



Melford E. Spiro

1920–2014

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memiors

*A Biographical Memoir by
Kevin Avruch*

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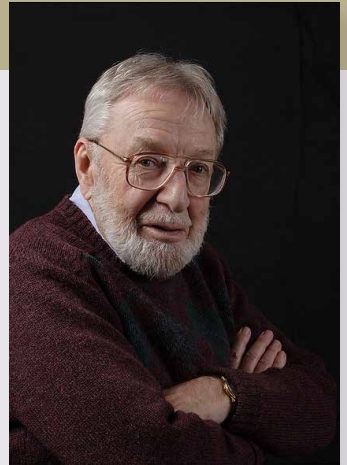
MELFORD ELLIOT (“MEL”) SPIRO

April 26, 1920–October 18, 2014

Elected to the NAS, 1982

Career and life in outline

Melford Elliot Spiro—everyone called him Mel—was born in Ohio in 1920 to Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, who moved to Minnesota when he was an infant. The family was poor and suffered during the Depression. Despite this, Mel earned a B.A. from the University of Minnesota, where he majored in philosophy. He studied subsequently at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and went on to earn his PhD in anthropology at Northwestern University (1950), studying under Melville Herskovits and A. Irving Hallowell. Hallowell became a lifelong mentor and friend whose seminal writings in psychological anthropology had a decisive effect on Mel’s own intellectual commitments to the field. Mel edited a *festschrift* in his honor, *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology* (1965).



Photography by Manuel Rotenberg

By Kevin Avruch

After receiving his doctorate Mel went on to teach at Washington University (St. Louis) and at the universities of Connecticut, Washington, and Chicago, before leaving to found the anthropology department at UC San Diego (UCSD) in 1968. Mel had felt especially at home in Chicago, where the reputation, intellectual strength, and diversity of the faculty and the excellence of the students made the decision to go to La Jolla a difficult one. But the chance to establish a new department in a rising university, and to give to it his unique intellectual signature proved irresistible. He hired the department’s first six faculty members in 1969 and recruited its first class of graduate students. Among the faculty were Roy D’Andrade, Marc J. Swartz, Theodore Schwartz, Robert I. Levy, David K. Jordan, and Joyce Bennett (later Justus). Soon thereafter the British social anthropologist F. G. Bailey joined, as did Gananath Obeyesekere and the biological anthropologist Shirley Strum. The intellectual direction of the department was toward psychological anthropology. “Within ten years,” his colleague Roy D’Andrade wrote in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* soon after Mel’s death, “the

department became an outstanding department of psychological anthropology, arguably the best in the country. The department was noted for its high degree of solidarity, as well as its academic strengths.”

Beginning in the late 1960s, Mel studied at the San Diego Psychoanalytic Institute, was certified a lay analyst, and saw a small number of patients. He found this endeavor very gratifying.

As one of the founding chairs in the social sciences at UCSD, Mel was an influential voice who played an important role in setting the academic and scholarly tone of what has become a first-rate research university. In addition to chairing the anthropology department from 1968 to 1972, he served in the university’s academic senate and on other crucial committees. He was appointed in 1982 as UCSD’s first holder of the Presidential Chair. He served on many editorial boards and was

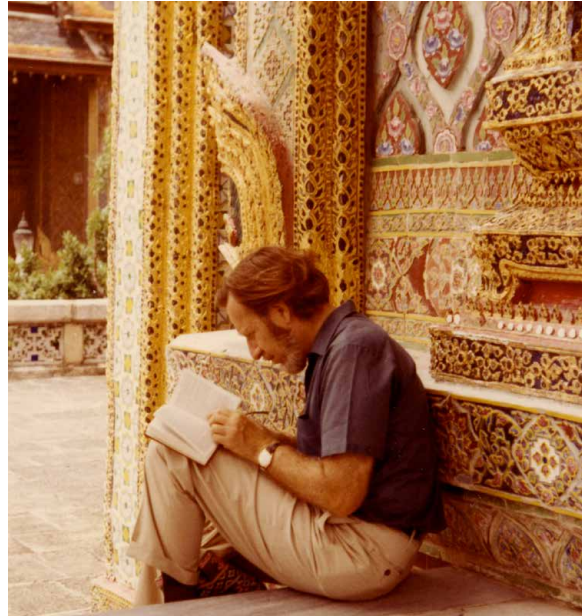
one of the founders of both *Ethos* and the *Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, serving also as president of that society and of the American Ethnological Society. He won many awards and distinctions, including two Guggenheim fellowships, recognition by the Social Sciences Research Council and the National Science Foundation, an Einstein Fellowship, and an Excellence in Teaching Award at UCSD. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (elected 1975) and was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1982. Mel retired from UCSD in 1990 but continued to teach, attend colloquia, and generally to participate in the life of the campus, as one among its elder (and founding) statesmen and women. Beginning in the late 1960s, Mel studied at the San Diego Psychoanalytic Institute, was certified a lay analyst, and saw a small number of patients. He found this endeavor very gratifying.

Mel was married for 62 years to Audrey Spiro, a remarkable woman who earned her PhD in Chinese art at the age of 60 and taught art history for many years at different University of California campuses. Audrey predeceased Mel in July 2011. All who knew her agreed that she was, at the least, Mel’s intellectual equal and a valued and equal co-researcher in his early fieldwork on the kibbutz. Mel died in La Jolla on October 18, 2014, at age 94. He is survived by two sons: Michael Spiro, a renowned percussionist and professor of music at the University of Indiana, and Jonathan Spiro, a historian and dean at Castleton University in Vermont; and by three grandchildren: Remi, Sophie, and Benjamin.

Writing informally soon after Mel's death, his one-time student (at Chicago) and later colleague, David Jordan, said, "Mel was a focused and methodical thinker." Working in several different ethnographic regions, David continued, "he never let the minutiae of the regional specialists (the people he called 'ologists') deflect his attention from the psychodynamic issues he was intent upon exploring."

Research and scholarship: an overview

Mel was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in recognition of his standing among the foremost cultural anthropologists of the twentieth century, specializing in religion and psychology. He worked ethnographically in sites as diverse as Ifaluk, a small atoll in the Caroline Islands of Micronesia (1947–1948); an Israeli kibbutz, beginning in 1950 and continuing throughout his career; and a village in Burma (now Myanmar), from 1961–1962, when a military coup overthrew the government and precluded further work in the country. (In the summers of 1969–1972 Mel worked with Burmese refugees in Thailand. But he deeply regretted being unable to return to Burma and always referred to the 1962 coup as illegal, and the military dictatorship that followed as illegitimate.) A brief period of fieldwork preceding his Ifaluk research, under his mentor A. I. Hallowell on the Lac Du Flambeau Chippewa (Ojibwa) reservation in Wisconsin, was important for arousing his lifelong interest in aggression and providing the original research problem for the Ifaluk work: explaining the apparent absence of overt aggression among the 250 or so people living on the one-half square island atoll, which was in contrast with what he had found among the Ojibwa. When Mel mentioned this brief ethnographic experience to me, it was mainly to recount that he had, to his great embarrassment, somehow lost an outboard motor in the lake. Hallowell was understanding and took the loss mildly.



Mel in Bangkok, 1972.



Mel and Audrey on the kibbutz Kiryat Yedidim, 1950.

As assiduous an ethnographer as Mel was, he always made it clear that he never was interested in ethnographic description *per se*. “Ultimately,” he wrote in his 1978 article, “Culture and human nature,” ethnographic data are important “to the degree that they can illuminate some aspect of the nature of man,” which he came ultimately to understand in terms of its invariant universality. Thus, Mel always discussed his fieldwork in terms of the more general theoretical and scientific problems that motivated each of them, and the ways in which the research findings subsequently sharpened or outright transformed his understanding of theory and, ultimately, “the nature of man.” It makes as much sense therefore to speak of the theoretical issues that Mel engaged over his career as it does to discuss the ethnographic sites in which he engaged them. In Ifaluk: aggression, dependency, childrearing, socialization, and religion (as belief in evil spirits). On the kibbutz: ideology (“utopian” Zionism and its vicissitudes), socialization, enculturation, marriage, and gender. In Burma: a world religion, Theravada Buddhism, analyzed in terms of the difference between its canonical form (“religion-in-text”), and how it is understood and used by socially, culturally, and psychologically situated actors (“religion-in-use”).

Tying these seemingly diverse theoretical interests together were two things: First, an increasing reliance on, and confidence in, the power of psychoanalytic theory as a major way to understand and explain variant beliefs and behavior (cultural variability) as well as universal human nature. Psychoanalytic theory defined his approach to psychological anthropology (in some ways he continued to prefer the older locution, “culture and personality”), as well as his later writings on dreams, sexuality, symbology, and the Oedipus complex. The second characteristic running through his work, reflective of his undergraduate background in analytical philosophy and the philosophy of science, was an unbreakable commitment to the canons of scientific explanation; an exacting attention to the logic of enquiry (for example, the strict distinction between contexts of discovery and verification); and the rigorous application to data of what some have called “non-teleological functionalism,” which entailed making clear the distinction between

functional explanations as concerned with the consequences of behavior, and causal explanations, concerned with the antecedents of behavior. Following such philosophers of science as Richard Rudner and C. G. Hempel, Mel argued that only causal explanations are fully scientific, and therefore that the crucial problem for anthropology, indeed, for all the human sciences, is to understand how cause and function, antecedent and consequence, “origins and persistence,” reinforce each other in three systems (psychological, social, cultural) of cybernetic-like feedback. And the key here, Mel argued, was to recognize the indispensable importance of motivation, a psychological variable wrongly dismissed by many anthropologists and sociologists. This commitment to a psychological anthropology thus set Mel apart from many



Mel in the field, Itluk, 1947.

contemporaries. But there was something else. At the beginning of his career, his insistence on the importance of the psychological system and personality variables, as well as attention to recurring logical inconsistencies in conflating cause with function, was the basis of his critical approach to many of his functionalist contemporaries. In a later phase of his career, his absolute commitment to the canons and goals of science, to the notion of causality itself, formed the basis of a rising generation’s increasingly critical response to his work. In the sections that follow I want to examine the early and late phases of Mel’s career in terms of his intellectual interlocutors, though in the second phase I think, at least for Mel himself, calling them “adversaries” would not be too strong.

Spiro’s psychological anthropology

In the late 1940s, when Mel began his professional career, American anthropology was already far along in developing its Boasian legacy: the “culture concept” was its orthodoxy and the centrality of culture the first article of its credo. Most significantly,



Mel and Audrey in Chicago with Burt Aginsky, 1968.

of course, these served to distinguish American cultural anthropology from its counterpart, social anthropology in Great Britain. But in the United States the universal homage paid to culture did not preclude sectarian developments. What was culture, anyway? Phenomenal reality or analytical construct? How ought one to study it: as science or history? And, however one answered these first two questions, how was the psychological study of the individual to be considered in the study of culture? By their responses to any and all of these questions, one could group and differentiate the major anthropologists of the time: White from Kluckhohn, White from Kroeber,

Benedict and Sapir from Kroeber and White, and so on. While Mel addressed all three questions, two of them particularly engaged his interest, though at different times in his career.

Through the late 1970s, the third question was at the center of his work, and he engaged a variety of anthropologists around the necessity to consider the individual as a fully psychological entity in studies of social systems. By the mid-1980s, however, responding to changes in anthropology and the social sciences in general, he took up the second question—whether culture should be studied as a science or as something else—with a passion and a vehemence that was largely absent in the earlier work.

To return for a moment to the beginning, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, given the centrality of the culture concept to the anthropological tradition in which Mel was trained, and given his position on the crucial importance of psychology focused on personality in the study of culture, he might well have been expected to develop his intellectual program, concretely, against the superorganicism of Kroeber and the culturology of White. A seminal early Spiro paper, “Culture and Personality: The Natural History of a False Dichotomy” (1951) is cast very much in this mode. But the earliest published work on Ifaluk (e.g., Spiro 1952, 1953), arising from his first sustained ethnographic fieldwork, already showed a turning away from purely culture-and-personality concerns,

or from culture-and-personality as it was conceived by the first generation of anthropologists working in that tradition, to concerns of a different anthropological tradition. Conceptually, Mel was moving towards a Parsonian tripartite view, one that asserted the analytical, though not causal-functional, autonomy of personality, as well as social and cultural systems. Theoretically, even as these early Ifaluk papers focused on the psychological origins and psychodynamics of Ifaluk belief in spirits called *alus*, Mel was already engaged with the rigors and limitations of functional explanations. In fact, starting with the papers on Ifaluk and extending into his work on Burmese Buddhism and supernaturalism, his work focused on using the concept of personality to better explicate the workings of the social system. Therefore, in this period of his work, his main intellectual interlocutors were Radcliffe-Brown and his followers, who engaged with Mel on the field of functional analysis in social anthropology.

One can read much of Mel's work on religion, in particular, as a critique of British structural-functional approaches, which had roots, of course, in Durkheim's (1938) dismissal of psychology from his rules of the sociological method. Following Merton and Hempel, meticulously applying the logic of functional analysis, Mel sought to disentangle function from cause, a distinction that was clear in Durkheim's treatment but hopelessly muddled in Radcliffe-Brown's transposition. The central theme involved the problem of motivation, a psychological problem par excellence. In 1961 he wrote: "The functional requirements of group existence are satisfied not by the existence of customs but by their performance" (*Culture and Personality* p. 563, emphasis in original). And performance—indeed the very operation of sociocultural systems—is a motivational problem.

It might at first seem strange and counterintuitive to cast Melford Spiro, a mighty oak in the forest of American culture-and-personality studies, as a social anthropologist as this term was understood throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But if one looks at the sort of colleagues whom he engaged critically throughout this period, one would count predominant among them British social anthropologists, many of the structural-functional persuasion, including Radcliffe-Brown and Firth on the functions of religion, Evans-Pritchard on defining religion, Gluckman on rituals of rebellion, Leach on interpreting cultural symbols, and Needham on some defects of structural analysis. In all of these cases, the basis of Mel's critique was the insufficiency of a social anthropology that neglected motivational (i.e., psychological) concerns. At the same time, he disputed Malinowski, whose psychological, needs-based concept of functionalism was, in many ways, closer to his own than was Radcliffe-Brown's. The argument contra Malinowski involved the latter's claim that the Oedipus complex was absent in matrilineal societies



Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA) team in Honolulu en route to Micronesia, 1947. CIMA was funded mainly by the U.S. Navy.

Front row, left to right: Saul Riesenberg, Melford Spiro, William Lessa, Rupert Murrill, Ward Goodenough.

Back row, left to right: Frank LeBar, Raymond Murphy, Alicia Joseph, unknown woman, Veronica Murray, George P. Murdock, Joseph Weckler, Conrad Bentzen.

(Photo courtesy Ward Goodenough.)

such as the Trobriand Islanders. Reinterpreting Malinowski's own ethnographic data (and that of others), Mel demonstrated in 1982 that Oedipus could indeed be found among the Trobrianders (Spiro 1982). In this case, Mel was demonstrating both the universality of a "deep" cultural structure and the relevance of Freudian psychoanalytic theory for uncovering it. Indeed, even when Mel engaged Levi-Strauss (*American Anthropologist* 1979) and his mythologues, which also argued for a universal "deep structure," he did so by questioning the structuralist's blatant neglect of the id, of sex and aggression in mythic texts that are manifestly obsessed with both.

At the same time, Mel sought to differentiate himself from earlier psychological anthropologists. In his 1961 article, “Culture and personality,” he called for a suggested reorientation (what he later also hailed, rather more grandly, as a “Copernican revolution”) in psychological anthropology. Looking back at the field from the year 1961, Mel saw the first generation of psychological anthropologists—Sapir, Benedict, Mead, Kardiner, even the *sui generis* Bateson, I would add—as concerned primarily with how culture or society affected (or effected) the individual. The reorientation he called for in 1961 was this: “Instead of merely asking how the social system influences the development and structuring of personality, we are now equally interested in how personality affects the functioning of social systems” (*Studying Personality*, p. 121). The closest he came to doing psychological anthropology of the first-generation type was in his study of kibbutz children (1958), where the ideological (collectivist) and social-structural characteristics of kibbutz institutions of family and child-rearing were conceptualized as independent variables, and the resulting personality configurations of the sabras as the dependent ones. In the end, of course, what the kibbutz studies revealed was, if not quite the opposite, the limited effects that ideology and radical institutions such as collective child-rearing can have on cultural “deep structure,” particularly with respect to gender (*Gender and Culture* 1979, Spiro 1997).

But even to speak of dependent and independent variables, of simply conceived bivariate relationships between social and personality systems, is to miss the point of Mel’s conception of psychodynamic structural-functionalism. In effect, he was arguing for a way to conceive the causal and functional relations among Parsons’s analytically separable three systems: psychological, social, and cultural. The epitome of this was expressed by Mel in terms of a social system at equilibrium (also a Parsonian epitome!), wherein, “personality drives serve to instigate the performance of social roles, and the performance of roles serves to gratify personality drives” (Spiro 1972, p. 590). When it all works, this entails in effect the transformation of duty into desire, and vice-versa. But the vice-versa part is, Freud taught us, much harder to manage: desire is inherently messy. The messiness was eventually addressed by Mel through his elucidation of “culturally constituted defense mechanisms.” This idea was his great borrowing from Freud’s conception of individual psychodynamics that served to tie up several loose ends of Kardiner’s mono-directional cultural psychodynamics (Spiro 1965; Kardiner 1946).

In my view, the elucidation of culturally constituted defense mechanisms was the highpoint of this period of Mel’s culture-and-personality work. Ethnographically, the complex deployment and working out of these defense mechanisms was exemplified as

part of Mel's analysis of Burmese supernatural beliefs (Spiro 1967) and of Theravada Buddhism as a lived religion in village Burma; in distinguishing normative nibbanic (concerned with ultimate release from the wheel of rebirth) from kammatic (focused on more proximal, material and concrete ends, including wealth and status) constructions of Buddhist salvation; and in exploring the mechanisms of self-recruitment and retention of certain villagers to the social role-demands and psychological pay-offs of Buddhist monkhood (in *Buddhism and Society*, 1970; on defense mechanisms and religion in general, see also Spiro 1965 and 1982b).

Whatever differences Mel had with structural-functional or structural anthropology were focused on the need to take Freudian psychology, motivation, and affect seriously. He engaged these colleagues on the field of structures and their functions. But, importantly, Mel shared with Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski, and Levi-Strauss a fundamental view of anthropology as a science with nomothetic concerns and a goal to explain human behavior, sociocultural systems, and their institutions. By the late 1960s, however, the sturdy house of British structural-functionalism had all but collapsed, and with it the tremendous élan and self-assurance, methodological and theoretical, that had, since Malinowski's seminars at the London School of Economics, buoyed social anthropology, whether in Britain or in colonial outposts like the Universities of Chicago or Rochester. In America, meanwhile, the culture concept seemed to him to collapse onto itself, along with much else in Vietnam-era intellectual life, and what emerged, finally, was a concept of culture focusing first on symbols and their meanings, and eventually on culture analogized as (and in Mel's view mistaken for) literary text.

By the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, as Mel turned to address new developments in culture theory, the grounds of engagement had changed radically. Earlier, Mel had argued for the relevance, indeed necessity, of psychological, psychodynamic explanations to supplement sociological ones. (Many of the important theoretical papers from this era are collected in Kilborne and Langness [1987].) Against many in the rising generation of anthropologists, however, he found himself in the position of having to argue for the relevance and necessity of explanation, as opposed to some exclusive form of hermeneutical understanding.

Melford Spiro and the scientific study of culture

In 1978 an autobiographical essay by Mel, reflecting on his career up to the mid-1970s or so, was published in *The Making of Psychological Anthropology*, edited by George Spindler. In relating what brought him to anthropology, Mel mentioned a prior and

fundamental interest in philosophy, which he studied in college, and in those philosophers of the Enlightenment—Locke, Hume, Rousseau—whose interests lay in uncovering, each in their different ways, the essential “nature of man.” Mel wrote that for him, “anthropology has been the handmaiden of philosophy, a tool for the empirical investigation of some issues concerning the nature of man” (1978, p. 332). But allied to this was a sharp political sensibility that in most professional settings and writings, if not to his family and close friends, Mel kept to himself. Without explicit mention of his own family’s poverty and struggles, Mel wrote of the “political and intellectual zeitgeist” of his formative years. He wrote: “For liberal intellectuals like myself, coming to maturity in the late thirties and early forties, politics was an overriding concern. Existentialists without knowing it, we had to come to grips with the twin traumata of our time—the Great Depression at home and the rise of Fascism abroad.” He went on to write that despite having “escaped the seductions of Soviet Communism,” he yet deplored the “poverty amid plenty” which seemed to characterize capitalism, and perceived “in democratic socialism the only viable alternative to the horrors of both Fascism and Communist totalitarianism. As Marxists—and, in some sense, we were all Marxists in those days—we believed that men were creatures of their social systems” (1978, p. 332). In this way, anthropology made sense. It, rather than, say, psychology, was a way to study social systems alongside the human psyche. As for sociology, it had long followed Durkheim and disdained any serious interest in matters psychological. Moreover, embracing the centrality of ethnographic fieldwork, anthropology was decidedly empirical. It was the perfect handmaiden to philosophy and, Mel believed, the royal road to understanding both culture and human nature. This was in fact the title Mel had given to the essay.

There was something else Mel had alluded to, which linked the philosophers and the spirit of the Enlightenment to his Marxism and his critique of capitalism’s inherent competitiveness, exploitation and injustice: the idea of human and social perfectibility; the notion, Mel wrote, “of a society in which men were motivated by cooperation, altruism and mutual aid...not viewed as a utopian quest—nor...as a secular derivative of the religious visions of Amos or Isaiah, those Hebrew prophets who had earlier influenced me” (1978, p. 333). I find this brings several threads of his biography together: not just “why anthropology?” but why the collectivist kibbutz, that “venture in utopia” (the subtitle of his first kibbutz book); and why, after reading Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and his other essays in the sociology of religion, Mel’s work came so strongly to focus on the anthropology and psychodynamics of religious beliefs and behavior. His allusion to Amos and Isaiah references not only his own religious

background, and perhaps his time at the Jewish Theological Seminary, but also, of all the Hebrew prophets, the two most closely associated in the minds of many with biblical condemnations of injustice and divine strivings for its opposite. And that important qualification—the commitment to a secular, not a religious or spiritual, framework for thinking about social justice—serves to record Mel’s road not taken, a road away from seminary towards an anthropology department.

I take the liberty to rehearse all of these events and opinions, derived from his brief reflections on these matters at the beginning of 1978 essay, because while they reveal important things about Mel Spiro—his progressive politics, his commitments to social justice, secular values, and Enlightenment ideals—they are virtually invisible, absent from his public scholarship and published writings, before the mid-1980s. Before then, you couldn’t really tell much about Mel’s politics or his feelings about religion, separate from the positivist analyses of its psychodynamic causes and social functions, by reading his copious publications on religion. (You could tell much, if you knew him, from how he talked regretfully about the ways Israel was changing as it became less socialist, more nationalist, xenophobic, and religious, or about its treatment of Palestinians. But he didn’t write or publish on these things; they weren’t anthropology.) Similarly, his sympathy for democratic socialism, which may (along with deep familial connections) have drawn him to the kibbutz originally, did not prevent his conclusion, based upon hard data and close, long-term empirical observation, that utopian ideology and concomitantly radical social institutions were not enough, in the face of an obdurate human nature, to create wholly “New Men and New Women,” and perhaps particularly the latter. Mel himself would perhaps put this in terms he learned in his studies of the philosophy of science: Whatever sympathies, biases, political beliefs, prejudices, childhood traumas, or experiences—even neuroses—pushed one towards the study of some phenomenon or another, and thus underlay the context of discovery, this context must in the end always submit to the discipline of science, determined by verification or justification. And as for the Enlightenment, as a scientist, Mel’s admiration for its spirit and canons did not require special notation or reference in his writings because they were integral to his very concept of what anthropology was and how one went about doing it. Reading the work leading up to the 1978 autobiography, and that essay in retrospect, one is struck by how Mel had engaged in many theoretical disagreements with his many interlocutors, but never in polemic. The 1978 piece ends rather mildly with a call, as the so-called New Ethnography and cognitive anthropology were gaining prominence, that one should not neglect the “etic” (transcultural, comparative, observer-based) goal

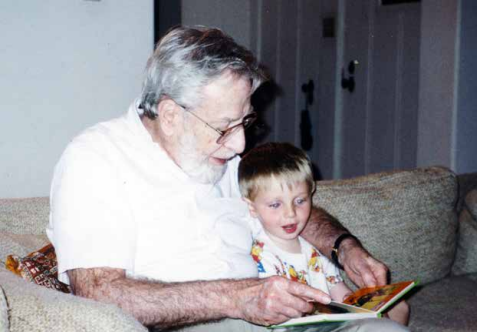
of explanation by over-privileging the narrowly ethnographic “emic” (the world as it looks exclusively from the native’s point of view) goals of description. (One can note in passing that Mel shared this opinion, at least, with the cultural materialist anthropologist Marvin Harris, who wrote at the same time. Harris’s writing, in contrast with Mel’s, was disputatious and polemical from the get-go. And while Harris pointedly included culture and personality, Freud, and psychological anthropology generally in his roster of wrong-headed approaches to anthropology as science, he shared with Mel the deepest commitment to science itself and wrote with great derision about postmodernism; see Harris 1979.)

But already by the middle and late 1970s the ground was shifting and the fundamental epistemological assumptions under which Mel conceived his work were being shaken. The modernism championed during and after the Enlightenment was increasingly challenged in academic (in the humanities and some of the social sciences) and intellectual thought by a variegated movement, aptly called “postmodernism.” Coming from a variety of intellectual sources (not the proper subject of this biographical memoir), it was taken up by many cultural anthropologists, first in subfields briefly called “symbolic” or “interpretivist” anthropology. Some of these anthropologists were immensely influential, including Clifford Geertz and David Schneider, former colleagues of Mel in Chicago. By the mid-1980s some form of postmodernism had become for many the dominant representation of cultural anthropology within and outside the profession. It was imbued with notions of radical cultural relativism and oriented methodologically to genres of textual deconstruction. For many, it came allied to a post-colonial critique and distrust of “grand theory,” yet with a vaguely Marxist conception of “praxis.” It was exemplified for many by George Marcus and Michael Fisher’s (1986) *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*.

By the time I wrote a chapter on Mel’s work for a festschrift in his honor (published in 1990 but completed several years before that), the first of a series of papers by him critiquing this postmodern turn in anthropology had already appeared or were in preparation (Avruch 1990). My chapter took note of them but not satisfactorily, largely because Mel’s critique was at the time of my writing, still in *medias res*. More than two decades have passed since then, and the books (especially Spiro 1992 and 1997) and articles (especially Spiro 1984, 1986, 1993, and 1996) by Mel contra the postmodernist turn now constitute a separate, and final, part of his life’s work and his legacy. I do not think Mel wrote them in the same spirit of intellectual collegiality that characterized his earlier critiques of, say, structural-functionalism or Levi-Strauss. This later work

seems very different in tone from the work that came before. Moreover, the tone seems to intensify from the earliest to the latest. To be sure, they are written with his usual attention to exploring and assessing the logic of his interlocutor's arguments, and they are especially acute in pointing to the logical missteps or inconsistencies among them. Substantively, they deal with questions of cultural determinism and relativism, conceptions of self in non-Western societies and, perhaps most controversially, with gender. But increasingly, Mel wrote as if he saw himself engaged in nothing less than a *kulturkampf*, no longer in argument against the logical, factual, or conceptual adequacy of this theory or another, but in mounting a defense of what (after John Searle) he called "The Western Rationalist Tradition." He saw in postmodernism and related movements the wholesale repudiation of the rationalist tradition, particularly its fundamental axiom of metaphysical realism, the existence of a mind- and language-independent external reality, and the existence of objective truths discoverable by the canons and standard of science. More than anti-science, Mel saw in the most extreme voices of this movement nothing less than the dark forces of a malevolent anti-liberalism, indeed a spirit of nihilism. In particular it was extreme cultural relativism, which denied the commonalities of human experience and featured the notion that "Other" is completely unknowable, that Mel reacted to. He wrote in 1996 that the dismissal of scientific epistemologies, if successful, would have "disastrous consequences not only...for scholarship but for civil society" (*Comparative Studies* p. 768). Tellingly, he concluded that same article by quoting the "distinguished and anti-fascist political philosopher" Hannah Arendt, who wrote that a commitment to metaphysical realism and thus the search for truth was a "necessary condition for politics" itself (p. 776). In these later works Mel's politics, his own deep political commitments and his essential world view, alluded to his in 1978 autobiographical essay but invisible in his scientific work, explicitly emerged. In these works his interlocutors were no longer merely intellectual adversaries, as in the past, but ideological, moral, and political ones, as well.

It would be a mistake to see Mel as entirely alone in this critique. I mentioned Marvin Harris earlier, and one should note also the impassioned, derisive, and acerbic writings of Ernest Gellner (1992) against postmodernism. Both Harris and Gellner—the latter was certainly admired by Mel—were even more fierce polemicists than was Mel. Meanwhile, postmodern (or later, post-structuralist) thinking made modest inroads in archeology, and few in linguistics or biological anthropology. Nevertheless, Mel felt embattled. In his acknowledgments to *Gender Ideology and Psychological Reality*, he thanked the Yale University Press editor for "her willingness to publish this book despite warnings about



Mel with grandchildren in 2005 (top) and 2003 (bottom).

‘political pitfalls’” (Spiro 1997:xix). More than this, Mel felt increasingly isolated from the mainstream of thinking in cultural anthropology and from many younger anthropologists. It seemed to me he began to find more personal and intellectual satisfaction in his psychoanalytic practice.

I was Mel’s student at UCSD from 1972–1978; he sat on my doctoral committee. As a lecturer in the department for a year following my PhD, I was his colleague. Throughout our relationship Mel was unfailingly kind, generous, and supportive toward me. The clarity and acuteness of his writing and work—the meticulous care with which facts were marshaled and arguments were constructed—became a model for my own work and set a standard I still try to achieve. When I visited him in La Jolla over the years, all too infrequently, he would always express great interest, and a little bit of skepticism, in the direction my own academic career has taken, away from “mainstream” cultural anthropology and into the more “applied” study of conflict analysis and resolution. (“Applied” though it may be, I would never venture the word praxis in his presence!) Mel thought that, on the whole, what I was doing seemed a good thing, but

even if he admired the implicit and prosocial intentions of my field, he remained Mel with respect to wondering whether the study of “peace,” admirable politics aside, was in fact too openly political—whether his student had sufficiently mastered the distinction between contexts of discovery and verification. Was it science? More than once over the years, over lunch at the UCSD faculty club, he would pose the same question: “I know how you study war, Kevin. But how do you study peace?”

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