

## Paul Ricœur and Clifford Geertz

### The Harmonic Dialogue between Philosophical Hermeneutics and Cultural Anthropology

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#### Abstract

Human experience has a symbolic structure. By focusing on the symbolism of human action, this essay considers the reciprocal influences and the essential differences between Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics and Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology. Through reference to Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, the section on "Ideology, Utopia, and Politics" in *From Text to Action*, and Geertz's 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, this paper aims at reconstructing the dialogue between these thinkers. I begin with a broad framing of the encounter between Ricœur and Geertz, and then turn to the notion of the symbolic mediation of action, considering it as the shared key concept between these authors. These reflections will lead to an examination of the semiotic conception of culture, opening up the discussion of a nonpejorative dimension of ideology.

*Keywords:* Symbolic Action; Culture; Ideology; Hermeneutics; Anthropology.

#### Résumé

L'expérience humaine a un caractère symbolique. En focalisant l'attention sur le symbolisme de l'action humaine, cet essai porte sur les influences réciproques et sur les différences essentielles entre l'herméneutique de Paul Ricœur et l'anthropologie culturelle de Clifford Geertz. En se référant à l'œuvre de Ricœur *L'idéologie et l'utopie*, à la section "Idéologie, utopie, politique" dans *Du texte à l'action*, et au travail de Geertz publié en 1973 intitulé *The Interpretation of Cultures*, cet article vise à reconstruire le dialogue entre ces penseurs. En premier lieu, je présenterai le contexte général de la rencontre entre la pensée de Ricœur et celle de Geertz et, en second lieu, j'analyserai la notion de médiation symbolique de l'action, en reconnaissant en celle-ci le concept clé partagé par les auteurs. Ces réflexions nous conduiront à examiner la conception sémiotique de la culture et à ouvrir la discussion sur la dimension non-péjorative de l'idéologie.

*Mots-clés:* Action Symbolique; Culture; Idéologie; Herméneutique; Anthropologie.

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### Introduction

Paul Ricœur undoubtedly leaves a signature in the field of the human and social studies.\* His ongoing dialogue with the human and social sciences is dispersed throughout the length of his philosophy. The relationship between his thought and these disciplines is not accidental, instead it represents a constitutive part of his philosophical anthropology, one that still offers many untapped resources.<sup>1</sup> Even though not many of Ricœur's works are addressed directly to the human and social sciences, the French author contributes to the study of social phenomena in many ways. The fertile intellectual interconnection between his philosophy and the human and social studies enables the theoretical redeployment of the problems of these latter in a renovated relation with contemporary philosophical perspectives. Diving into different fields of knowledge does not imply for Ricœur to reduce them to a philosophical logos, but to analyze them through a critical philosophical approach.

Ricœur's relevance for the human and social sciences cannot easily be easily exhausted. It is through the formulation of his hermeneutical phenomenology that the author inaugurates his dialogue with these disciplines, trying at once to re-theorize them from within and to challenge them from the outside. His dialogue with the human and social sciences arises as a positive conversation, essentially interdisciplinary, moved by the methodological and epistemological questions concerning the foundation of a valid scientific knowledge for social, political, cultural and historical reality. Specifically, Ricœur's aim is to justify the possibility of a scientific knowledge for the humanities and social sciences, namely, a methodological, systematic, and rigorous knowledge, which contemplates the specificity of the human being as a finite, historical, and social being. Against all minimization of the human element in human and social disciplines, the search for objectivity, which is defined in the epistemological sense as "a work of methodological activity,"<sup>2</sup> must include subjective elements. Thus, the human being's meditative reflection calls into question the legitimacy of an objective explanation of the human and social framework without avoiding the importance of the subjective aspects of knowing. Scientific objectivity is pursued in the broader human and social sciences in their effort to understand human beings' views and meanings in the spatial and temporal dimensions. In short, Ricœur does not object to "objective explanation" per se, but to objective explanation that does not incorporate qualitative factors of human meaning.

My intention here is not to explain the way Ricœur develops his own reflection on the methodology and the epistemology of the human and social sciences in his works. Rather, the purpose of this essay is more specific. The aim is to draw out the strong reciprocal influence between Ricœur's thought and the human and social sciences by focusing on the analysis of his engagement with Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology. Indeed, this dialogue is one of the major contributions of Ricœur's confrontation with humanities and social sciences as a mutually enriching exchange of founding and ideas, based on shared research interests and concepts. Just as Ricœur draws upon Geertz, the American anthropologist also draws upon Ricœur in order to delineate the features of his interpretive cultural anthropology. Both Ricœur and Geertz claim that an appropriate, qualitative social science offers objectivity and valid scientific knowledge in a non-positivist sense of the term. Part of the significance of Ricœur's and Geertz's works is the claim that qualitative factors can be known through external, objective signs.

Through reference to Ricœur's 1975 lecture on Geertz published in the work *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*,<sup>3</sup> the section on "Ideology, Utopia, and Politics" in *From Text to Action*,<sup>4</sup> and Geertz's masterpiece *The Interpretation of Cultures*,<sup>5</sup> my article examines the recognition of the symbolic structure of social actions, the semiotic explanation of culture and the notion of integrative ideology as common interrelated themes shared by these authors. I begin with a broad framing of Ricœur's and Geertz's reciprocal influence. Then, I will focus the attention on the symbolic mediation of action, showing some extensions of this topic in Ricœur's work. Particular attention will be given to the hermeneutic question of figuration. These reflections will lead to discuss the semiotic perspective of culture. Finally, I will examine the integrative function of ideology in the structuring of the social imaginary.

## Ricœur and Geertz: Setting up the Context of a Mutually Enriching Encounter

Ricœur's thought is a complex and coherent philosophical anthropology characterized by a constant concern about human agency, whether through the methodology of reflexive philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalytic theory, narrative, ethics and politics.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise put, the question of being able and not being able, that is, of the capable and suffering being, is the ultimate purpose of his philosophical reflection which is developed as a unity in diversity, for example, as a discordant concordance of methodological practices, interrelated themes, and interdisciplinary debates. As Ricœur affirms in his 2003 interview with his faithful scholar and friend Richard Kearney,

the ultimate purpose of hermeneutic reflection and attestation, as I see it, is to try to retrace the line of intentional capacity and action behind mere objects (which we tend to focus on exclusively in our natural attitude) so that we may recover the hidden truth of our operative acts, of *being capable*, of being *un homme capable* [...] My bottom line is a phenomenology of being able.<sup>7</sup>

Although both scholars, who were personally acquainted with the French philosopher, and young researchers, that have found in his work a great inspiration and source of guidance in their projects, have recognized the anthropology of the capable human being as the underling thematic unity in Ricœur's thought, not sufficient attention has been paid to the question of the situatedness of the

acting self in constituted cultural contexts. Yet, as Timo Helenius notes, “explicit questions of the concept of culture as well as the question of cultural recognition have largely been neglected.”<sup>8</sup> More exactly, we can observe that even if Ricœur’s relation to cultural anthropology has recently attracted much attention from philosophers and social scientists,<sup>9</sup> the cultural anthropological aspect of his thought has not been systematically discussed. What has not been sufficiently explored, I think, is the precise way in which Ricœur’s philosophical investigation on the cultural dimension of human life is an extension of the phenomenological premise of the embodied condition of human being as corporally situated in the social realm subtended by its history. Considering the human body as the basic medium of our being in the world, that is, as a primary social structure and source of all values (organic, social, cultural, etc.), already in his early phenomenology Ricœur invites us to think ourselves as “beings-in-the-common-world, only by reason of our incarnate existence.”<sup>10</sup> Ricœur’s interest in cultural anthropology arises in his phenomenology and most prominently in *The Symbolism of Evil* in which he explicitly affirms to trust in a philosophy that, in order to study the world’s cultural wealth of symbols,

finds man already settled, with a preliminary title, within its foundation. His being there may appear contingent and restricted [...] But, beginning from this contingency a restrictedness of a culture that has his upon these symbols rather than others, philosophy endeavors, through reflection and speculation, to disclose the rationality of its foundation.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically, throughout the development of his complex philosophical anthropology Ricœur focuses on the question of situating the human subject, moving from a phenomenological approach of the human being’s embodied condition in the world to the hermeneutical analysis of the meaning-giving conditions and contexts that provide the possibility for self-understanding.

Ricœur’s interest in cultural anthropology, the meaning of culture, and cultural symbols, is made explicit in his lecture on Clifford Geertz published in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*. This book consists of eighteen chapters originating from nineteen course lectures on social and cultural imagination held by Ricœur at The University of Chicago in the fall of 1975. These lectures were brought together in a book in collaboration with Ricœur thanks to the work of George Taylor, who carefully reconstructed their content from tapes and notes. In his excellent editor’s introduction, Taylor points out that “the larger project to which the lectures belong is best characterized not simply as philosophic but as a *philosophical anthropology*.”<sup>12</sup> More precisely, the philosophical anthropology at work in Ricœur’s *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, is focused on the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the human imagination. It is in this context that we can find Ricœur’s richest contribution to the articulation of a general theory of culture grounded on philosophical anthropology and orientated by the analysis of practical life and social actions. This philosophical anthropology is attentive to the meaning of collective and social life understood through the language of praxis, emerging from the examination of the ideological imaginary and culminating with the discussion of Geertz’s anthropological work. At the time, Geertz was a quite famous American anthropologist, whose fieldwork led him to Indonesia and Morocco. In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricœur draws from Geertz’s 1973 book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, and in particular from two essays in that collection. The first, “Ideology as Cultural System,” was originally published in 1964, and it is the essay on which Ricœur principally relies in his chapter on Geertz. The second essay that Ricœur cites is entitled “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” and its initial publication was in Geertz’s 1973 book. What is

interesting is that if Ricœur found benefit in the *Lectures* in Geertz's 1964 article on ideology, in the 1973 article it is Geertz who is reliant on Ricœur through his emphasis on the textuality of human action. Geertz clearly comments that the "whole idea of the inscription of action is borrowed and somewhat twisted from Ricœur."<sup>13</sup> The American anthropologist cites Ricœur's 1971 article "The Model of the Text," later included in *From Text to Action* (1989). He agrees with the French author in affirming that what writing fixes is:

not the event of speaking, but the 'said' of speaking, where we understand by the 'said' of speaking that intentional exteriorization constitutive of the aim of discourse thanks to which the *sagen*, the saying, wants to become *Aus-sage*, the enunciation, the enunciated. In short, what we write, what we inscribe, is the noema of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event.<sup>14</sup>

Although Ricœur cites Geertz's 1973 article in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, his characteristic modesty and reticence lead him to refrain from noting Geertz's reliance on his own work. As with other profound intellectual exchanges that have accompanied the development of his philosophy, Ricœur's characteristic humility is heightened in his confrontation with Geertz's thought. Geertz returns to Ricœur also in other parts of his work. In a footnote of the essay entitled "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,"<sup>15</sup> he quotes Ricœur's *Freud and Philosophy*.<sup>16</sup> Geertz cites the French philosopher for freeing the notion of text "from the notion of scripture or writing"<sup>17</sup> and thereby contributing to the construction of a general hermeneutics. A page later, Geertz stresses that, so far as anthropology is concerned, the idea of "cultural forms can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social materials, has yet to be systematically exploited."<sup>18</sup> Ricœur's work, including the *Lectures*, does just that. In a nutshell, Ricœur and Geertz share the conviction that human actions have a symbolic structure and are inscribed in the context of the socio-cultural lifeworld. They both think that human actions can be read and interpreted like written works through the methods and practices of textual interpretation. Let us now look more closely at the way in which these authors understand the notion of symbolic mediation of action, which is a key term in Ricœur's thought.

### Symbolic Action or Symbolic Mediation of Action? From the Symbolization of Experience to Figuration

As I have intimated, when we turn more closely to Ricœur's intellectual confrontation with Geertz, we are inevitably confronted with the genesis of their discussion of symbolic action. It is well known that Ricœur's aim in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* is to show that there is an interconnection between the world of human action, or praxis, and ideology. As Suzi Adams puts it, the point of Ricœur's lecture on Geertz is "to emphasize the way in which symbolic systems mediate action, and this conclusively to demonstrate that ideology and praxis are not opposed but rather that ideology in its integrative aspect is the ground of praxis."<sup>19</sup> In order to understand the relation between human actions and the integrative aspect of ideology, we have to carefully examine first the notion of symbolic action and later the concept of culture as a symbolic process. As Ricœur observes,<sup>20</sup> Geertz borrows the term "symbolic action" from literary theorist Kenneth

Burke, for whom language itself was the form of symbolic action, not actual action, but action in a symbolic form.<sup>21</sup> Thus, real action is replaced by signs. Ricœur specifies:

It seems that what Geertz borrows is more than the actual concept, because in the book of Burke's that Geertz cites for this notion, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, symbolic action appears to have a different meaning than it does for Geertz. Burke says that language in fact is symbolic action. Geertz's point, though, is that the action is symbolic just like language.<sup>22</sup>

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur explicitly states in a footnote to this text that he owes to Geertz "the concept of mediated symbolic action"<sup>23</sup> used in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986) and in the section on "Ideology, Utopia, and Politics" in *From Text to Action* (1991). According to Geertz, all action is coded since it has reference to a complex and multifarious shared system of symbols, which might require translation and explanation. Human actions draw their meanings from the history, values, and conceptions characterizing a community. Geertz's conception of symbolic action is linked to what he calls "thick description,"<sup>24</sup> that is, to the interpretive task of ethnography focused on the meaning of the behavior of the actors involved. What ethnography aims to discover is the underlying meaning of social behavior, that is, the deep structure of culture and social life. Thus, for Geertz, ethnography does not only have to describe culture, but to interpret it. He illustrates, then, the distinction between "thin" and "thick" description by borrowing an example from the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Imagine someone rapidly contracting his or her right eyelids. Whereas thin analysis describes the fact that someone is blinking his or her eyelids, thick description does not rest at this descriptive level, but attempts to ascertain what the blinking might mean: "practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a blink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy in motion."<sup>25</sup> More precisely, if for thin description the blinking might be indifferently a wink or a twitch, for thick description the wink and the twitch are essentially different. The wink is interpreted as a deliberate mode of communication, while the twitch has no intended secondary meaning. The wink is, then, a symbol because its meaning stands for something other than simply the blinking of eyelids. Multiple levels of meaning are at work and need to be ascertained. Only a critical interpretation of the wider context, namely of the situation in which the action happens and the behavior that preceded it, allows a proper thick description. Geertz's understanding of thick description as interpretive practice is well explained in the closing essay of *The Interpretation of Culture* entitled "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight."<sup>26</sup> According to him, the cockfight is a symbolic event; it is a cultural form or text that requires to be interpreted in order to understand the Balinese society. Through a detailed description of the cockfight, Geertz presents a commentary of the Balinese village life. More precisely, the thick description of the Balinese cockfight shows "a Balinese reading of a Balinese experience," which remains open also to further interpretation. Agreeing with Geertz, Ricœur arguments against the very idea of "brute action" and focuses on the fundamental and inescapable ways in which human practical field is always symbolically mediated. Ricœur clearly argues that "there is no human action unless it has already been articulated, mediated, and interpreted by symbols."<sup>27</sup> This claim is valid for social actions, but also for elementary actions, insofar as human being as singular agent can confer meaning to them. Briefly stated, except when the blink of an eye is considered just a common physiological condition, we never have simply the physical action without its symbolic meaning. Geertz's analysis of the symbolic character of human action is

similar in type to Ricœur's example of someone raising his or her arms. As Ricœur observes, this gesture might be considered "as a greeting, a prayer, hailing a taxi and so on."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, raising one's arm is not merely a physical motion, as we do not understand the act unless we recognize its aim and contextual setting. In conclusion, this conception of "thick description" situates the broad common intellectual framework that Geertz and Ricœur share.

Like Geertz, Ricœur endorses the application of literary theory to understand how symbols work in human action. Thus, he again approvingly quotes Geertz that "with no notion of how metaphor, analogy, irony, ambiguity, pun, paradox, hyperbole, rhythm, and all the other elements of what we lamely call 'style' operate,"<sup>29</sup> we do not have the resources to rightly understand how the symbolism of human action occurs, including "the import of ideological assertions."<sup>30</sup> Ricœur considers Geertz's attention to these stylistic devices and the "possibility of comparing an ideology with the rhetorical devices of discourse,"<sup>31</sup> the most significant aspect of Geertz's essay "Ideology as Cultural System." Through the evocation of these rhetorical measures, which have been long studied in literature, it is possible to develop more precise articulations not only of the symbolic mediation of action more generally, but of its specific kind of operation. In other words, rhetorical devices assist human being in comprehending the symbolically mediated action of real life and not merely the symbolic action of literature. Symbolic mediation is essential to both social action and language. Therefore, the interpretation of literary texts always offers a primary link to the world of social action. Part of the essential lesson is that these rhetorical tools are not imposed from afar on real life, but rather they are intrinsic to how human action operates.

However, Ricœur criticizes Geertz's perspective for considering symbolic mediation as extrinsic.<sup>32</sup> Geertz calls the symbol "extrinsic," in contrast to genetic codes which are instead "intrinsic" to our biology. By acknowledging the dichotomy between the biological-genetic and the socio-cultural models, the American anthropologist forwards the idea that system of symbols or culture patterns, constitute "extrinsic sources of information."<sup>33</sup> Extrinsic symbols "lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism as such in that intersubjective world of common understanding into which all human individuals are born."<sup>34</sup> They provide also "a blueprint or template in terms of which processes external to themselves can be given a definite form."<sup>35</sup> Ricœur accuses Geertz for utilizing "the doubtful concept of an extrinsic symbol, in the sense of an extrinsic theory of symbolic systems."<sup>36</sup> In other words, according to Ricœur, we cannot say that there is physical action and then symbolism is added to it. The insight here is quite profound: the action is symbolic from the start, that is, symbolism is inherent to and incorporated in the action from the beginning. Contrary to Geertz's perspective, Ricœur wants to attend the symbolism of human action itself, preferring the terms of "symbolic mediation of action" or the "symbolic structure of action" to that of "symbolic action." Let me explain this point further. On the one hand, while epitomizing the inextricable symbolic mediation of actions, their meaningful structures and temporal character, Ricœur agrees with Geertz in applying Burke's insight to human action. On the other hand, Ricœur undoubtedly resists the vocabulary of symbolic action. As he observes, Geertz has simply bypassed how symbols symbolize, that is, how symbols function to mediate meanings.<sup>37</sup> I, for one, believe that it would be wrong to affirm that Geertz may have misread or misunderstood Ricœur. Rather, even if Geertz does not state explicitly in his works that his own perspective on symbolic action is a modified appropriation of Ricœur's thought, I think that the language used by the American anthropologist should be considered in light of a revised endorsement of the notion of symbolic action.

Ricœur's notion of symbolic mediation of action can be better understood if we relate it to a larger part of his thought. There is, indeed, a strong continuity between the themes that announce themselves in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, such as the analysis of the concept of symbolic action and the related topic of productive imagination, and Ricœur's work on metaphor and narrative. It is profitable, then, to read Ricœur's reflection on symbolic mediation of action and the expansion of this theme in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* against the backdrop of his whole philosophical oeuvre. Following Ricœur's line of reasoning, human action may be considered as analogous to a text, in the sense that human action might have and receive its own language. The symbolic mediation of action is part of this language. The symbolic devices just mentioned above illustrate the linguistic character of action. Hermeneutics interprets not simply written texts but the texts of action. Specifically, in Ricœur's thought the symbolic mediation of action is extended from his attention to the creative capacity of language and for acting to the narrative theory. If, on the one hand, Ricœur stresses that "*The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative* form a pair,"<sup>38</sup> highlighting the continuity between these two works, on the other hand, the use of the notion of figuration implies a change of method from his earlier work on metaphor in which the central concept was that of reference. More precisely, closely related to Ricœur's vocabulary of the symbolic structuring of human action, the issue of figuration in the three moments of mimetic circle, i.e., pre-figuration, con-figuration, and re-figuration, occurs in *Time and Narrative*. As George Taylor points out, in *Time and Narrative* Ricœur aims at subordinating "the Fregean question of the theory of (empirical) knowledge represented by the term 'reference' to the hermeneutic question of figuration."<sup>39</sup> In Ricœur's analysis of the human capacity to narrate the notion of symbolic action is incorporated into the threefold process of mimesis or "narrative arc,"<sup>40</sup> divided into prefiguration (mimesis I), configuration (mimesis II), and refiguration (mimesis III). Whereas the notion of reference, included that of productive reference used in the *Lectures*, gives attention only to empirical object in reality, the concept of figuration is not limited to the empirical sphere, but "allows an interplay between the 'real' and the 'unreal' that lies at the heart of productive imagination's creativity."<sup>41</sup> In Ricœur's theory of narrative, symbolic mediation of action is representative of figuration. More precisely, it is in his few pages on prefiguration that he returns to and extended his prior work on the symbolic mediation of action. Human action can be narrated because it is always articulated by signs, rules, and norms on a socio-historical level. Action becomes culturally mediated through symbols, that is, it acquires a collectively shared meaning. It is through the belonging to a structured symbolic system that actions have a context and are readable. This means that the symbolic does not lie in the mind. Symbols are not intended as psychological operations and their meaning is "incorporated into action and decipherable from by other actors in the social interplay."<sup>42</sup> Actions are symbolically implicated from the start, they are never immediate or raw, but always symbolized and re-symbolized.<sup>43</sup> Briefly stated, actions are always figured. The narrative beginning in figuration re-emphasizes the fact that human beings do not begin with the literal, but within a figured semiotic and signed world that needs interpretation and re-interpretation.

## The Semiotic Concept of Culture

As we have just seen, symbolic actions are culturally mediated through symbols. There is, as a result, a strong connection between symbolic actions, understood as actions that need to be interpreted, read and deciphered in order to be understood, and culture as a system of shared symbols and meanings. Thus, the notion of symbolic action leads us to question that of cultural-symbolic mediation and its relevance to cultural anthropology. According to Ricœur and Geertz, people are joined together through symbolic actions in cultural contexts. It is, then, through the sharing of public symbols such as values, mores, and orientations, that cultural collective identity can be constituted. By refusing the ideational notion of culture, these authors explain that the cultural sphere is something socially developed. In other terms, culture is conceived as “socially established structures of meaning.”<sup>44</sup> According to Geertz, symbols are expressive vehicles for conceptions and their combination form a cultural text. Thus, culture is compared to a social semantic and to the interpretation of a collective text. The semiotic concept of culture implies the hermeneutical concept of text as it is developed in Ricœur’s philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>45</sup> Drawing on the writings of Ricœur and reacting against the cultural materialism, Geertz emphasizes on culture as texts. As he declares, “the concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one.”<sup>46</sup> Culture “is not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”<sup>47</sup> Since culture is understood as a semiotic process in which the concept of symbolic action is central, cultural interpretation is like textual interpretation. As Geertz claims,

as interwoven systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed: it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described.<sup>48</sup>

The understanding of culture as semiotic does not mean, then, to reduce culture to the fact that it is made of words. For both Geertz and Ricœur, culture is not exclusively linguistic. Rather, culture includes other symbolic aspects such as images, music, formal symbols like logic and math, etc. More simply, culture is a con-text within which human actions can be intelligibly interpreted. Geertz refers explicitly to Ricœur proposing to use the hermeneutic approach to the cultural analysis. Cultural anthropology becomes, then, a reflexive discipline. The access to a different cultural heritage requires at once the direct contact with it and the interpretative comprehension of the system of meanings that characterize the social life of the group at stake. The ethnographer must follow a dialectical movement between distanciation and appropriation, contestation and re-description, towards the understanding of a belonging into the distance.

Ricœur argues that Geertz follows Marx Weber in believing that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”<sup>49</sup> Agreeing with Geertz, Ricœur reacts against a vision of culture as understood simply on the basis of causal and structural law. As Geertz, Ricœur focuses on the ascription of human meaning. If we recall Ricœur’s differentiation between explanation and understanding,<sup>50</sup> both thinkers want to reject the reduction of human action to sociological or anthropological explanation. As Ricœur argues, there is not an undialectical opposition between explanation and understanding, rather “understanding precedes accompanies, closes, and thus envelops explanation. In return explanation develops understanding

analytically.”<sup>51</sup> However, the valences of understanding in the two thinkers are different: whereas Geertz is attentive in cultural meaning, Ricœur’s concern is ultimately more existential. Indeed, according to Ricœur, the function of hermeneutics is “to make the understanding of the other – and of his signs in various cultures – coincide with the understanding of the self and of being.”<sup>52</sup> As he puts it, “the most fundamental phenomenological presupposition of a philosophy of interpretation is that every question concerning any sort of ‘being’ is a question about the meaning of that ‘being’.”<sup>53</sup> Ricœur’s hermeneutics and Geertz’s cultural anthropology are fundamentally oriented not just to the uncovering of textual or cultural meaning, but of human being’s meaning. Ricœur’s and Geertz’s insistence on the relevance of understanding, leads them to epitomize the importance to preserve the qualitative nature of human meaning from its reduction to causality and quantification.

### The Tensional Structure of Ideology

The fundamentally symbolic structure of human existence, whose centrality to Ricœur and Geertz we have just remarked, can be undoubtedly considered as the broader framework in which these authors inscribe their analyses of ideology. More precisely, Ricœur’s and Geertz’s conjoined attention to human meaning is fundamental to their interest in the concept of ideology, particularly at its integrative level. Ideology as integration allows for a non-pejorative dimension of ideology. Specifically, Ricœur’s 1975 lecture on Geertz develops an analysis on the notion of ideology following Geertz’s idea that ideology derives from a culture in which there is the production of a set of psychologically satisfying symbols that bring order to the world by providing a mechanism through which members can act and understand it. Within this semiotic methodological framework, ideology is conceived as an integrated structure of interrelated meanings. Starting from the inquiry on the symbolic mediation of reality and the semiotic concept of culture, Ricœur describes the third level of ideology: integrative ideology. Specifically, Ricœur defines three levels of ideology by drawing on Marx, Weber, and Geertz, claiming that on the third and deepest level ideology has a mediating integrative role in the social realm. More exactly, these three levels of ideology are: (1) distortion, (2) legitimation, and (3) identity formation. All levels are comprehensible only on the basis of the symbolic mediation or structure of action as “absolutely primitive and ineluctable.”<sup>54</sup> Otherwise put, it is only because the action is symbolic that it can be distorted, legitimated, or contribute to identity formation. Let us focus here on the third level as the crucial point of Ricœur’s highly significant reading of Geertz. As group knowledge and systems of belief, ideology provides justification for the existing social reality and introduces conceptual boundaries that play an integrative role. Agreeing with Geertz, Ricœur criticizes other common theories of ideology: ideology as the representation of dominant interests and ideology as the product of certain socio-psychological strains.<sup>55</sup> Geertz stresses that the interest theory of ideology is “too rudimental to cope with the complexity of the interaction among social, psychological, and cultural factors it itself uncovered.”<sup>56</sup> The case is similar when Geertz argues that the weakness of the strain theory

[is] the virtual absence [...] of anything more than the most rudimentary conception of the processes of symbolic formulation [...] [leading to the conclusion that] the link between the

causes of ideology and its effects seems to be adventitious as the connective element [...] is passed over in virtual silence.<sup>57</sup>

As Ricœur points out, for Geertz such theories do not understand “how the release of a strain becomes a symbol or how an interest is expressed in an idea.”<sup>58</sup> According to Geertz, the understanding of how do interest become expressed arises from the analysis of “how symbols symbolize, how they function to mediate meaning.”<sup>59</sup> He argues further that the import of ideological assertion cannot be construed “with no notion of how metaphor, analogy, irony, ambiguity, pun, paradox, hyperbole, rhythm, and all other elements of what we lamely call style operate [...] in casting personal attitudes into public form.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, the analysis of ideology must be supported by the part of semiology that deals with figures of speech and by tropology, studying the “rhetorical devices that are not necessarily intended to deceive either oneself or others.”<sup>61</sup> As Ricœur clarifies, Geertz’s analysis does not aim to eliminate current theories about ideology, but instead to work on the ideological phenomenon on its deepest level as an integrative function.

Ideology is integrative both in space and time, which is to say that its integrative function occurs both on a synchronic and a diachronic framework. Ricœur observes:

ideology is a function of the distance that separates the social memory from an inaugural event that must nevertheless be repeated. Its role is not only to diffuse the conviction beyond the circle of founding fathers, so as to make it the creed of the entire group, but also to perpetuate the initial energy beyond the period of effervescence. It is into this gap, characteristic of all situations *après coup*, that the images and interpretation intervene. A founding act can be revived and re-actualized only in an interpretation that models it retroactively, through a representation of itself.<sup>62</sup>

Ideology functions through a kind of collective memory. Ricœur is interested by stories of founding events that establish and sustain groups, communities, nations. Ideology exists, then, with the memory of its own inaugural events. In these cases, the ideological structure functions as an integrative structure. Ricœur mentions for example the celebration of the Fourth of July in the United States or the fall of Bastille in France.<sup>63</sup> In short, we can state that ideology is related to the past and involves memory. On the other hand, the conception of the culture as a text that can be critically analyzed implies that ideologies have to be constantly revisited, avoiding in this way the risk of becoming frozen and closed oversimplifications, expressed in slogans and caricature. Following Ricœur’s line of thought, integrative ideology has to be always involved in a dialectic relationship with utopia, which is not merely a literary or historical conceptualization of a distorting socio-political ideology, but a view from “nowhere” in terms of which human being can experience and rethink social reality. Ricœur claims that “the judgment on an ideology is always the judgment from a Utopia. [...] The only way to get out of the circularity in which ideologies engulf us is to assume a Utopia, declare it, and judge an ideology on this basis.”<sup>64</sup> The main point is neither suspicion nor a value-free attitude, but instead an attitude of critical conversation and dialogue. As Geertz points out when he describes the goal of the ethnographic research: “we are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with people of another culture, a matter a great deal more difficult, not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized.”<sup>65</sup> He continues that “the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse [...] It is an aim to which a semiotic concept of

culture is peculiarly well adapted."<sup>66</sup> The conversational attitude is linked to a conceptual semiotic framework in which culture is understood as a semiotic process. Therefore, Ricœur concludes that the recognition of a group's values is possible "on the basis of its self-understanding of these values, then we must welcome these values in a positive way, and this is to converse."<sup>67</sup>

Ricœur emphasizes three points on the basis of the analysis of the integrative function of ideology. First, since there is no social action that is not symbolically mediated, ideology cannot be understood as a mental superstructure for a material infrastructure. Instead it is a symbolic mediation through which human beings experience reality and brings it to expression. If we follow this path, "we can no longer say that ideology is merely a kind of superstructure. The distinction between superstructure and infrastructure completely disappears, because symbolic systems belong already to the infrastructure, to the basic constitution of human beings."<sup>68</sup> Second, on the basis of the integrative function of ideology, Ricœur highlights that there is a positive correlation between ideology and rhetoric. Ideology is the rhetoric of basic communication since "we cannot exclude rhetorical devices from language."<sup>69</sup> Third, Ricœur claims that there cannot be ideology without a conflict of ideologies. More precisely, he stresses that "integration without confrontation is pre-ideological."<sup>70</sup> Indeed, "we are caught in a situation of ideologies, in the plural."<sup>71</sup>

Since ideology as integration deals with the constitution and preservation of identities, its role as integrative function is to conceal any potential tension. By dealing with identities, ideology institutes a fundamental anthropological and social relation. Thus, even if conflicts among groups or social classes arise in the active processes of integration, the struggle seeks to achieve recognition among social members. Ideology is related to the internal coherence of narratives and practices which characterize a community. As Ricœur points out, "we belong to a history, to a class, to a nation, to a culture, to one or several traditions. In accepting this belonging that precedes and supports us, we accept the very first role of ideology, that which we have described as the mediating function of the image, the self-representation."<sup>72</sup> In other words, each community is an act of historical synthesis of a tradition, understood as a medium for the narrative transmission of practices and patterns. On the other hand, as George Taylor points out, even if "we begin with an experience of belonging or participation in the culture, class, time, and so on that give us birth, [...] we are not completely bound by these factors."<sup>73</sup> Ideological truth is not something universal coming from an external perspective, instead it is an inter-communitarian truth, an internal parameter which is directly participated in by members belonging to a particular ideology. In this way, ideology implies the activity of handing down.

## Conclusion

In this article I have investigated the opportunity of a fruitful exchange between hermeneutic philosophy and cultural anthropology through a critical reading of Ricœur's dialogue with Geertz's anthropological reflections on culture. We can note the following points by way of conclusion.

My interest was primarily focused on the reconstruction of the broad intellectual framework of Ricœur's encounter with Geertz. I have drawn attention to the profound mutual influence that these authors exercised on each other. In spite of Ricœur's essentially humble philosophical approach, I have shown that just as the French philosopher draws upon Geertz, the

American anthropologist also draws upon Ricœur, even if this latter never indicates. The common shared theme shared by Ricœur and Geertz lies in the recognition of the symbolic structure of social action, a concept that more recent scholarship has classified as the “social imaginary.”<sup>74</sup> The social imaginary is ineradicable from the very nature of human activity, that is, it is constitutive of social reality and has an interpretive character. This does not imply to recognize that social imaginaries are always positive, either for individuals or a society. As Taylor sums it up “creativity is not necessarily constructive.”<sup>75</sup> The dialogue between Ricœur and Geertz illustrates that the analysis of the social imaginary draws from both philosophy and anthropology, but it applies also to history, social theory, political theory and sociology. Acknowledging this interdisciplinary context, I have emphasized that the reciprocal influence between Ricœur and Geertz broadens hermeneutics beyond personal interpretation to a cultural hermeneutics.

The analysis of the symbolic structure of social action has led to Ricœur’s and Geertz’s conception of culture and integrative ideology. On the practical level, this reflection implies that belonging to an historical tradition or ideology should not be a passive assumption, but rather an active and critical act. The maintenance of this play of estrangement and retrieval is what constitutes the transmission of a cultural heritage. Emphasizing this critical edge, our difficult task consists in finding the right balance between openness and maintenance of differences, between comprehension without assimilation and critical distance without refusal. The same dialectic suggests that all cultures are limited, partial perspectives which can always be interpreted within a socio-historical context. It is my contention that this kind of balance can find its foundation within the human disproportion between fragility and capability.

Social life does not exist apart from the symbolic structure of actions. Human existence is necessarily mediated by the whole universe of signs. Consequently, we can grasp the act of individual and collective existing only within the scattered of symbols, signs, and meanings constituting the common world. The correlation between Ricœur’s philosophy and Geertz’s anthropology points then towards a traversal of the boundaries of our tradition and opens us to innovation by way of critical analysis of our social situation. This is achieved through analytical and social remembrance, critical and social reasoning, creative and social imagining, that is, by reflecting on our socio-cultural situation, on what we are doing in the life-world and on what is going on around us. In other words, we have to rediscover the importance of our active participation in the context of our praxis and through the praxis of our context.

\* The first version of this paper was presented in June 2017 at the First Edition of the Annual Summer Workshop on Ricœur's thought co-organized by the Fonds Ricœur and the Society for Ricœur Studies. Characterized by the formula "One book. One theme," the 2017's workshop was on Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986). At this and other meetings, and in correspondence, George H. Taylor has prompted questions and discussions which have helped and stimulated my attention on the relationship between Ricœur and Geertz. I wish to gratefully acknowledge him for his insightful comments. I would like to thank also Scott Davidson for his assistance in the final editorial review process.

<sup>1</sup> See Johann Michel, *Paul Ricœur: une philosophie de l'agir humain* (Paris: Édition du Cerf, 2006), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Ideology, Utopia, and Politics," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 227-339.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> For a clear explanation of the connection between Ricœur's early philosophical anthropology and his recent works see Bernard Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricœur: The Promise and Risk of Politics* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998). See also, David Kaplan, *Ricœur's Critical Theory* (Albany: New York State University Press, 2003), 75.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Timo Helenius, *Ricœur, Culture, and Recognition. A Hermeneutic of Cultural Subjectivity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 12.

<sup>9</sup> See Helenius, *Ricœur, Culture, and Recognition*; Svend Brinkmann, "Getting in Touch with the World: Meaning and Presence in Social Science," in *Imaginative Methodologies in the Social Sciences: Creativity, Poetics and Rhetoric in Social Research*, eds. Michael Hviid Jacobsen, Michael S. Drake, Kieran Keohane, Petersen Anders (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 133-55; Mario Valdés, *Essays after Unamuno and Ricœur* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016). At the forthcoming international conference organized by the Society for Ricœur Studies, a large number of sessions will be devoted to Ricœur's cultural hermeneutics.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra, "Paul Ricœur's Phenomenological Diagnostic of the Body: Being Corporally Situated in the Sociohistorical World," in *Paul Ricœur and the Lived Body*, ed. Roger Savage (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 174.

<sup>11</sup> Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 357.

<sup>12</sup> George Taylor, "Editor's Introduction," in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, xi.

<sup>13</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 19.

- <sup>14</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 19; Paul Ricœur, "The Model of the Text," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 146.
- <sup>15</sup> Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 412-54.
- <sup>16</sup> Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
- <sup>17</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 448.
- <sup>18</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 449.
- <sup>19</sup> Suzi Adams, "On Ricœur's Shift from a Hermeneutics of Culture to a Cultural Hermeneutics," *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, no. 6, 2 (2015), 142.
- <sup>20</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 256.
- <sup>21</sup> See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 208; See Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form. Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941).
- <sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 256.
- <sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 546.
- <sup>24</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 7.
- <sup>26</sup> Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 412-53.
- <sup>27</sup> Ricœur, "The Symbolic Structure of Action," in *Philosophical Anthropology (Writings and Lectures 3)*, ed. Johann Michel and Jérôme Porée, translated by David Pellauer, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 176.
- <sup>28</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 64.
- <sup>29</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 209.
- <sup>30</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 209.
- <sup>31</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257.
- <sup>32</sup> See Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 214.
- <sup>33</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 92.
- <sup>34</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.
- <sup>35</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 92.
- <sup>36</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 214.
- <sup>37</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257.

- <sup>38</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.
- <sup>39</sup> George Taylor, "Prospective Political Identity," in *Paul Ricœur in the Age of Hermeneutical Reason: Poetics, Praxis, and Critique*, ed. Roger Savage, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 129.
- <sup>40</sup> Dan Stiver, *Theology After Ricœur. New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knos Press, 2001), 66.
- <sup>41</sup> Taylor, "The Deeper Significance of Ricœur's Philosophy of Productive Imagination: The Role of Figuration," in *Productive Imagination: Its History, Meaning, and Significance*, eds. Salius Geniusas, Dimitri Nikulin (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 165.
- <sup>42</sup> Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume I*, 57.
- <sup>43</sup> See Ricœur, "The Creativity of Language" [interview with Richard Keraney], in *A Ricœur Reader. Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario Valadés, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 469.
- <sup>44</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 12.
- <sup>45</sup> See Ricœur, "The Model of Text," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 144-67.
- <sup>46</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.
- <sup>47</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.
- <sup>48</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 14.
- <sup>49</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 255; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.
- <sup>50</sup> See Ricœur, "Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 125-43.
- <sup>51</sup> Ricœur, "Explanation and Understanding," 142.
- <sup>52</sup> Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics* (London: Continuum, 1974), 51.
- <sup>53</sup> Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutical," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 38.
- <sup>54</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 77.
- <sup>55</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257.
- <sup>56</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 202.
- <sup>57</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 207.
- <sup>58</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257.
- <sup>59</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 208.
- <sup>60</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 209.
- <sup>61</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257-8.

- <sup>62</sup> Ricœur, "Science and Ideology," in *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 249.
- <sup>63</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 261.
- <sup>64</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 172.
- <sup>65</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 13.
- <sup>66</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 14.
- <sup>67</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 255.
- <sup>68</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 258.
- <sup>69</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 259.
- <sup>70</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 259.
- <sup>71</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 261.
- <sup>72</sup> Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 267.
- <sup>73</sup> Taylor, Introduction to Paul Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, xxv.
- <sup>74</sup> See Suzi Adams, Jeremy Smith, eds., *Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
- <sup>75</sup> George Taylor, Foreword to *Social Imaginaries: Critical Interventions*, 11.