity in the modernist sense. Postmodernist cultural forms, including those lines of cultural theory which posit the irrelevance/death of the subject, reflect this flattened subjectivity and at the same time heighten the subject's sense of disorientation. This is where Jameson goes with his famous interpretation of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles.<sup>15</sup> Moving us, the readers, through its impossibly confusing spaces, Jameson talks of the ways the hotel 'has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body . . . cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world' (1984: 44). He goes on to locate the central anxiety that is modeled by this kind of environment:

It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment . . . can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (1984: 44)

Jameson here has both outlined what he sees as a new formation of culture/consciousness, and critiqued it as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. It is not an ideology in the common sense of the term, a set of ideas and perspectives imposed by dominant classes, but a *culture* looked at as ideology, as the 'superstructural expression' of new forms of power in the world. Moreover, its central features constitute a Geertzian nightmare, disordering, disorienting, drained of meaning and affect. Postmodern subjects are disoriented in time (the 'weakening of historicity') and space (metaphorically wandering the labyrinthine corridors of places like the Westin Bonaventure). Lacking a vocabulary of subjective depth and complexity (the end of 'depth models'), their emotional lives are reduced to inchoate emotional bursts ('intensities') and featureless moods ('euphoria').

Given this interpretation grounded in anxieties of orientation and meaning, Jameson is consistent in terms of the kind of politics he calls for at the end. Although there are gestures toward conventional radical politics, Jameson's final call is not to the barricades but to practices of conceptual ordering of the world, and specifically the practice of 'cognitive mapping': 'The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping' (1984: 54). In the course of such mapping 'we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion' (1984: 54).

Jameson's essay can be criticized on many grounds. In particular it is massively socially ungrounded. Postmodernity in the senses he has discussed are not linked to particular groups, classes, or forms of practice (e.g. work). It seems to float free of any location in the social base whatsoever, part of the ether of the late capitalist mode of production as a whole. Fred Pfeil has offered a brilliant critique of the essay in just these terms (1990), and the Sennett book to be discussed next will avoid many of these problems. Sennett's argument is developed more from ethnographic-type material than from texts, and that is part of the difference between them.<sup>16</sup> But leaving aside the flaws of Jameson's essay, my central point for present purposes is to emphasize how both Jameson *and* Sennett

can be profitably read in terms of the (Geertzian) issues of culture and subjectivity, updated via Raymond Williams, that are central to this article.

Sennett's book, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1998), is, like Jameson's essay, an exploration of the new forms of consciousness emerging under conditions of late capitalism. The texts for his discussion are not paintings and buildings, but workplace scenes, structures of authority and responsibility in workplaces, and people's talk about work. If for Jameson 'late capitalism' is largely seen in the form of multinationalism, 'out there' and hard to grasp, for Sennett late capitalism is largely seen in the corporation and the workplace, 'at home' but equally hard to grasp.<sup>17</sup>

Sennett argues that the conditions of work have radically changed under late capitalism, and that this has had profound effects on consciousness, which he calls 'character'. He sums up these changed conditions with the phrase, 'no long term'. This means, first and foremost, that jobs are insecure, in part because of the increasing opacity of organizations, so that people never quite know what is expected of them; and in part because of the practices of 'downsizing' and 'reengineering' corporations, constantly throwing people out of work, even though there is no evidence that these practices actually increase productivity or profits. 'No long term' means as well that work itself is not embedded in one's 'job', a long-term relationship with a company that might become part of one's identity, but is cut up into (decidedly non-Sartrean) 'projects' which can be outsourced if necessary to contractors who themselves have no long-term relationship with the corporation. It means further a tremendous bias against older workers (over 50; in some places over 40; in advertising over 30); people who have been too long in the company are seen as too mired in past histories, too attached to past ways of doing things, too prone to talk back to a younger boss, and so on and so forth. In still other uses, 'no long term' refers to the machines of production, which are and must be reprogrammable on short notice, the famous principle of just-in-time production (Harvey, 1989). In sum the principle of 'no long term' ramifies in myriad ways throughout the corporate culture of late capitalism.

Within this body of discourse, the positive spin on 'no long term' is provided by the word 'flexible'. People must be flexible, machines must be flexible, corporations must be flexible. Sennett's book as a whole is about the kinds of subjectivities produced under the regime of flexibility. More careful than Jameson in locating who are the subjects in question, Sennett shows how flexibility plays itself out in different class locations. On the one hand he makes several visits to a very high level annual symposium in Davos, Switzerland for chief executive officers of major corporations. He concludes that people like Bill Gates and other members of the species 'Davos Man' are comfortable with, and indeed flourish within, the mind-set of flexibility: 'The capacity to let go of the past, the confidence to accept fragmentation: these are two traits of character which appear at Davos among people truly at home in the new capitalism' (Sennett, 1998: 63). But as he immediately goes on to say, 'Those same traits of character . . . become more self-destructive for those who work lower down in the flexible regime . . . [They] corrode the character of more ordinary employees who try to play by these rules' (1998: 63).

Although from the point of view of the owners and executives, the flexible workplace is more productive, from the point of view of those who work 'lower down', the organization and/or one's career within it appear 'incoherent' (1998: 48), 'shapeless' (1998: 57), 'illegible' (1998: 86). Sennett gives a number of different, quite individualized, examples

of how this plays out for people in different kinds of work environments and at different organizational levels. In one example, workers in a bakery that has been completely computerized, and with many flextime workers on different schedules, were 'indifferent' about their work (and none except the foreman were actually bakers). In another we learn about Rose, an older woman who went to work in an advertising agency. She quickly learned that performance 'counted for less to employers than contacts and networking skills' (1998: 79); she felt vulnerable and continually at risk, partly because she lacked those skills, and partly because there was no clear way to read her own progress (1998: 84). A third example is of a factory with the increasingly popular 'team' organization of work; here, where bosses represent themselves as simply other members of the team, workers feel the obscure workings of 'power without authority' (1998: 114), while managers practice the skills of 'deep acting' and the 'masks of cooperativeness' (1998: 112). Even without downsizing, nobody stays very long at any given job.

Sennett sums up the corrosive effects of the many manifestations of flexible capitalism as follows:

The culture of the new order profoundly disturbs self-organization . . . It can divorce easy, superficial labor from understanding and engagement, as happened with the Boston bakers. It can make the constant taking of risks an exercise in depression, as happened to Rose. Irreversible change and multiple, fragmented activity may be comfortable for the new regime's masters, like the court at Davos, but it may disorient the new regime's servants. (Sennett, 1998: 117)

Sennett thus arrives, from a different direction, at conclusions very similar to Jameson's. Jameson's 'waning of affect' appears as the bakery workers' 'indifference'; Jameson's 'depthlessness' appears in the 'masks of cooperativeness' that represent the primary skills of the contemporary manager; Jameson's emphasis on spatial disorientation is Sennett's emphasis on temporal disorientation: 'Time's arrow is broken; it has no trajectory in a continually re-engineered, routine-hating, short-term political economy. People feel the lack of sustained human relations and durable purposes . . . register[ing] unease and anxiety' (1998: 98).

The crisis of postmodern consciousness<sup>18</sup> is once again a crisis of orientation within an uninterpretable, or what Sennett calls illegible, world. In his final chapter Sennett writes of the necessity for human solidarity and community in order to effectively deal with that world politically. But as with Jameson there is in a sense a more fundamental need, a need for conceptual, cognitive, symbolic tools for reorienting and reconstituting the self within this new regime. Thus where Jameson talks of cognitive mapping, Sennett writes of the importance of narrative, of people being able to narrate their lives in a coherent and meaningful way. The capacity for coherent self-narration is constantly under assault in late capitalism, and must be preserved or restored; the penultimate chapter considers the attempts of some downsized, unemployed IBM executives to narrate what happened to them and why, in ways that help them come to terms with the new conditions of their lives.<sup>19</sup>

Both Jameson and Sennett are performing what Raymond Williams called 'epochal analysis', in which 'a cultural process is seized as a cultural system, with determinate, dominant features: feudal culture or bourgeois culture' (Williams, 1977: 121) or, in this

case, postmodern culture. But while this can be – is – very effective, it is never enough, and one must also, as Williams also argues, look for the countercurrents that exist within any given cultural formation. Before concluding this article, then, I want to look briefly for such countercurrents.

What Williams was emphasizing as countercurrents was the question of alternative cultural formations coexisting with the hegemonic, what he calls the ‘residual’ and the ‘emergent’ (Williams, 1977: 121–2). For purposes of the present argument, however, I will not look at alternative cultural formations (though surely they are there to be found); instead I want to return to the question of complex subjectivities. I said earlier that I take people to be ‘conscious’ in the sense of being at least partially ‘knowing subjects’, self-aware and reflexive. Subjectivities are complex because they are culturally and emotionally complex, but also because of the ongoing work of reflexivity, monitoring the relationship of the self to the world. No doubt there are cultural subjects who fully embody, in the mode of power, the dominant culture (‘Davos Man’), and no doubt there are cultural subjects who have been fully subjected, in the mode of powerlessness, by the dominant culture. By and large, however, I assume at the most fundamental level that for most subjects, most of the time, this never fully works, and there are countercurrents of subjectivity as well as of culture.

Thus while the two works just examined are primarily accounts of the dominant formation, we can also find in them evidence of these kinds of subjective countercurrents. Remember Rose, the older woman discussed by Richard Sennett who joined an advertising agency. Rose was, for Sennett, not primarily a victim of postmodern flattening but an informant. He uses her experience to write of the manipulative actors, and of the culture that rewards them, in the firm; he presents her reactions largely in terms of the ways in which she registers what is going on. And the fact of the matter is that Rose left the firm. She was somewhat ‘worn down’ by the whole experience, but she returned to her former life (she owned a bar that Sennett frequented, and had leased it out in the interim), and she did so with a heightened critical consciousness about ‘slick uptown kids’ and the queasy-making moral world of organizations like this (Sennett, 1998: 78). One could speak of this episode in terms of Rose’s ‘agency’, and that would not be inaccurate. But the idea of agency itself presupposes a complex subjectivity behind it, in which a subject partially internalizes and partially reflects upon – and finally in this case reacts against – a set of circumstances in which she finds herself.<sup>20</sup>

There are no individuals in the Jameson essay, so I cannot extract a story like Rose’s to tell. But there is one moment in Jameson’s text in which we can see the *effects* of a critical subjectivity at work. Thus after powerfully communicating to the reader the disorienting spatial arrangements of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, Jameson tells us that ‘color coding and directional signals have been added’, obviously in response to people complaining that they were getting lost. Jameson sneers at these cognitive orienting tools, seeing them as evidence of ‘a pitiful and revealing, rather desperate, attempt to restore the coordinates of an older space’ (Jameson, 1984: 44). Maybe so. But I also like to think of them as political posters (in my imagination, someone goes around putting them up at night), both providing a way through the maze, and conveying the message that arrogant architects and big capital can never fully get us down.

Again one could think in terms of the agency of those who successfully made demands for directional signs and color coding in the Bonaventure. But agency – unfortunately



– has come to be associated with the problematic subject of humanism, and thus too easily dismissed. What I prefer to emphasize here, then, is the complexities of consciousness even in the face of the most dominant cultural formations. This is not to say that actors can stand ‘outside of culture’, for of course they cannot. But it is to say that a fully cultural consciousness is at the same time always multi-layered and reflexive, and its complexity and reflexivity constitute the grounds for questioning and criticizing the world in which we find ourselves.

### **SOME VERY BRIEF CONCLUSIONS**

Whether one agrees with their takes on postmodern consciousness or not, Jameson and Sennett show us that a critical reading of the contemporary world involves understanding not just its new political, economic, and social formations, but its new culture, a culture in turn that is read by both of them in terms of the kinds of subjectivities it will tend to produce. This then returns us to the main thesis of this article, which I would like to summarize briefly here.

I have argued for the importance of a robust anthropology of subjectivity, both as states of mind of real actors embedded in the social world, and as cultural formations that (at least partially) express, shape, and constitute those states of mind. Clifford Geertz, carrying forward the tremendously important work of Max Weber, has been central here because of what I called earlier his subjectivity-oriented theory of culture. Moving beyond Geertz, however, I have been particularly interested in understanding subjectivity in its relations to (changing) forms of power, and especially – as in the Jameson and Sennett examples – the subtle forms of power that saturate everyday life, through experiences of time, space, and work. In short I have been concerned to explore the ways in which such an anthropology of subjectivity can be the basis of cultural critique, allowing us to ask sharp questions about the cultural shaping of subjectivities within a world of wildly unequal power relations, and about the complexities of personal subjectivities within such a world.

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### **Notes**

- 1 An earlier version of this article appeared in Italian as ‘Geertz, soggettività, e coscienza postmoderna’, in L. Cimmino and A. Santambrogio (eds) *Antropologia e*

*interpretazione: Il contributo di Clifford Geertz alle scienze sociali.* Perugia, Italy: Morlacchi Editore, 2004.

- 2 See also Bourdieu (2000) and Fox (2003) for discussions of this history.
- 3 As Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd have put it in a discussion of 'minority discourse':

... where the point of departure of poststructuralism lies within the Western tradition and works to deconstruct its identity formations 'from within', the critical difference is that minorities, by virtue of their very social being, must begin from a position of objective *non-identity* which is rooted in their economic and cultural marginalization vis-à-vis the 'West'. The non-identity which the critical Western intellectual seeks to (re)produce discursively is for minorities a given of their social existence. But as such a given it is not yet by any means an index of liberation ... On the contrary, the non-identity of minorities remains the sign of material damage to which the only coherent response is struggle, not ironic distanciation. (1987: 16)

I have used this quotation from JanMohamed and Lloyd before, but as the post-structuralist, anti-humanist project continues unabated in some quarters, it seems worth quoting again. See also Hartsock (1990).

- 4 See an excellent essay by Throop and Murphy (2002) that raises some of the same questions. See also Meneley (1999).
- 5 James Scott (1990, especially Chapter 4) considers the question of the knowledgability of dominated subjects, and argues strongly against seeing them as hegemonized in a deep Gramscian sense, or subjected in the deep Foucauldian sense. I sympathize with his position but I think he goes too far. I am more closely in agreement with Giddens on this point; Giddens argues that there is 'no circumstance in which the conditions of action can become *wholly* opaque to agents' (1979: 144, emphasis added).
- 6 Yacine was a student of Bourdieu's. I find it interesting that she has located her own ethnographic work in this area of subjectivity that was lacking in his framework.
- 7 I will be looking almost exclusively at Geertz's foundational essays in this article. For a recent overview of his work as a whole, see Inglis (2000). For a very interesting recent interview, see Panourgíá (2002). For a recent collection of essays taking stock of, and extending, his work, see Ortner (1999c).
- 8 My own empirical work has primarily responded to this version of the critique, and has for a long time emphasized the articulation of cultural forms with social differentiation and inequality. See especially 1999a and 2003.
- 9 Williams can be thought of as having effected the rapprochement between anthropology and literature from the literature side, as Geertz did from the side of anthropology.
- 10 Crehan (2002) has criticized Williams's adaptation of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and also the extensive use of Williams's version of the concept in anthropology. She raises interesting questions but these cannot be pursued here.
- 11 See for example my discussion of Shahbano in Ortner (1995).
- 12 I do not mean to privilege non-anthropologists here. I choose the Jameson and Sennett works because they illustrate best the points I wish to make about Geertz's

- approach to subjectivity. Anthropologists have addressed various aspects of late capitalism, especially globalization (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Ong, 1999). On questions specifically of postmodern consciousness, among the closest work would be that of Traube (1992), Martin (1994) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2001).
- 13 To show how fast the language of theory and politics changes, the term 'globalization' was not yet in currency when Jameson wrote his essay.
  - 14 On the basis of a small set of interviews she conducted in the US, Claudia Strauss (1997) has questioned Jameson's arguments, and my 1991 amendments to those arguments, about the fragmented self. It is not clear that these kinds of interviews with individuals can be used to respond to Jameson's and my points, which are pitched at a cultural level, but it would take us too far afield to address these questions here.
  - 15 Having just moved from New York to Los Angeles, I have to say that there is something strange to a New Yorker about the design of many buildings in LA. Here I specifically refer to apartment houses. Many of them, for example, do not really have an obvious entry door, or some kind of recognizable entry space or lobby. In my own building and many others in this neighborhood one has to enter through the garage, or through a non-obvious side door which puts one directly into a hallway of apartments. This is all to say that the Westin Bonaventure may be 'postmodern', but it may also represent an exaggerated version of some local architectural culture.
  - 16 It is possible to distinguish certain kinds of textually based cultural studies work that are more successful in dealing with the social location problem, even without ethnographic data/research. See, for example, Traube (1992) and Bordo (1993), also on postmodern consciousness.
  - 17 The third major site for mapping postmodern culture and consciousness is the family, for which see Judith Stacey's outstanding *Brave New Families* (1990).
  - 18 Sennett rejects the term 'postmodern', but he is clearly talking about the same phenomena that Jameson gathers under that term.
  - 19 I actually disagree with Sennett's interpretation of their stories. But I completely agree with his general point about the rupturing and reconstitution of narrativity; in fact I wrote a paper, which for various reasons I never published, making much the same point (1991). See also Salman Rushdie's wonderful children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990).
  - 20 Actually, in the context of this story, Rose's first act of agency was taking the job. The whole Rose story is fascinating but I cannot pursue it here.

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