Some Notes on Clifford Geertz’s Interpretive Anthropology

Achmad Fedyani Saifuddin

(Universitas Indonesia)

Abstrak

 Salah satu persoalan dalam filsafat ilmu sosial adalah bagaimana menjelaskan (explain) tindakan-tindakan manusia yang beranekaragam secara ilmiah. Apakah kita dapat menerapkan metode-metode ilmu alam atau ada cara lain yang lebih tepat untuk menjelaskannya? Para ilmuwan sosial masih terus berupaya menemukan the best way untuk menjelaskan gejala-gejala sosial meskipun mereka tetap belum puas. Thomas Kuhn berpendapat bahwa ilmu sosial—tidak seperti ilmu alam—masih terlibat dalam diskusi metodologi yang tidak habis-habisnya karena belum mampu mencapai suatu kesepakatan mengenai paradigma-paradigma umum untuk membatasi masalah-masalah dan prosedur penelitian. Artikel ini berusaha mendiskusikan pandangan interpretive dari Clifford Geertz dalam mengkaji kebudayaan dan masyarakat serta kedudukannya dalam konstelasi metodologi ilmu sosial. Ada dua alasan mengapa perlu mendiskusikan masalah ini: (1) pandangan interpretive terhadap gejala-gejala sosial merupakan perkembangan penting dalam ilmu sosial selama dua dasawarsa; (2) C. Geertz yang banyak dipengaruhi teori sistem Talcott Parsons telah mengembangkan gagasan yang kaya dan luar biasa tentang bagaimana melihat dan menganalisis kebudayaan dan masyarakat. Perhatiannya tidak hanya pada masalah antropologi tetapi juga pada ilmu sosial umumnya.

Kata kunci: interpretivism; “thick description”; antiekonomisme; antireduktionisme.

Introduction

Alexander Rosenberg (1988) maintains that the traditional questions for the philosophy of social science reflect the importance of the choices of research questions and of methods of tackling them. Therefore, there is the question of whether human action can be explained phenomena in its domain. Suppose that the answer is positive, the implication is that the application of natural science explanation is considered the most appropriate for the analysis. But, quoting Rosenberg again, the application of natural science way to explain human action is so much less precise and less improv-able than scientific explanation. Now, if the answer is negative, then what is the right way to explain social action scientifically? The answers will be returning to the nature of explanation and causation, the testing of generalization and laws, and it will reflect on the nature of thought and its relation to behavior.

1 This article is republished of the original version which published on ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA vol. XV, no. 49, 1991, pp. 4–11.
However, social scientists continue to see themselves, as did their predecessors, trying to find out the “best way” of explaining social things, but, like their predecessors, they remain disappointed (for discussion, see Fiske & Shweder 1988; Brown 1980). Social scientists have seized upon Thomas Kuhn theories (1970) in part as a way of explaining the failure of any of the social sciences, including linguistics and economics, to develop either the agreement on methods or the generally acknowledged classic examples of explanation characteristics of the natural sciences. As we understand, Thomas Kuhn (1970) argues that the strength of natural science has laid in its ability to go beyond endless methodological discussions by developing general shared paradigms which define problems and procedures. But, unfortunately social scientists, without denying the persistence and theoretical fruitfulness of certain explanatory scheme in the social sciences, have never reached of the degree of basic agreement that characterizes modern natural science, at least according to Kuhn.

This article tries to discuss Clifford Geertz’s interpretive view of seeing human culture and society, and its position within the constellation of the social science methodologies, and some controversies among social scientists concerning this issue. This issue is important to discuss because of two reasons: first, the interpretive way of looking social things in social science has been an important development in the last two decades. This model refocuses attention on the concrete varieties of cultural meaning, in their particularity and complex texture, but without falling into the traps of historicism or cultural relativism in its classic interpretations; and second, Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who started his career with his classic and traditional way of anthropology in 1960s and was much influenced by the system theory of Talcott Parsons, has created rich and extra ordinary development of ideas of how to see and analyze human culture and society. Furthermore, Geertz has shifted his position from a traditional anthropologist to a social scientist, and even a good writer, because he not only concerns with the problems of anthropology but also of the nature of social science generally. This makes him prominent position in social science theories nowadays.

Clifford Geertz’s interpretive view

The following part discusses Geertz’s way of looking human culture and society consisting of a description of the “Thick Description” as a methodological issue, antireductionism and anti naturalistic theses, and his anti economism view.

The “Thick Description” methodology

Clifford Geertz is an anthropologist who emphasizes that anthropology should shift from the search for explanation to the search for meaning and who saw the importance of symbols in anthropological research (Geertz 1973; 1983; 1984; 1988). He stresses the significance of social context as a crucial element in comprehending what symbols signify. He argues for turning away from an investigation of signs and symbols in abstraction, to “toward an investigation of signs and symbols in their natural habitat—the common world in which human look, name, listen and make (1983:119)”.

Symbolic anthropology is based on the notion that members of a society share a system of symbols and meanings called culture. The system represents the reality in which people live. Symbolic anthropologists stress system, whether it is loosely or tightly integrated, since members of a society must articulate and share to some degree. People must
have some notion of what other people in their community believes, some expectation of what their response to others will be and others to them, so as to be able to interact and communicate. Symbolic anthropology is dedicated to studying and researching the process by which people give meaning to their world and their action in it (1973, 1983).

Interpretive anthropology seeks to redirect cultural anthropology from a strategy of finding causal explanations for human behavior to one that seeks interpretations and meaning in human action. It is a strategy which sees the humanities rather than science as the model for anthropology. It seeks analogies based on theatre, play, drama, and literature rather than those based on crafts, mechanics, and organic structures. This approach, rather than seeking general propositions through the comparative study of many cases, takes an idiographic approach, that is, the study of the single case which can yield insights and meaning. In the study of the individual case, a particular society, for example, interpretive anthropologist does not look at how people behave as much as the meanings which persons living in the society give to their actions and behavior. These meaning are conveyed through the use of symbols which stand for values, codes, and rules. This viewpoint does not deny the material world but believes that the material and social world of humans can be best understood by listening to the way persons living in the society explain and understand their institutions and customs. The job of anthropologists is to interpret the interpretations of the natives (1973, 1983). One particular things in this view is that anthropologists should pride themselves in “thick description” knowing a lot about each case, documenting local events accurately, and generalizing within cases, not across cases (1973).

Geertz shows that cultural understanding by no means entails any form of special intuition or mysterious powers of empathy. He outlines and then demonstrates how cultural understanding starts with a picture of the whole, which leads the investigator to look for symbolic forms through which and in which the conceptions of the persons, the social order, and the cosmology are articulated and displayed. Taking the Balinese as an example, he shows that the people are active interpreters of their own culture. Both anthropologists and natives are busy creating and commenting on social life. In his article, “Deep Play. Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” (1972), he presents that the Balinese cockfights ritualize violent conflicts and thereby orders and to an extent domesticate it. Cultural forms play a therapeutic role by organizing and thereby making comprehensible violence and inequality (1972).

With the compilation of interpretations of texts, actions, symbols, social forms, and events, going from particular to general and back again, understanding and meaning slowly emerges. It is presented in the form of “thick description”, it preserves the magic of life, it goes back and forth from one viewpoint to another, from one level to another, and it leads to an understanding of the meaning of one’s own, as well as other, cultures (1973; 1983).

Antireductionism and antinaturalistic theses

Clifford Geertz shows that an interpretive approach does not reduce the number and diversity of means of understanding that are available, but rather improve them (1973). If theory per se no longer separate from the enterprise, then insights, methods, and techniques from a variety of disciplines become available to us. Theory, here, is seen as itself an interpretation. It is seen as being in a situation with a
particular problem to work on. Therefore, it can use what is appropriate to the case. Being it self situated, both theoretically and practically, it no longer can autonomously see the terms for discussion. But a discussion of a problem is impossible without it (1973).

His critiques on the quantifying way of social things and cultures are implicit in his works in 1960’s. But in 1980’s he has consistently been grasping his ideas to attack quantitative methods, especially in confronting, and defending himself from, many critiques coming from many scholars of various disciplines who also studies the Javanese agricultural tradition, the theme he studies in 1960’s, from different point of views. He argues:

“Both (convergent and divergent methods) have their uses; for some purpose they complement one another; and it is possible to get things precisely or vaguely wrong, employing either of them. But the sharp turn towards the divergent data, approach does serious questions about the adequacy of interpretations of the contemporary scene in rural Java which flows from such a “what you count is what you get” sort of analysis (1984:522).”

Geertz further argues that quantitative arguments are extremely tricky to make, not only are the numbers unreliable as such, many of them having been made up in some administrative offices or other for purposes more rhetorical than analytic, but the great complexity of proprietary institutions within the historic Javanese local community makes the application of familiar measures of rural inequality based on a simple view of ownership often quite misleading. The tendency to rely on numerical measures, however uncertain, rather institutional descriptions, is again part of the general turn to an economistic approach to the analysis of rural society and the externalization of culture that attend it He sums up that the pulverization of village social structure into numbers and the setting aside of cultural factors altogether as something for the Javanese investigators to deal with seems to lead to ascending indeterminacy instead of increase precision. “Only the recontextualization of the Javanese and Indonesian economic processes within the Javanese and Indonesian life as concretely enacted, the de-externalization of culture, can reduce this indeterminacy, however slightly, and deliver answers we can have some faith in, however modest. It is economism, the notion that a determinate picture of social change can be obtained in the absence of an understanding of the passions and imagining that provoke and inform it (1984:523)”.

From the above description we understand that the stress on the qualitative is close to merging with another typical antinaturalistic thesis, that social scientists must understand social life intuitively. We have noted that Geertz has been sensitive to the methodological problems. Writing about the view that the settings in which qualitative researchers gather data are “natural laboratories”, he argues:

“The natural laboratory notion has been . . . pernicious, not only because the analogy is false—what kind of a laboratory is it where none of the parameters are manipulable?—but because it leads to a notion that the data derived from ethnographic studies are purer, or more fundamental, or more solid, or less conditioned... than those derived from other sorts of social inquiry. The great natural variation of cultural forms is ... not, even metaphorically, experimental variation, because the context in which it occurs varies along with it, and it is not possible (though there are some who try) to isolate their y’s from the x’s to write a proper function (1973:23–23).”

Antieconomism view

Clifford Geertz criticizes the “economism”, the term he uses to call the way of thinking leading to the re-externalization of cultural (or sociocultural) matters reminiscent of the culture-as-barrier versus the culture-as-stimulus
framework (1984:516). Unfortunately, his critiques toward “economism” come much more explicit twenty years later, 1980’s when he has been very busy to defend himself against sharply critiques coming from many scholars of various disciplines. It seems that he made much improvements in his latest article published in *Man*, 1984, much better than his original work.

The term of “economism” basically comes from Marshal Sahlins, an economic anthropologist, with Marxist version, who views that moving forces in individual behavior (and thus in society), are those of a need-driven utility seeker maneuvering for advantage within context of material possibilities and normative constraints. Man the strategizer, manipulating “means-ends relations (within) an eternal teleology of human satisfactions, takes the center of and most of the rest of the social stage. Custom, convention belief, and institution are not regarded as important forces.

Geertz argues that Sahlin’s approach is far from precise for analyzing Javanese case, but it is probably the most suitable model for understanding Western rational-based actions. He warned the danger of placing cultural matters outside social processes. The externalization of the Javanese (or Indonesian) moral, political, practical, religious and aesthetic ideas, the conceptual framework within which the Javanese perceive what happens to them and respond to it, ends not with the discovery of the “real” material determinants of change but with a disjunction between them that neither the most desperate of speculations nor the most determined of dogmas can paper over. Whatever happened in pre-independence Java—involution, class formation, or anything else—it did not consist in the progressive working out of “the logic of capitalism”, and it did not take place in a cultural vacuum (1984:520).

Another Geertz’s important critique dealing with “economism” is to the tendency of social scientists to aggrandize the “famous” theories rather than appreciate the function of them to enable to research. This tendency makes the relationship between the social theory and social research rather backward, keeping the habit of social scientists to apply one famous theory coming from Western rational-based action tradition to, for example, a small traditional Javanese village. It is the function of theory to accelerate research model, and by this function social theory and social research will pushed forward into progress.

Summarizing this section, there are two important points: firstly, the “Thick Description” is a methodological solution in anthropological, or even in social, research. The “thick description” implies that researchers must explore one case deeply, document local events accurately, and generalize within cases, not across cases; and secondly, social scientists have to take full consideration the important of exploring “tacit knowledge” of the people studied. The implication of this is the rejection of naturlistic-quantitative way of seeing human society and culture.

**Discussion: agreements and controversies**

In contemporary anthropological theory, there has been a variety schools of thought that are all with us today—structural-functional, structuralism, Marxism in various kind of varieties, personality and culture, cultural ecology, cognitive anthropology, neo-evolutionism, culture materialism, etc.—but none is dominant (Kuper 1987). This may be the future condition of anthropology: a pluralistic disciplines that loosely shelters those variety of interest and which lacks a center.
Among the constellation of various methods developed in social science, Geertz’s point of view is inevitably one of the most frequently quoted in the last two decades. There has been a great numbers of responses, pro or con or uncertain, coming from many scholars of various kind of disciplines (see, for example, Geertz 1984:n.4, p.524). It has been recognized that the impact of his model not only on the development of anthropology theories but also on other disciplines such as ecology, history, economics, and political science.

While not denying the persistence and theoretical fruitfulness of certain explanatory schemes in the social science, social scientists have never reached the extraordinary degree of basic agreement, something characterizes modern natural sciences. The strength of natural science, according to Thomas Kuhn, has laid in its ability to go beyond endless methodological discussions by developing general shared paradigms which define problems and procedures. Social scientists have attempted to follow the way natural science explains things but they fail to develop agreement which characterizes the natural sciences. This failure makes the condition which Donald W. Fiske and Richard A. Shweier (1986) call “the crisis in social science”. The crisis also concerns the nature of social investigation itself. The conception of the human sciences as somehow necessarily destined to follow the path of the modern investigation of nature is at the root of this crisis.

The emergence of interpretive approach is a philosophy matter, and the social science is moving in a different direction. The interpretive approach denies the claim that one can somehow reduce the complex world of signification to the products of a self-consciousness in the traditional philosophical sense (Rabinow & Sullivan 1987). It may begin from the postulate that the web of meaning constitutes human existence to such extent that it cannot ever be meaningfully reduced to constitutively prior speech acts, dyadic relations, or any predefined elements.

Explanation and prediction

Clifford Geertz, in term of anthropology prediction asserts that anthropology cannot aspire to be a science in the way that the physical sciences are, with laws and generalizations based on empirical and verifiable data. He believes that anthropology must be based on concrete reality, but, from reality, one derives meanings rather than predictions based on empirical data. This arguments make Geertz’s position differs from the nature of scientific explanation of Carl G. Hempel (1970).

Hempel’s concept on scientific explanation can be outlined as the following: Firstly, science consists of a search for “general laws” to explain events; secondly, the statement of a general law can have different logical forms, but it typically makes a universal generalization across some domains of events, for example, “all gases expand when heated under constant pressure”; thirdly, the main function of general laws is to connect events in patterns, which are usually referred to as “explanation” and “prediction”. It is clear that Geertz’s point of view differs from Hempel’s in the sense that Geertz shifts anthropology from the research for explanation to the search for meaning and interpretation. He stressed the significant of social context, as crucial element in comprehending what symbols signify. I feel it is important to note D’Andrade (1986) who questions the descriptive adequacy of the covering law model of science, Hempel’s model, and in doing so, attempts to clarify the nature of some of the problems confronted by the social sciences and psychology. He says that Hempel’s
covering law model is not the ideal form for all scientific thinking, and he examines the foundation of those semiotic or semantic sciences that eschew an interest in law like generalization and seek, instead, to understand “imposed order” (see also, Fiske & Shweder 1986).

Since anthropology has serious constraints in explaining and predicting, two main components is scientific laws, it can not be characterized as a science. Another uneasy problems in Geertz’s concept is the problem of context. Barbara Frankel (1986), for example, says that context is peculiarly difficult matter. It is, after all, a slippery concept, for there is no telling a priori where a context begins or ends.

Clifford Geertz is also criticized in term of who are studied. People of the community studied or a key informant? Some social scientists argue that there is no guarantee that if an anthropologist interviews a key informant he already know what all people living in the community think and do.

Some other social scientists prefer to take a moderate way. They say that the only way to do to achieve a maximal precision in interpreting social action is to limit our unit of observation into a narrow domain, a small scale investigation, and study it as maximum as possible. But, still, we confront with another serious problem in science that is generalization, a level of conclusion which all sciences dream of. Some others argue for reducing the social things into statistical numbers (see, for example, Papineau 1978). They maintain that numerical and statistical way out offer much wider scope and more possibility to draw generalization. But, still, as Frankel (1986) says, the reductionism tends only to draw patterns and structures of the social things rather than exploring causes and processes.

Finally, interpretive anthropology takes the humanities as its model. Whatever the outcome, interpretive anthropology is based, in part, on the trends in scientific methodologies in the human sciences in early 1980s. However, whatever the results, social scientists continue seeing themselves, as did their predecessors, try to find out the “best way” of looking social things. The debates and controversies do not seem to end in future.

References

Brown, S.C.  

D’Andrade, R.  

Fiske, D. and R. Shweder  

Frankel, B.  
Geertz, C.


Hempel, C.G.

Kuhn, T.S.

Kuper, A.

Papineau, D.

Rabinow, P. and W. Sullivan

Rosenberg, A.