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BOOK REVIEW

Geertz, Clifford (2022) Sūq: Geertz on the Market, edited and introduced by Lawrence Rosen

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Originally issued as part of the 1979 collective volume, *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society. Three Essays in Cultural Analysis* (Geertz *et al.* 1979), Clifford Geertz's long *tour de force* on the *bazaar* economy has been published in 2022 as a standalone book by HAU Books and the University of Chicago Press with a solid introduction by the Princeton anthropologist, and Geertz's longtime collaborator and friend, Lawrence Rosen. Preceded by a number of works on Indonesian *pasars* (see Geertz 1963), the piece builds on Geertz's ethnographic work in Sefrou, Morocco, to challenge the (general) understanding of *bazaars* as irrational phenomena or transitional stages towards more advanced (i.e., Western-like) market systems. Combining his trademark interpretive anthropology and information theory, Geertz argues that *bazaars* are in fact coherent and meaningful economic institutions whose defining element is the fact that "information is generally poor, scarce, maldistributed, inefficiently communicated, and intensely valued" [3]. The practices and institutions typical of the *bazaars* might be explained as emerging from the search for reliable information to which all traders are incessantly committed. Following this premise, the essay is a rich piece of work: after a short theoretical introduction, Geertz traces the historical evolution of the *sūq* of Sefrou from a stop on a long caravan route to a complex, articulated economic system. The *sūq*, as he observed it between 1964 and 1976, included permanent shops, a weekly market, and Western-style stores all rooted in a host of common economic and religious institutions [4 ff.].

In a clear but understated criticism of Ernst Gellner's "segmentary" model (Gellner 1969), Geertz explores the "mosaic pattern" of Moroccan society [20] and the economic structures, roles, and norms of the market before getting to the meat of his contribution [52 ff.]: a detailed analysis of the meaning of, and the connections between, ten keywords operating as the "model of" the bazaar for its regular dwellers and the "model for" they action within it [82 ff.]. These include descriptive terms such as *zḥām* (crowd), *klām* (words), and *ḵbar* (news); evaluative principles as *ṣdiq* (candor), *macrūf* (consensus), and *ṣḥīḥ* (wholeness); and ways to frame a judgment like *macqūl* (reason), *ḥaqq*

(reality), *bāṭel* (deception), and *kdūb* (vanity). This semiotic analysis reveals the emic vision of the market as a space crowded with rivals, words, and news, where information must be evaluated according to social and theological standards and reasoning. It also explains why day to day exchanges are mainly addressed via two practices—clientelisation and bargaining [101 ff., 104 ff.]—which Western tourists and dwellers have seen as "exotic" (and maybe even "amusing") but that are perfectly rational, for they serve to reduce the complexity of a system lacking stable and unambiguous informational processes. In conclusion, Clifford Geertz sees (and makes us see) the *sūq* as a sophisticated and functional economic institution, adapted to its specific cultural and communicative conditions [79 ff., 95 ff.], challenging simplistic or evolutionary views of non-Western market systems. His analysis demonstrates the intricate interplay between social dynamics, economic structures, and cultural meanings in shaping the *bazaar*'s unique character and functionality [117 ff.], and has been regularly taken into account by economic anthropologists or economists working on this kind of institutions.

To the reader who now holds this new edition of *Sūq* in her hands, a number of features stand out immediately. First of all, following Geertz's 1960s habits, this is a book where the ethnographer and the people he met are nowhere to be found. Although the author can effortlessly weave historical description, meaningful categorisations, multi-level analyses, and witty turns of phrase, he is curiously stingy with details, stories, and dynamism. This might be far from current ethnographic styles and sensibilities: as said by Corinne Cauvin Verner (2014: 13), "missing are the smells of the market, the atmosphere, the movement of cattle and *suwwāqs* [i.e. *sūq*-dwellers] by truck, moped or donkey; missing is the misery of rural life in the face of urban opulence, and all the negotiations that make the market a place for capitalising on dysfunctions. It's hard to see what's legitimate and what's illegitimate. Neither disorder nor explosion of neutralities are reported." It seems like Geertz is taking to the extreme his often-quoted aphorism that anthropologists do not study villages but *in* villages—but here the "village" of Sefrou becomes a web of terms, words, concepts, labels, categories, and structures, with no humans in sight.

To the 2025 reader, the lack of flesh and blood Sefrouis sounds like a symptom of a wider methodological flaw in Geertz's practice of interpretation and thus in the very practice of interpretive social science—a flaw that, to be sure, has been variously addressed in the nearly fifty years that separate us from the first edition of the essay (Ortner 1997; Alexander et al., 2011). As I read this and other Geertzian texts, the real issue lays in the fact that Geertz lacked a theory of epistemic attribution, so that he ended up shifting from a phenomenological perspective to a more "objectivist" stance (see Crapanzano 1981), oscillating between "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts—the declination of Heinz Kohut's emic/etic distinction he put forward in "The Native's Point of View" (Geertz 1974: 28). Here the lack of real people doing real things within real contexts was paradoxical but not incidental: instead of reflecting on the existence of multiple points of view and their delicate relationships, Geertz emphasised the "objective" nature of his subject as an ordered system, stressing the connectedness and the *mise en forme* of the whole. Sure, he added, "the constraints are partial, the logic approximate, the motivations incomplete, the comprehensibility limited—and the system thus, as all social systems, far from fully coherent." The *sūq* remained nonetheless "an ordered whole with properties of its own" that might be observed, analysed, understood, and written down in a properly scientific report [95]. If the *sūq* is a system, the observer might well abstract it from real life and extract words, concepts, and schemes from their contexts and their peculiar (and particular) operational rules as to present an ordered semiotic system that is then translated into a (ideal typical) mindset and/or a bundle of (ideal typical) emotions and sentiments. The universal, or at least some level of it, ends up prevailing on the particular—an

anathema not only to an author who, like Clifford Geertz, wanted to defend the specificity of cultures, individuals, practices, and institutions, but also, I suspect, to the majority of contemporary ethnographers and social scientists.

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