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Interpretation and Critical Classification. Geertzism and Beyond in the Sociology of Culture

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Abstract

How can we explain the success of Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* in American sociology? On rereading Geertz today, it seems insufficient to point to the limits of Parson's account of values and the lack of culture elsewhere in the discipline at the time to understand why such relatively concept-free and eclectic essays could become *the* placeholder for "culture" in some circles. If Geertz was successful partly because of the ambiguity of his work, this ambiguity is not perfectly open. The paper works towards a critical understanding of the celebration of Geertz in sociology in the context of the alternatives occluded within it. It discusses the consequences of an interpretation of "hermeneutics" and "the humanities" that goes back only as far as Dilthey, which ignores alternative, earlier forms of hermeneutics; it also discusses Weber's position, which was also already an answer to Dilthey. What is at stake is the question as to how interpretation is defined, what it is defined against, and whether and how it is possible to combine interpretation with observation and critique in the sense of situating social phenomena within the range of possibilities for how things could be otherwise.

Keywords: Hermeneutics; interpretation; history of humanities; Geertz; Weber; Verstehen; critique.

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How can we explain the success of Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) in American sociology? On rereading Geertz today, it strikes me that we cannot only point to the limits of Parsonian accounts of values and the lack of culture elsewhere in the discipline at the time to understand why such relatively concept-free and eclectic essays could become *the* placeholder for "culture" in some circles.

To make Geertz central to the project of cultural sociology must have meant to ignore other resources that in theory should have been available. To the conditions of possibility of "Geertzism" in sociology mentioned above, we should thus add a certain othering of social constructionism and microsociology by proponents of the strong programme in American Cultural Sociology,¹ a lack of consideration of alternative, earlier forms of hermeneutics, and a seeming lack of access to the writings of the sociological classics and, more particularly, to the work of Max Weber.

In what follows, I pursue a critical understanding of Geertzism in sociology in the context of the alternatives occluded within it. If Geertz was successful partly because of the ambiguity of his work, this ambiguity is not perfectly open. The celebration of Geertz in sociology is a symptom and has risked being a cause of a very selective interpretation of the history of the humanities and of sociology itself within sociology.

I hope to make the case that such a critical understanding of Geertzism is relevant also to those sociologists who are not particularly interested in the strong programme in American cultural sociology or even in American sociology in general. What is at stake is a sense of the range of options for cultural analysis, how interpretation is defined, what it is defined against, and whether and how it is possible to combine interpretation with observation and critique in the sense of situating social phenomena within the range of possibilities for how things could be otherwise.

1 What Kind of History of the Humanities for the Humanistic Social Sciences?

Geertz, reasonably enough, insists on meaning and interpretation, which in the context of the 1970s provides an advantage against non-cultural approaches, such as behaviourism and rational choice theories but does not as such mark a distinctive position within interpretative approaches.

Geertz (1973) further emphasises a strong distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (p. 15).

This emphasis is traced to Dilthey (Alexander, 1987, 2008), who is often claimed to have established the humanities and the hermeneutical tradition, which is then said to be carried forward by Gadamer, Ricoeur and others. But this is a very selective history of cultural research,

1. Alexander, one if not the key architect of Geertzism, rejects microsociology as "individualist" (Alexander, 1987). This hostility is not shared by Geertz himself (Geertz, 2002, p. 4; Cossu, 2021, p. 364). The dogmatism in parts of the micro-sociological tradition will also have contributed to the initial lack of dialogue across cultural approaches in sociology.

which takes Dilthey out of the context of the alternatives to Dilthey at his time. In the German-speaking territories, the humanities — antiquity studies, philology, critical bible studies, and history — had played a leading and confident role in the establishment of modern research universities since the end of the 18th century.

Against this backdrop, Dilthey's innovation beginning from around 1860 was twofold: It was, first, to be defensive vis a vis the natural sciences, which were only becoming culturally dominant in exactly this later period, and second, to formulate this defense from a position at some distance from actual research practices (but see Guryeva et al., 2016). In other words, Dilthey's role was that of an ideologue of the humanities ("Geisteswissenschaften", literally sciences of the "spirit"), when an ideological defence against the natural sciences had become newly relevant.

When we go back only as far as Dilthey, we do not consider earlier cultural research and earlier and alternative traditions of hermeneutics. Building on earlier forms of renaissance learning (Grafton, 1981), critical bible studies and critical studies of sources on the culture of Greek and roman antiquity (Marchand, 2003; Spoerhase & Dermann, 2011; Hamann, 2014; Rebenich, 2021), the modern humanities were established in the late 18th and early 19th century. They were established as a science in the German sense of "Wissenschaft", demarcated not against the natural sciences but defined as an academic, open-ended pursuit against normative expectations by cultural elites and by cultural challengers (Marchand, 2003; Krause, 2024).

In the field of antiquity studies, the task was to get at the "national culture" of the ancient Greeks; though relying on group-based, wholistic notions of culture, these investigations always included individual expression, not just because the fine arts were included but because of the commitment to the critical study of sources, which required careful speculation about meanings and word choices of (possibly different) authors and later editors. Given the kinds of sources available, the work also paid close attention to material culture.

The classicist August Boeckh (1785–1867), a scholar who produced works on the Greek Poet Pindar, as well as on weights and measurements and public budgets in Athens, called his version of the humanities the "philological sciences". He propagated the aim of establishing a "knowledge of the known" ["Erkennen des Erkannten"] (Boeckh 1877, p. 10), pioneering what we today might call a "constructivist" position, but what was then a version of "historicism". When dealing with texts by Plato, for example, the task was not to learn from Plato's knowledge of the world but to make Plato's knowledge itself the object of investigation.

The version of hermeneutics that is chosen by Dilthey and Geertzism is one that leaves it at "verstehen", the reconstruction of meaning. In its version in the later Dilthey (1977), it is an understanding of individual expressions and objectified contents of culture at the same time. Good understanding for Dilthey is not a virtue among others, it is a duty owed to the very nature of the empirical material, which scholars in the humanities are working with. It is the only operation that is allowed. Dilthey's empiricism of meaning approaches in paradox ways a kind of positivism.

For Boeckh by contrast, hermeneutics is "Kritik und Einordnung", critique and (literally) "placement" or "sorting" (see Horstman, 1987). In the meaning given to it in the humanities, critique here is not necessarily the critique of power but the practice of placing an object in the context of other options (including those options, we might want to add, which are currently obscured by power).

2 “Interpretation” in Weber’s Answer to Dilthey

Geertz cites Weber and is seen to presuppose Weber. But his dialogue with Weber is very selective and not taken forward in terms of the cultural sociology that Weber had already developed. As a consequence, when Geertzism in sociology goes back to Dilthey what is also not considered is Weber’s answer to Dilthey.

When I reread Weber and Geertz side by side today, it does seem that the celebration of Geertz by trained sociologists must have meant that the way to Weber was cut off. In this case, however, unlike with the broader context of debates in the German humanities I sketched above, the issue surely was not a lack of access. Rather, the overclaiming of Weber by everyone and anyone may have acted as a barrier. Perhaps given Parsons’ claiming of Weber, Geertz’s reference to Weber was somewhat polemical in the first place. Indeed, Weber was claimed by almost everyone, including many who were not particularly interested in cultural sociology or issues of interpretation.

Weber, who is well-aware of Dilthey’s work, rejects and transcends the opposition between interpretation and observation that is important to Dilthey and this is important for how we understand interpretative research today (Brown, 1990). We can note here that Weber takes meanings very seriously but also observes and indeed observes at the same time as he interprets: we can speak of charismatic authority, for example, because it is in principle possible to observe people running after Jesus and because we can produce accountable attempts to reconstruct the meanings associated with Jesus and the act of running after him. We can then compare both aspects to other types of authority guided by meanings and look across history for these different types.

Some of Geertz’s scepticism towards typologising makes sense in the context of his dialogues with other anthropologists, who had at times been overenthusiastic. But speaking among sociologists, his assertion “I am more interested in the sociology of religion, than types of faith” (Geertz & Micheelsen, 2002, p. 5) is *also* somewhat paradoxical. And in this context, for Geertz to suggest that Weber couldn’t decide between science and cultural analysis (“the discussion about Weber is of course whether he really believed in a social science with a scientific approach to culture, or if he believed in an interpretive one” [*ibidem*]) is precisely to substitute a very unsubtle demand to take sides for a serious engagement with Weber’s answers to Dilthey and others.

There are reasons why a simplistic opposition between “experimental science” and “interpretative science” would have served Geertz well, and related but to some extent separate reasons for why such an opposition seemed attractive to sociologists. For the sociologists who are understandably frustrated with some of the scientism in the field, the Dilthey-Gadamer-Ricoeur-Geertz line allows a selective appropriation of the humanities without much engagement with research in the humanities themselves and with an often quite stark loss in the subtlety of the interpretation that is provided.

I think it is fair to say that we sociologists have tended to be worse custodians of the research heritage of the humanities than Geertz and Geertzian anthropologists, because we have reminded each other less that we should also be seriously engaged with “the local” or with “cultures” in the plural. This has been exacerbated in the early stages of the strong programme in American Cultural Sociology by a tendency of combining the historicist-positivism of Dilthey with a claim to causal analysis, showing again and again that culture matters vis-a-vis other factors.

Compared to Weber, this has often entailed a separation of cultural analysis from history,

from practices and from other factors that causality has to be proven against. It also precludes critique in the meaning given to it in the humanities, of which Weber retains traces in his program of explicating the “so-und-nicht-anders-Gewordenseins der Welt” [“world’s being historically this way and not otherwise] (Weber, 1985).

3 A Fuller Range of Options for Cultural Research

What Geertz shares with the older traditions in the humanities, which I discuss here, is a holistic concept of culture (but see Paidipaty, 2020). This notion of culture played a productive role for the establishment of the humanities, providing a target for scholarly efforts, which could be pursued at some remove from instrumental concerns and evolutionary schemas. But alongside other problems with different versions, the concept has been in the way of developing a vocabulary of socio-cultural forms and with that, in the way of fully combining the humanities’ notion of critique with sociological concerns.

Geertz emphasises local performance and the specific objects of cultural practice, but interpretation always lead back to the whole. The precise relationship between these two poles in Geertz is contested with some saying there is too much contingency (Alexander, 1987) and some saying he is a functionalist, others admiring the dialectic between them (Alexander, 2008, p. 159). In any case, Geertz does not contribute by offering concepts for everything that is in between the part and the whole.

I have tried to argue that it is not necessary to oppose interpretation and attention to meaning with observation. To fully pursue interpretation, observation *and* critical classification within sociology we need to move beyond hermeneutics in the humanities and holistic cultural sociology by paying attention to a range of intermediary socio-cultural forms, which are interpreted and observed with a view to the interpretations that are a part of them. This is a project with a strong basis in classical sociological theory which today can draw from efforts in a range of theoretical traditions if and when they allow themselves to be part of a multi-paradigmatic discussion.

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