

## Introduction: *The Interpretation of Cultures at Fifty*

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### Abstract

Introducing the symposium “*The Interpretation of Cultures at Fifty*,” editors Andrea Cossu and Matteo Bortolini reflect on the dynamics of the iconicization of texts and the paradoxical quality of so-called “classics”: their being present while being rewritten and forgotten. A brief illustration of the papers by the contributors to the symposium — Joan W. Scott, Anne Taylor and Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ann Swidler and Ronald Jepperson, Simon Susen, and Monika Krause — completes the introduction.

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Fifty years after its publication, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973) has become an object of celebration but also, and quite paradoxically, a *forgettable* classic. Absurd as it may seem to advance such a point at the very beginning of a symposium that brings together so many renowned scholars offering their take on Clifford Geertz's work, we would like to explore the peculiar dynamic of intellectual forgetfulness and argue that this is what makes Geertz's work alive, and at the same time it is what allows the new interpretations that have, in recent years, redrawn the picture of his intellectual trajectory, position, and development.

The argument that *The Interpretation of Cultures* (henceforth *TIOC*) is forgettable — and in most cases forgotten outright — is at the same time counterintuitive and provocative, almost revisionist in its outlook. After all, the book has been getting, in the past ten years, an average of more than 7,000 citations per year, and, if we subscribe to the bibliometric perversions that characterize contemporary social science, its impact is probably comparable or even higher than that of other classics like *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1956) or *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1979). And yet, if one were to unpack this astounding impact, one would clearly see a pattern founded on an internal ranking among the individual essays collected in the book — a “sacred trilogy” that makes *TIOC* a repository of sorts, rather than a comprehensive call for interpretive social science. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” and “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” would probably account for the majority of those citations, with “Religion as a Cultural System” coming as a distant third. Nobody, today, is likely to spend hours skimming “Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali”, “Ritual and Social Change” or “The Integrative Revolution”. To a student who has been exposed almost exclusively to the hermeneutic tour de force of winks and twitches, or to the intricacies of betting on the margins of a cockfight ring, these essays seem half-baked: too much modernization theory, too little interpretivism, too much movement at the center of the attention space of American Cold War Social Science, too little politics and critique. Retrospective evaluations of *TIOC* (Swidler, 1996; Burke, 2007; Davis, 2009) and the papers collected in this symposium are not exceptions to the rule.<sup>1</sup>

This is why, while Geertz and some of his work remain firmly in the scarcely populated realm of classic or paradigmatic authors and texts, *The Interpretation of Cultures* as a whole is indeed forgettable. One can easily be attracted to it like a magnet, but the book would then be the subject of a series of (pre-determined and pre-digested) selections that are at the same time operations of canonization *and* forgetting. There is also another sense in which *TIOC* is forgettable, as a result not of a centripetal force, but of a centrifugal one. It is a much rarer occurrence, but — to a *few* of us, to be honest — *TIOC* may become the object of an unpacking-and-reconstructing effort at understanding Geertz's intellectual trajectory. In this particular case, *TIOC* becomes a reference book or a signpost, but by no means the end of the story. The story up to *TIOC* is precisely the story of continuities, transformations, modernizations, and tales from the field that the most recent scholarship has tried to account for and come to terms with. *The Interpretation of Cultures* becomes, *de facto*, forgettable because it blocks a total understanding of Geertz's subtle and yet very real transition from functionalism and modernization theory to interpretivism, an intellectual re-positioning that many take for granted although it stands at the center of the process of becoming “Clifford Geertz”. In other words, as a classic and/or an alleged exemplar, *TIOC*-the-cultural-object risks occupying the scene where a very different drama — one of subtle intellectual continuities, rather than a radical and irreparable

1. Besides the authors of this introduction (Cossu, 2021 & 2022; Bortolini, 2023 & 2024), the only contemporary scholar who focuses on Geertz's pre-interpretive work is the Chicago historian Joel Isaac (2018 & 2022). Another notable exception is Paidipaty (2020).

break — might be staged.

The paradox is that everything is, so to speak, in plain view: the book indeed includes a huge number of papers that cannot be reduced either to stereotypical modernization theory or Geertzian interpretivism. While in the first case *TIOC* was interesting as the point of departure of a transformation in “the way we think about the way we think” (Geertz, 1983, p. 20), in this case it is by analyzing the book as a cultural object per se, reconstructing its history, its structure, and its production process that we can understand its place in the development not only of Clifford Geertz the intellectual, but also of “Clifford Geertz” as part of a wider cultural imaginary (for a first attempt at doing so, see Bortolini & Cossu, 2015; see also Lutkehaus, 2008). Obviously enough, such an analysis needs that kind of archival and interpretive work that we have seen in Alvaro Santana Acuña’s *Ascent to Glory* (2021) or Clayton Childress’s *Under the Cover* (2019), that is, historically savvy books in the sociology of culture which transcend methodological, theoretical, and object-related cleavages. From this point of view, Geertz and his work become a site for studying wider cultural and structural processes (Guhin, 2014) such as the constitution, consolidation, and transformation of scholarly habits, *personae*, and practices; the emergence and establishment of new scientific paradigms; the dynamics and porousness of disciplinary boundaries and their infrastructures (Bortolini & Cossu, 2020); the creation of scientific and intellectual movements vs. the founding of institutions; and the celebrification of intellectuals and academics. All of these analyses will, over time, contribute to the complex dynamic of memorialization, historicization, oblivion, and re-theorization that affects any author or work in the intellectual field.

In the meantime, readers from different disciplines might find in the collection of essays presented in this section a diverse and thorough assessment of the legacy of Clifford Geertz some fifty years after the publication of *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Testifying to the very different ways in which Geertz’s work has been appraised in the long-term, the papers are rather heterogeneous in their approach, length, and articulation. To begin with, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Anne Taylor (2024) read Geertz as a forerunner of strong-program cultural sociology, but criticize his scarce, if not non-existent, post-*TIOC* contribution to the task of theorizing and generalizing. In the lengthiest and most articulated paper in the collection, Simon Susen (2024) looks at the many connections and ramifications of Geertz’s legacy. Central to his treatment is the idea of situating debates within wider intellectual and theoretical panoramas, identifying conceptual pairs that constitute a necessary and useful analytical infrastructure for assessing the continued importance of at least some of Geertz’s ideas.

Reworking a document they have pondered for a long time, Ann Swidler and Ronald Jepperson (2024) introduce the distinction between meaning and meaningfulness to clarify what we are saying when we talk of interpretation and explanation, and unearth some hidden analytical tools used by Geertz and others to assess causality in interpretive social science. What interpretivists seek to explain, in their view, is how things, people, practices, events, and texts become meaningful for a certain group of people, rather than the meaning of individual acts, events, or practices. At least from this point of view, their final assessment is at odds with Alexander and Taylor’s, for they see Clifford Geertz as a much more general theorist than he (and most critics) was ready to admit. Much more critical is Monika Krause (2024). Her paper — which one might rename “The road(s) not taken” — shows how Geertz’s appropriation of Max Weber’s work was strongly selective, and effectively barred the appreciation of other hermeneutical traditions and ways to understand the relationship between description, explanation, and interpretation. Krause suggests a reappraisal of both neglected scholarly traditions and the complexities of Weber’s original rejection of Wilhelm Dilthey’s understanding of the

hermeneutical problem.

Last but not least, Geertz's colleague at the Institute for Advanced Study, historian Joan W. Scott, re-reads *The Interpretation of Cultures* starting from an old copy of the book which she once shared with her ex-husband (Scott, 2024). Instead of memorializing her personal relationship with Geertz, she goes back to the historical object itself, but her reading ultimately points to the 2020s and the challenges that finding a fair balance of universality and particularity pose for social science from both an epistemic and a normative point of view. Just like Alexander and Taylor, Scott now finds the center of *TIOC* in a paper not included in the "sacred trilogy" mentioned earlier — *Ideology as a Cultural System*. To those of us who still read, use, and cite *The Interpretation of Cultures* as a mere signpost for interpretive social science, this suggests that we should explore its many rich and unexpected articulations and levels of meaning—and, maybe, of meaningfulness.

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