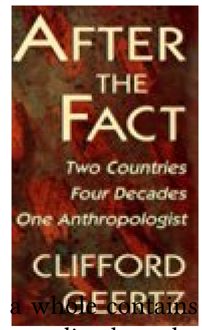
Clifford Geertz. *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades One Anthropologist.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. 198 pp. $22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00871-7.



Reviewed by Ken Jacobs (Universite de Montreal)
Published on H-Ideas (July, 1995)

For those habituated to Geertz's approach to anthropological narration, it will come as no surprise that this collection of a series of "Jerusalem- Harvard Lectures" is a wryly and deftly constructed travelogue. The itinerary – as suggested in the title– is temporally, spatially and personally ambitious, tracing the myriad shifts in Geertz's visions of his field locales, his career, and the enterprise called "anthropology" since 1952. In this book, all such shifts are ascribed, in mixed ways, both to obvious forces acting on global or regional scales and to more subtle changes in Geertz's own evolving ways of seeing (which, themselves, are not unrelated to the same geopolitical machinations but neither are they immediately reducible to them.)

Nor will it come as a shock to those familiar with Geertz's work that his rhetorical tone swings, often in mid-thought, between an apparently cool (one is tempted to say "objective") detachment and an informed sardonic wit more typically associated with such "innocents" abroad as Mark Twain, Paul Theroux or, for more recent converts to the genre, P.J. O'Rourke. Moreover, this latter tone is not reserved solely for those "others" encountered "out there." A fair share of anthropologists and their scrivenings are given capsule and, not infrequently, mordant reviews. Michel Foucault's "rhetorical tower," for example, reduces in the Geertzian view to a series of toyings with such ironies as anyone with a lick of sense might discern from a close reading of the OED's 21 definitions of the word "discipline."

The book itself, however, is divided into six chapters ("Towns," "Countries," "Cultures," "Hegemonies," "Disciplines," and "Modernities"). Such a taxonomy actually implies a greater thematic subdivision and a more linear flow of conceptual development in the book than in fact is present. It is true that the book as a whole contains abundant recollections and reflections regarding how the "upper," "lower" and emergent "middle" strata of society have been transformed –or not– in the political, economic, religious and social changes which attended the shifts of Indonesia and Morocco from colonial dependencies into whatever they are now. Geertz himself refrains from trying to attach any handy label onto these "postcolonial, pre- postmodern" entities and, in an age dominated by categories drifting out as much from the cloisters of the IMF as from the ivory towers of pith-helmeted academe, he thereby engages the reader from the start in the process of trying to figure out "just where does all this fit? "

Thus there is an ample amount for the casual reader of "simple observations" of the goings-on in two very volatile places, during very volatile times in their histories, as seen by a single observer. But instead of merely recounting the changes or stases seen in each place, Geertz's long- standing field locales of Pare (Indonesia) and Sefrou (Morocco) serve almost as eyelets in a pair of well-worn sneakers, to which he repeatedly returns to assess the fit of new threads of thought which, over the years, have come to preoccupy his mind. This, of course, generally is why one reads Geertz, for his strategy, applied in this book and indeed throughout his own career is to force a return –time and again– to the same (?) places, each time seeing them in a slightly different fashion.

This strategy becomes most explicit some two thirds of the way through the book, when Geertz bemoans anthropology's hypochondria– its recurrrent self- diagnosis of being always, somehow, "in crisis." His solution (p.98) is to stop seeing anthropology in the manner of "linguistics or entomology, as the study of something or other, [seeing it instead] as a loose collection of intellectual careers." His point here is of course that social/cultural anthropology comprises, at any one point in time, the accumulated casual observations, "thick descriptions" and other opinions of those who are designated by their peers or others as "anthropologists," a congeries of individuals whose careers possess their own trajectories –often shaped by whim, dumb luck and good timing. And that these nearly randomly concocted trajectories in turn produce what comes to be seen as "their" opus.

Yet Geertz's persistent re-reading of his own prior views –placing them in the contexts of the University or other institutional affiliations which both enabled and constrained them– provides elegant testimony to the fact that "a loose collection of intellectual careers" may describe as aptly the life-path of an individual anthropological scholar as it typifies the discipline itself. What is more, as witness this book, the insights gained by being aware of and attempting to make sense of "why one thought *that* while being *there* at *that* point in time," can be stimulating and productive. This is not the mere "navel gazing" into which too much ethnography recently has devolved. This is a serious attempt by an erudite scholar to assess the variegated paths by which we come to think that which we profess.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas

Citation: Ken Jacobs. Review of Geertz, Clifford, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades One Anthropologist.* H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. July, 1995.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=104