

David E. Apter

on Clifford Geertz

My association with Cliff goes back to when we were both students at Antioch College. He was a fidgety, scratchy, given-to-mumbling sort of guy, in no way prepossessing although I knew on

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first exchange that he was no ordinary student. Not that he was given over much to casual conversation, even in that high academic moment known as the Veteran Generation, when student discussions (or better, arguments), usually about politics, were pretty much the order of the day. Cliff tended not to get involved, but if drawn in he invariably delivered some uncommon insight, often in the form of a quick retort followed by silence – a silence that some of us took as a reproach or embarrassment, as if our commentary fell short in some way. I remember in particular one heated and very undergraduate discussion over whether values were objective or relative. Cliff put an end to the conversation by saying that the only way to affirm a value is in terms of another value. It was the kind of oracular pronouncement that could put some people off.

We had a number of common bonds – for one, a miserable childhood. I was a high school dropout. Cliff grew up effectively without family – farmed out to a family in Santa Rosa who treated him badly. He discovered how bright he was more or less by chance, when he took the Navy V-12 examinations during the war and knocked the top off them. A former high school teacher suggested Antioch. It was an inspired choice: there, a good deal of learning was by doing. And there, we both got married, to women who fully shared our professional and academic lives.

At first he intended to major in English. He did a stint as editor of *The Antiochian*, the student literary journal (which had the foresight to publish a piece by fellow student Rod Serling). He then shifted to philosophy, coming under the wing of George Geiger, a convincing Deweyite who proctored Cliff intellectually and helped persuade him to go to Harvard in Social Relations.

Among the looming intellectual influences of that day was, of course, Talcott Parsons. Cliff studied with him at Harvard, even though he found the rigidity of structural functionalism off-putting. While Cliff's proclivities were always more or less phenomenological, he was right to say, "We are all parsnips now." What comes through in two memoirs (meditations, really, with their marvelous titles), *After the Fact* (1995) and *Available Light* (2000), is a profoundly aesthetic sense of intellectual design and a career of serendipitous encounters.

After we graduated, our paths continued to cross although my field was political science and his anthropology. We were fascinated by the multiple transitions taking place in the so-called developing world: colonialism to independence, traditional to modernist cultures, political systems under duress, nationalism, and how they all affected opportunities for civility and institutional democracy. We tried to make sense of the entangled and entangling networks, the webs of meaning and organization, that such transitions entailed.

Moreover, we were not just hothouse academics but field workers as well, he in Indonesia and Morocco and I in Africa and elsewhere. Cliff never hesitated at disciplinary boundaries (indeed, I believe he once entertained the notion of doing an anthropological study of the disciplines as savage tribes). Rather, his was an extraordinary capacity to combine the philosophical, the hermeneutical, the empirical, the structural, and the linguistic, converting their theoretical abstruseness into a coherence that reappeared as common sense. His writing was always direct and elegant – with a style and clarity of thought that made for wide appeal in many scholarly fields.

From 1958 to 1959 we both had fellowships at the Center for Advanced Study

in the Behavioral Sciences. It was an extraordinary year. Among the fellows were W. V. Quine, Tom Kuhn (who was writing *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), Tom Fallers, Roman Jacobson, Meyer Fortes, Fred Egan, Edward Shils, Morris Janowitz, and many others of similar caliber. Cliff and Tom were on leave from Berkeley, Shils and I from the University of Chicago.

It was at the Center that we got the idea of establishing an interdisciplinary group at Chicago to study new nations; the intense intellectual atmosphere there at the time made it the perfect venue. We made Shils the director, and Cliff agreed to come, as did Fallers and Janowitz. Our first year of full activity was 1961. It was Cliff who edited our first collective effort, *Old Societies and New States* (1963). His article in that book, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States" can only be described as prescient, with its emphasis on what was later referred to as identity politics and the ways in which development exacerbated rather than mediated ethnic, religious, and linguistic claims to loyalty and jurisdiction.

Virtually all the comparative problems discussed in the committee – on law, civil society, identity, development, education, institution building, corruption, the role of the military, and democracy itself – are as relevant today as they were when the Committee began its work. Nor, despite all the work done since then, have our knowledge and understanding of such matters progressed much beyond what we knew in those days. We all had knowledge of certain cases in depth and combined such knowledge with broad comparative and theoretical interests. It was that combination by members from all the social-science disciplines as well as law that

Clifford
Geertz

gave the Committee its special intellectual bite. When I left Chicago for Berkeley, Cliff took over as Executive Secretary, and the Committee continued its work for many years until, one might say, the new nations stopped being new.

My own relationship with Cliff lasted for exactly sixty years. During those years Cliff was the most intellectually stimulating figure I knew. I was instrumental to his career twice: first in bringing him to Chicago, and second in being one of several who nominated him for the first social-science post at the Institute for Advanced Study. He was, in my judgment, the first among social scientists. Over the years, he developed a marvelous sense of public humor, too. In a phone conversation a few weeks before he died, he said, "You know, a lot of people are dying now who never died before." Perhaps it was his way of saying goodbye.