

## Deep Play, Violence, and Social Reconstruction

**F**OR CLIFFORD GEERTZ: Errant Thoughts in a Blurred Genre—  
Errant—but hopefully not too erring. Thoughts in a blurred genre. Between the *Festschrift*—in which one offers in tribute one's own work as an extension of one's teacher's work—and the *slide show* on "works and lives." Indeed two slides can serve as frames: a slide of a fabulous large tapestry of a fighting cock that hangs in one of the chemical engineering buildings at MIT, a locus to which I shall return; and a slide of a painting of a buzkashi game that I recently brought back from Central Asia and that now hangs in my house, a game to which I shall also return.

So: errant thoughts in a blurred genre—for Clifford Geertz—in three movements: where we are now, where we have been, and on the trail of an anthropology to come. (One of the condundra of trying to talk about Cliff's work is that the very language of anthropology—the prose we speak—is suffused with the metaphors he has taught us to think with: turtles and metaphors all the way down.)

PART ONE: WHERE WE ARE NOW  
Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice;

OR:

A post-Geertzian manifesto, where "post," "posts," and "postings"  
are defined as a sending-receiving relation  
between fathers and sons,  
and between the three or four phases of self-defined Geertzian work.

I start with an ethnographic datum, a stance toward ethics and politics,  
and a contextualist stance toward social theory.

We live (again) in an era in which there is a pervasive claim, or native model, asserted by practitioners in many contemporary arenas of life (law sciences, political economy, computer technologies, education, etc.) that traditional concepts and ways of doing things no longer work, that life is outrunning the pedagogies in which we were trained, that we are experiencing emergent new forms of life—in new cyborgian, hybrid, cross-

species biotechnological forms of life, in databank-networked and new materials infrastructures, in environmental and ecological changes, and in the legal, economic, psychological, and social institutional innovations that these require. *Call this native model an ethnographic datum.*

We live therefore (again) in an era in which new ethical and political spaces are thrown up that require action and can often have quite serious consequences, but for which the possibilities for giving grounds quickly run out. Traditional ethical and moral guides seem not always helpful, and we are often left to negotiate interests and trade-offs in legal or other tournaments of decision-making over time, and across terrains configured with multiply interacting new technologies, what I call ethical plateaus with due deference to Giles Deleuze, Gregory Bateson, and the Balinese. *Call this a philosophical stance toward ethics and politics*, one that Ludwig Wittgenstein formulated when he said that giving grounds comes to an end somewhere and that "the end is not an ungrounded presupposition; it is an ungrounded way of acting" or a "form of life," a sociality of action that always already contains within it ethical dilemmas, or, in the idiom of Emmanuel Levinas, "the face of the other." The "face of the other" is particularly of concern in the peopling of new technologies and technosciences.

In coming to terms with this ethnographic datum and this philosophical stance, anthropology is pushed to develop new tools of social theory. The social theory of the last quarter of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first is created out of quite different generational, social structural, communication infrastructural, and knowledge-making contexts and experiences from those out of which classical social theory was created at the end of the nineteenth century and turn of the twentieth. *Call this a contextualist stance toward social and cultural theory.* Classical social theory is hardly passé or superseded, but Marx, Weber, Dilthey, Freud, Durkheim, Fleck, Mauss, Schutz, et al. did not experience or analyze the kinds of shifts that have become focal for post-Algerian independence French theory (Cixous, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Derida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Touraine, Abeles, Latour, et al.), post-Green movement theory in Germany (Ulrich Beck, Friedrich Kittler) and Italy (Agamben, Melucci), post-cost-benefit analysis of high hazard high consequence industries from anesthesiology to aeronautics to nuclear power in the United States (Perrow), post-socialist nationalisms, and, importantly for my own work, social and cultural movements in the Islamic world seeking to move beyond patriarchal patrimonialism (inspired among others by Ali Shariati, Nawal al-Sadawi, Saad Ibrahim; and the powerful

films coming out of Iran). Indeed today—on the very day that NATO is being expanded, and that we are contemplating war in Iraq—we operate under the sign of the film *Safar-e Qandahar* by the Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and its image of prostheses being parachuted from Red Cross helicopters to Afghan men running on crutches to catch them.

In the 1990s anthropology began to take up ethnographic challenges in a number of critical arenas: *work on the reconstruction of society* in the wake of social trauma, structural violence, and disruption on a scale not reflected upon, though it existed, by the social sciences since the early post-World War II, post-India-Pakistan Partition, and post-wars of decolonization era in which Clifford Geertz got his anthropological start. 1990s anthropology began to take up ethnographic *work on the new communication technologies* that mediate the contemporary analogues of what Durkheim might have called the conscience collective in their more differentiated, telemediated, transnationally diffuse guises, and *that transform the conditions of possibility for governance, legitimacy, and democratic civil societies*. And 1990s anthropology began to take up ethnographic *work on the infrastructures of what we make live and who we let die*.

To map and critique these technoscientific worlds and infrastructures, interferences and mediations, dislocations and reconfigurations, cultural forces and autoimmune cultural toxicities (CNN to al-Jazeera) requires an anthropology attentive to an expanding variety of cultural differences that go far beyond traditionally understood cultural differences. The distinctive anthropological voice—the aspiration for cross-culturally comparative, socially grounded, linguistically attentive perspectives—continues to be a valuable jewel among the social sciences amidst the pressures to simply turn to statistical indices for all policies and judgments.

Thus far the inconstant son's sendings to the father; let me turn to the generative sendings of the father to the son.

PART TWO: WHERE WE HAVE BEEN  
Rethinking the Anthropology of the Second Half  
of the Twentieth Century with Clifford Geertz;

OR:

Cliff's four phases and my three-fold epistemological interpretive grid.

In his most recent of three essays surveying his own "works and lives," Cliff uses a four-fold division. There is the golden age of optimistic post-World War II reconstruction, multidisciplinary and team research, modernization and development theories grounded in Max Weber's notions of economic, political, and cultural rationalizations, and the voluntarism

of Talcott Parsons's layer cake of biological, psychological, social, and cultural systems, the latter three, respectively, being dynamically integrated, functionally integrated, and logico-meaningfully integrated with cybernetic feedback among them, such that they were always already inseparable except analytically or heuristically. This was the age of Cliff's field-defining quartet of ethnographic monographs on Indonesia.

There followed the dramatic shift of the hot spots of the Cold War into Indonesia. Thus the silver age of his migration to Sefrou in Morocco, and the efforts of the Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations at Chicago to keep the modernization theories going as they obviously splintered and decayed. His ethnography became less monographic, and justifications were found for turning to the essay form in *Local Knowledge*, and the tributes to such literary idols as Lionel Trilling. It is this turn that contains, I think, much of the ambivalence of his own corpus of work and its uneasy relation to the work of some of his progeny.

There followed the bronze and iron ages in anthropology of the 1980s and 1990s, which Cliff glosses as a florescence of different schools and isms in the social sciences, followed most recently by a return of "unclear significance" to concerns with violence, ethnic conflict, and the like. This is the period of blurred genres, Cliff's being in multiple minds about the role of Islam, and so on.

This is, however, the period, in my own trajectory and that of my cohort, of *Writing Culture*, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, *Debating Muslims*, the eight-volume *Late Editions Project*, the *Public Culture Project*, the inauguration of the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, my own directing of a Center for Cultural Studies, and then directing a Program in Science, Technology and Society. I count myself as one of Clifford Geertz's progeny, perhaps an inconstant disciple, nonetheless both a fan, and I hope an appreciative and constructive deployer of his insights. My own work followed along behind Cliff's early interest in ecology, his efforts to test Weberian accounts of sociologically stratified and differentially organized religious forms (in my case in the Caribbean, Iran, and India), his interest in the philosophy of the social sciences, in genres of literary and dramatic forms, and eventually in science and technology. And I particularly want to salute Cliff's repeated efforts to appoint a science studies person at the Institute for Advanced Studies.

I would divide Geertz's four phases into three epistemological ones. I think one of the most fascinating features of Clifford Geertz's writings is the shift from a comparativist Weberian, Parsonsian, and broadly positivist or positive knowledge production, intended to help with notions of development programs for the modernization of "new nations"

in old cultures and civilizations (a contradiction that soon became generative both descriptively and epistemologically). It is a shift from the rich ethnographic work of *Agricultural Involvement, Religions in Java* as it's author titled it (not as it was titled in the singular by its publisher (Geertz, *After the Fact*, 1995 [hereafter AF], 55), *The Social History of an Indonesian Town, Peddlers and Princes*, and such essays as "Religion and Social Change," "Deep Play," and perhaps, but maybe not, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali,"<sup>1</sup> but certainly the later *Negara*. By the time we get to *After the Fact* and *Available Light* we are in the presence of an *ostad*, a master, of a very different kind of epistemology, one that plays deeply described cultures off against one another in a comparative epistemology, rather than a comparative realism, where as Geertz himself says, "One is faced with complex and contradictory fields of significative action, most of it tacit, across which assertion and denial, celebration and complaint, authority and resistance, continuously move." He is talking about comparing Indonesia and Morocco, and he continues, "When ingeniously juxtaposed, these fields can shed a certain amount of light on one another, but they are neither variants of one another nor expressions of some superfield that transcends them both" (AF, 49). I would call this *using the epistemological resources of one culture to critique and see anew into another culture*. In this example, Geertz is musing upon the lack of gender inflections in Javanese, and its minutely graded, hierarchical speech registers, in contrast to Moroccan Arabic, which "has gender inflections for just about every part of speech, but no status forms" (AF, 46). By so musing, he comes upon the insight—which he does not actually develop, though it would be fascinating to do so—that by looking at Moroccan politics with Javanese eyes (or grammars and speech modes), he is suddenly struck by the "persistent edge of seduction and resistance, flirtation and conquest . . . ranging from the understanding of sainthood to the metaphors of insult." Moroccan politics is a world of flirtation and seduction, "where rank and station are sexually charged."

Geertz in this most recent phase of his epistemological self-reflections speaks of this sort of comparative "method," or, since he eschews the term "method," artistic, even intuitive, skill, of these fields of "significative action, most of it tacit, across which assertion and denial, celebration and complaint, authority and resistance, continuously move"—as comparing incommensurables. Nonetheless, he concedes, it is "a useful enterprise, and when the stars are right, an informative one, however illogical."

Illogical? I would submit even in passing, that hermeneutics and performance are not illogical, either as method or as art, and that entertaining

work in the comparative critical apparatuses of local hermeneutics is both methodical and reasonable, and at least culturally logical.

Geertz's middle passage, where I suppose the contradictions of the Parsonian vision, came to accumulate so many anomalies that a paradigm shift was needed and was found in the Geisteswissenschaften of Dilthey, Weber, and Schutz, the counter-canon to which we were treated by Cliff in the 1960s. (We also found our way to Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*; to Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno; and to Paul Ricoeur, Kenneth Burke, Victor Turner, and Mircea Eliade who were important presences for my cohort at Chicago—and even, very sotto voce at Chicago, Claude Lévi-Strauss read as talmud rather than as machine, Marx read as a decipherer of symbolic hieroglyphics of suffering and meaning as well as a political economist and a Saul Alinsky organizer *avant la lettre*). This middle passage was the time of the essays of the *Interpretation of Culture*, essays that we as graduate students were enthralled by, and tried without comparable success to mimic in our various term papers, mimicking the vocabulary, the bons mots, the paradoxes and chiasmuses, and elegant turns of polished phrase: models of/models for, experience near/experience far, many, as with all good poets, borrowed from, and gaining resonance from, the sedimented metaphors in the language and epistemological threads of earlier practitioners, Dilthey's *Vorbildt* und *Nachbildt*, Kohut's experience near and experience far, Gilbert Ryle's thick description and public language routing the ghosts in the machine, Paul Ricoeur's social action leaving traces that could be read as texts, Jeremy Bentham's deep play, Alfred Schutz's consociates. The middle passage was ethnographic as well as epistemological: Morocco did not yield up the monographic ethnographic treatments that Indonesia did, though *Islam Observed*, and *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* had their brilliant insights and verbal pointillisms such as the much quoted image of the mental compartmentalization used by the modern Muslim of undecidable piety on the airplane with Scotch in one hand and the Koran for safety in the other.

This is the middle passage from cultural systems, the era of the hegemony of linguistic models: structural linguistics, generative grammars, cybernetics, paradigms, structuralisms, and the efforts to reformat phenomenology into more systemic modes whether in Sartre's effort to fuse existentialism and marxism or the socialization of perception through cultural forms, cockfights, calendars, tekonymic kinship namings, ethno-semantic, religion as a cultural system, models of/models for, common sense as a cultural system, art as a cultural system, ideology as a cultural

system. The middle passage is from these recursive, self-protective symbolic systems to interpretive modes of blurred genres, incommensurable fields of significant action, reading over one another's shoulders, and like a moiré flitting back and forth between narrative local worlds and world-historical ones, across which as well "assertion and denial, celebration and complaint, authority and resistance" continuously shift figure and ground, Gestalt and paradigm, appealing to undecidables and aporias, as when Geertz muses about the place of Islam in Indonesia, noting that in his several decades of observation its role has dramatically shifted several times—itsself a sociological and historical comparativist observation. His recent essay on Gus Dur Wahid shows that he remains a shrewd and incisive commentator on Indonesia. But about Islam's place he rather wishes to leave himself open to being "of many minds."

### PART THREE: ON THE TRAIL OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY TO COME

By way of conclusion, I would return our gaze to the three challenges of 1990s anthropology as sites of deep play, each providing its own slide show: (1) the reconstruction of society in the wake of obviously caused social trauma and structural violence—call this, title the slide, the move from cockfight to buzkashi; (2) the changes in science institutions from the 1960s to the 1990s—call this, title this slide, the move from Union Carbide in Bhopal (and Institute, West Virginia) to the demands of ACT UP and patient groups for accountability in the technologies of what is made to live and who is let die; and (3) the immersion in the telemedia—call this, title this slide, "War Again, 9/11, Qandahar, and the Autoimmune Cultural Toxicities of CNN and al-Jazeera."

#### 1. *From Cockfight to Buzkashi*

On September 31, 2001, General Amin Said Tariq of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was quoted in a *Boston Globe* headline: "It is time for the Americans to join the game," the Great Game of and for Central Asia, the game of buzkashi. American special forces were photographed astride Afghan steeds playing the game. Quite apart from one's political stand on just wars or effectiveness of global interventions, one wonders how we will play the buzkashi game with smart bombs, psycho-pharmacological uppers for long range flights, nanotechnologies for smart protective uniforms, smart mobile surgical rooms, and whether we have, and how good are our game plans to pick up the land mines, destroyed schools, water systems, battered bodies and minds. Like the cockfight for an earlier era of violence, this buzkashi focuses our atten-

tion today again on violence, bare life, and states of exception. Buzkashi becomes an icon for the shift from disciplinary societies to societies of control (those that depend less on territorial integrity than on statistics, flows, codes, networks, and standards, and which when attacked create new zones of indistinction).

#### 2. *From Union Carbide in Bhopal to the Demands of ACT UP and Patient Groups for Accountability*

The biopolitics of globalization are again at center stage, and at the center of these new ethical and political vortices are battles over the technosciences and biotechnologies themselves.

Cliff challenged us a few years ago to extend interpretivist approaches to the forms of life associated with "loose assemblages of differently focused, rather self-involved, and variably overlapping research communities in both the human and the natural sciences." He wrote: "Of all the sorts of work that go on under the general rubric of the human sciences, those that devote themselves to clarifying the forms of life lived out . . . in connection with linear accelerators, neuroendocrinological labs, the demonstration rooms of the Royal Society, astronomical observations, marine biology field stations, or the planning committees of NASA, are the least likely to conceive their task as limited to making out the inter-subjective worlds of persons. Machines, objects, tools, artifacts, instruments are too close at hand to be taken as external to what is going on; so much apparatus, free of meaning. These mere 'things' have to be incorporated into the story, and when they are the story takes on a heterocline form—human agents and nonhuman ones bound together in interpretivist narratives." After cautiously acknowledging the "ill-formed and variable, uncertain opening probes in an . . . ill-marked enquiry"—but I would say rapidly burgeoning field of science studies, (the anthropologies of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, Emily Martin, Rayna Rapp, Deborah Heath, and Karen-Sue Taussig, Steve Shapin and Simon Shafer, Sharon Traweek and Joe Dumit, Paul Rabinow and Lawrence Cohen, Kim and Mike Fortun, Adryana Petryna and Joao Biehl, Byron and Mary-Jo Good, Chris Kely and Hannah Landecker, Jennifer Mnookin, Heinrich Schwarz, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, Cory Hayden, Margaret Lock, Gary Downey, and many others, myself included)—he notes, "Sciences, physical, biological, human, or whatever, change not only in their content or their social impact (though they do, of course, do that . . .) but in their character as a form of life, a way of being in the world" (AF).

What I want to mark here is a set of double movements that Cliff

marked ahead on the trails of an anthropology to come, the double movement between lives and works, the coming inevitably onto the scene after the fact, *after the fact* in search of and *after the fact* belated, the world-historical narratives, such as they are (bracketed as Lyotard would say, or ironized with Geertzian caution), nonetheless world-historical narratives (political master stories of modernization, or of anti-colonialism, “those were the Bandung days,” “the days of May 1968”) bursting from time to time into local worlds, and at other times carrying those local worlds along with the spinning of the globe and the spinning of webs of significance and meaning, cosmic, scientific, metaphysical, and moral-ethical.

These doublings, hauntings, and phantasmagoria, tools of poesis, praxis, and gesture, mark out an anthropology to come, a justice to come, a community to come.

But the cockfights of science already are registered in rich accounts by scientists themselves and by observers of their forms of life: François Jacob’s much admired autobiography, much cited by scientists, provides an exemplary account of two trained roosters beak to beak in, as well, a metaphysical and cosmic competition with God:

Seminars, true rites of initiation, free-for-alls. . . . That day an American biochemist . . . The audience interrupted incessantly. . . . Chopping up his discourse with questions . . . badgering him, provoking him, nipping at his heels like excited puppies. . . . As for [Sol] Spiegelman, he was not easily confounded . . . he listened to comments and criticisms while playing with a piece of chalk in the fashion of a Hollywood gangster with a coin. . . . The deathblow came later in a cafe on the Boulevard Pasteur . . . the theory was dissected, torn apart, shredded into tiny pieces. Bit by bit, the bull weakened. A final thrust of [Jacques] Monod’s descabello. The bull’s final spasm. And resistance ceased. All this amidst laughter and joking. . . . *Two trained roosters beak to beak* vying with humor and sarcasm. . . . a will to power . . . a desire for intellectual domination . . . a world full of gaiety, of the unexpected, of curiosity, of imagination. A life animated as much by passion as by logic. Science meant for me the most elevating form of revolt against the incoherence of the universe. Man’s most powerful means of competing with God; of tirelessly rebuilding the world while taking account of reality. (Jacob 1988, 215)

There is a richness, a *jouissance*, a gamble with passion, in the sport of science, and also metaphysical depth, an agon with the mysteries of the universe and life, not just an aesthetic harmony or a pleasure in technical

skill. As the Polish-born physicist, from the spa town and Hassidic seat of Rymanov in Galicia, I. I. Rabi puts it:

Some of the young people I see, who are very good, take physics . . . as a system you can do things with, can calculate something with, and they miss . . . the mystery of it: how very different it is from what you can see, and how profound nature is. . . . There is no good translation of a *Witz*. It’s a joke or a trick. It’s the use of this kind of witty trick that I have always liked about physics. . . . I have always taken physics personally. . . . It’s between me and nature. (Rabi 1960)

This metaphysical depth is often folded—like a double helix—against cultural traditions, historical experiences, and community structures. Some of the productive tensions and synergistic reinterpretations between scientific rationalities (such as they are in a post-Ludwig Fleck, Tom Kuhn, Bruno Latour, and Peter Galison era) and Christian and Jewish traditions have been explored, but one wonders in today’s world why more has not been done with Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Islamic traditions that lie in the background of some of the world’s greatest scientists: Homi Bhabha, Vikram Sarabai, Ramanujan, Chandrasekar, Abdus Salam, Ghovind Khoranna, and now the Brahmin and Muslim creators of “the Hindu bomb”—Raj Ramana the classical pianist and explorer of resonances between Buddhist logic and high energy physics, and Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam, the current President of the Republic of India who justifies with good cockfight and game theory logic, “strength respects strength.”

Above all, the search for accountability has transformed the ways in which the institutions of science and the technosciences operate. Call it the transformation from big science and the national security state to science accountable to multiple constituents lest the complexity of the infrastructure become brittle and break down. The ethics of science—and the representations of science in both the epistemological (accuracy, reference, completeness) and political or stakeholders’ senses—are no longer marginal issues left up to the sensibility of the researcher or expert. Across the sciences these are becoming matters for institutional review, efforts at transparency, and negotiations between publics and researchers over the propriety of research that involves people and publics. As the world becomes more integrated and interactive, questions of how information is collected, packaged, and made available as part of social institutions of reflexive or second-order modernization (to use Ulrich