

# This Week's Citation Classic®

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Geertz C. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic, 1973. 476 p.  
[Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ]

This volume is a collection of papers published between 1957 and 1972 on various problems of interpretation in anthropology. The bulk of the papers are empirical, devoted to such subjects as religion, art, ideology, and the like. The whole is introduced by a long essay outlining the problem of anthropological interpretation in general. [The SSC/® indicates that this book has been cited in over 1,100 publications, not including those to the original papers.]

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After some years of publishing empirically oriented books and articles on Java, Bali, and Morocco, which mostly specialists read, I collected in this volume the more theoretically pointed of the articles and attempted to explain the intellectual orientation lying behind my work in general, with the hope that I might attract a rather wider, if still essentially scholarly, audience. The result was as planned: all sorts of scholars began commenting, positively and negatively, on my work, and a number of general controversies, still unresolved, were opened.

The burden of my argument was that symbolic forms played a critical role in shaping social behavior and that we lacked as yet very effective means for studying such forms. I proposed a few such means, but my main point was to make the need for them felt. This theme was then spun out more explicitly for various areas of anthropological research, from hominid evolution, through religious and artistic expression, to political ideology, and ending with what has

turned out to be my most famous, or notorious, single piece, my study of "The Balinese cockfight."

The argument of this piece, that the cockfight was a symbolic enactment of Balinese status conflicts, has hardly persuaded everyone, and there has been a small secondary literature that has grown up around it, both supportive and critical. Just why this piece has had such resonance (such that I expect to be remembered, if at all, as the man who wrote "that piece on cocks"), I don't quite know; perhaps it has something to do with the drama of it all and the somewhat personal tone of the opening section. The introductory "theoretical" essay, "Thick description," has become a bit of a slogan both within and without anthropology, mostly in service of opposition to "high science" views of social research.

Indeed, what has been most surprising, and most rewarding to me, has been the fact that the book has had as significant an impact in neighboring fields—history, philosophy, criticism—as in anthropology as such, for I have never been fully happy wholly enclosed in the "profession" of anthropology, which, like my teacher, Clyde Kluckhohn, I have always regarded more as a poaching license than anything else. That this book was in fact produced after I left a university department of anthropology to go to a research institute where I was the only anthropologist, and still am, is perhaps not an accident.

In any case, the book has been widely translated, praised and attacked by turns, and is still very much in print and selling. As a partisan of Belloc's jingle—"When I am dead, I hope it may be said: / 'His sins were scarlet, but his books were read'"—this pleases me.

[For a brief history of popular-culture studies, see the recent review by C. Mukerji and M. Schudson.1]

1. Mukerji C & Schudson M. Popular culture. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 12:47-66, 1986.

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