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"Ideology" and After: Reinscribing the Aesthetics of Symbolic Structure in Geertz

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Abstract

This essay explores the transformational effects that Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* had on the development of a meaning-centered cultural sociology. Though "Deep Play" and "Thick Description" were his most popular essays, we argue that it was "Ideology as a Cultural System" that marked Geertz's most significant contribution. In response to Parsonian functionalism and conflict theory, Geertz's emphasis on interpretation — inspired by cutting-edge work in the humanities in the mid-20th century — brought the relative autonomy of culture back into focus in the human sciences. While considering how "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" and "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" also helped pave the way for a systematic theory of culture, we argue that they also represented a dangerous new tendency in Geertz's work, namely his refusal to move beyond empirical description. The late resistance to theorizing undercut the purchase of Geertz's breakthrough ideas for contemporary efforts at socio-cultural explanation.

Keywords: Clifford Geertz; cultural sociology; thick description; interpretation.

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1 Introduction[1]

The cultural turn in the human sciences began in the late 1960s, following in the wake of functionalism and the linguistic turn that, after Wittgenstein and Austin, transformed contemporary philosophy. It came to the discipline of sociology only two decades later, in the 1980s, when a new generation of post-Parsonian sociologists began to metabolize the thinking of Clifford Geertz. Yet while most scholars focus on Geertz's "Deep Play" and "Thick Description" — by the far the most popular of his cultural essays, at least in terms of citation count — we argue that "Ideology as a Cultural System" is the most important of these essays; not only of those collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures* but in Geertz's entire compendium.

"Ideology," along with its twin essay "Religion as a Cultural System," is often overlooked because the theoretical problems it addresses have been forgotten, swept away with broad brush rejections of functionalism. We agree that functionalism is a languishing theoretical tradition that mistakenly concluded society could be like a well-oiled machine, insofar as institutions and people could integrate the same values. But in their dismissal of Parsons, the standard cursory accounts miss what actually was the problem: not his focus on meanings but his effort on tying meanings too closely to social institutions. In a bold challenge to his former teacher, Geertz rejects this reductive approach to "ideology," and argues that we must differentiate and study the *cultural structure* itself — separated from the social and psychological systems — and that we can do so only by employing tools from the humanities. On the basis of this revisionist reading of the relation between Geertz and Parsons, we demonstrate how Geertz's emphasis on the structural power of culture is a truly radical innovation essential for the development of a cultural sociology.[2]

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1. This essay draws from our discussion of Clifford Geertz in our book currently in preparation, *Cultural Sociology: The Lectures* (Jeffrey Alexander with Anne Taylor, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press).

2. In this regard, our argument differs from the implicit understanding of the theoretical stakes involved in the Geertz-Parsons relationship that Andrea Cossu (2021) reconstructs in his beautifully rendered and deeply researched historical "Clifford Geertz, Intellectual Autonomy and Interpretive Social Science." We agree with Cossu that, in principle, Parsons' concept of an analytically independent "cultural system" was, and is, broad enough to accommodate, at a metatheoretical level, the radical critique Geertz levels against Parsons and other functionalists in his "Ideology" essay. But we do not agree that this effort by Geertz was, in fact, an effort to "write [action theory's] fundamental code" in such a manner that "Geertz's thinking could be integrated with Parsons' framework" (p. 349), so that the revised cultural theory could "bring the cultural system back into action" (p. 357). We believe, to the contrary, that Parsons' thinking about the relation of the cultural to the social system firmly rejected the implications of the cultural turn in the human sciences that Geertz was promoting, and that Parsons was only interested in conceptualizing that subset of culture that became "values," creating what later came to be called the "pattern maintenance" subsystem of the social system. Without understanding that it is this that Geertz's radicalism was directed at, it's impossible to see what Geertz was really up to in a theoretical sense. This is quite apart from what Geertz's complex motivation structure might have been at the time, which undoubtedly was torn between loyalty and rebellion. Joel Isaac (2018) makes similar arguments.

   What we demonstrate in the following is that Geertz reconstructed the sociological relevance of humanities' aesthetic theorizing to argue against Parsons' moralistic, equilibrium-directed "value reduction." It is particularly important to be clear about this because this Geertzian move is at the heart of the critical attitude toward functionalist sociology of culture taken by the Strong Program's cultural sociology, which first informed Alexander's empirical and theoretical writing in the middle and late 1980s.

   In the first sentence of this note, we use the phrase "implicit understanding" of the theoretical stakes Cossu sets out because analytical precision about these stakes is not the point of Cossu's investigation. Whereas he criticizes the discussion of Geertz–Parsons on the grounds that there has been no "attention to the socially imbedded activities through which these positions formed," we do not believe that such historical attention,

From this position, then, "Deep Play" and "Thick Description" actually represent a declension, a downward turn away from the radical contributions "Ideology" brought to the table. Geertz ignores his earlier, more complex and analytical theorizing, embracing what seems to be a merely descriptive empiricism. We wish to read these essays differently, however. Considering "Ideology" as a powerful theoretical rebuttal to Parsons, "Deep Play" is an attempt to show scholars *how* to draw out the cultural structure, suggesting it can only be understood in aesthetic terms. This understanding also shows how "Thick Description" itself needs to be reread. Contemporary readers think they are being "Geertzian" if they focus with empirical specificity to detail the difference between a wink and a blink; in doing so, they miss the cultural structures that actors draw from to make sense of both. This is what happens when contemporary "culturally-oriented" scholars follow "Thick Description" in eschewing theory. It is ironic that, in doing so, they miss exactly the radically new theory Geertz laid out in "Ideology."

In what follows, we first reconstruct our distinctive understanding of what the actual failures of functionalism were. Only then do we proceed in reconstructing how the radical innovations of "Ideology" provide a way to theorize, methodologically reveal, and describe the cultural structures embedded in society. After contrasting this breakthrough with Geertz's less impressive contributions in "Deep Play" and "Thick Description," we conclude by demonstrating how the contemporary tradition of cultural pragmatics builds off the positive contributions of "Ideology" and resolves the problems of the other, later essays.

2 The Failure of Functionalism

In the 1960s, the fate of a meaning-centered sociology was hanging in the balance. Though functionalism had attempted to salvage cultural elements from classical sociology, the manner in which it had modeled the relation of culture and society was increasingly understood to be counterproductive. Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils' (1951) three-system model had marked an original and sophisticated approach to conceptualizing the relative autonomy of culture — which Durkheim had highlighted in his later writings — while also acknowledging the role of institutions à la Max Weber, and the emotional territory explored by Freud. Yet, in offering this new conceptualization, Parsons insisted that the discipline of sociology should focus exclusively on the social, and not the cultural, system. Rather than examining such elements as narratives, symbols, or codes, the functionalist would examine socialization into already-existing shared values via internalization, and their institutionalization in value-complementary organizations. Via value transmission and value maintenance, the *stability* of interactional relationships and organizations would be assured.

From Parsons' perspective, this lens had the advantage of avoiding the territory of semioticians, literary theorists, and anthropologists. From our perspective, however, it had a distinct disadvantage in more or less reducing culture to instructions for how to perform narrowly-defined social roles. In so doing, functionalism conceptualized culture from the perspective of the social system rather than looking at the social system from the perspective of culture. The ef-

welcome as it is, adds much in itself to the *analytic* understanding of these positions. In making this rather brutal statement, we find ourselves very much agreeing with the position Robert Merton (1968) articulated in his early essay "On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory" (pp. 23–59). Alexander (1982) challenges this Mertonian position in his early metatheoretical work on the history of sociological thought, which occupied volumes 2–4 of *Theoretical Logic in Sociology* — but he engaged in this historical investigation in a rather presentist manner, in order to pursue the analytical argument he had laid out in volume 1.

fect was to emaciate the complex internal processes by which collective meaning is constructed, undermining the power of collective meaning to bewilder, disillusion, inflame, and inspire.

By reducing culture in this way, the spirit or "haunting" of the real by the ideal disappears. In its post-war haze, functionalism insisted that, once values are patterned and integrated, societal coherence can be achieved. In fact, stability is a rare occurrence. Social actors will always orient themselves toward broader, more idealized forms of social meaning, not only in their minds but in their hearts. We carry hopes, dreams, and fears within ourselves, not just for people and institutions, but for ourselves, too. New codes, narratives, symbols, and feelings are always waiting just beyond what is institutionalized in the social system as currently constituted, waiting to be evoked — by visionary leaders and social movements — against "things as they are," waiting to be institutionalized by new kinds of organized social arrangements. Brave activists stand up to the abuses of unbridled power, voters cast ballots in great tidal waves of democratic change, and religious schisms birth refreshed spiritual devotion. The values of today can be changed tomorrow. The specter of the ideal remains.

The limits of functionalism cast a long shadow. Critics were quick to point out that social stability is an illusion, and to insist on what they believed to be the contrary — that conflict is foundational to the social world.

> The existence of consensus has served sociology as an operating assumption for so long that its heuristic status has been forgotten. Treating a proposition as proven does not in fact prove it. On the face of it, this proposition violates the evidence we do have, which suggests that complex and rationalized societies like our own are arenas for conflicts of beliefs and moral standards unmatched in comparative and historical perspective (Birnbaum, 1955, p. 7).

Norman Birnbaum was right to point out that contests of meaning abound in contemporary society. His and others' emphasis on conflict, however, sustained the functionalist's unfortunate insistence on looking at culture from the point of view of the demands of the social system. This new paradigm of "conflict theory" turned sociology's gaze away from culture entirely. Conflict theory focused exclusively on institutions, organizations, and interactional processes — with meaning, when it was considered all, treated as a *product of* material, rational, or cognitive forces. To view it as anything else would reflect a misguided commitment to stability and consensus, or the putatively naïve assumption that meaning can be studied as a structure in itself. Functionalism may have been dead, but its errors lived on.

Conflict cannot be understood exclusively, or even primarily, in material terms, and a commitment to studying meaning from the bottom up does not mean a commitment to studying stability. Behind every modern social conflict are aspirations and criticisms filled to the brim with meaningful beliefs about transcendence, morality, gender, money, violence, race, sexuality, and territory. These meanings are open, blurry, and contingent. A sociology that could move beyond not only functionalism, but also conflict theory, would need to respect the idea, as Durkheim did, that culture is relatively autonomous from the social system and institutional (and material) power. It would have to rewind Parsons and go back to the classics to reimagine their insights into pre-modern forms, like ritual or belief in the sacred, and challenge the traditional/modern binary plaguing social science. It would also have to go beyond the late Durkheim's focus on premodern times, accepting the specificity of modernity and linking cultural meaning to critique, division, conflict, and change. As it turned out, in order truly to rehabilitate the sociological study of culture, thinkers would need to move not only beyond functionalism and conflict theory, but beyond the discipline of sociology itself.

Geertz was the thinker most prepared to lead this charge. New ways of thinking about meaning had crystallized in the mid-20th century — in literary studies, philosophy, arts, theatre, and anthropology — and Geertz, in sharp contrast with Parsons, was thoroughly at home with these new lines of thought. Though Geertz's disciplinary home was anthropology, he had an expansive, inter-disciplinary network of inspiration and colleagues. He worked with functionalist anthropologists who had adopted Durkheim's (1912) late work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, as their own, and he immersed himself in the most sophisticated humanities scholarship of the time, including those in literature and the arts. It was this immersion that inspired his rebellion against Parsons.[3] Of course, Geertz was not the only student of Parsons to rebel; Robert Bellah, a close friend of Geertz, staged his own — albeit subtle — transgressions (Bortolini, 2021). Geertz, however, waged a boldly outspoken critique of the functionalist approach to culture, and, in doing so, laid down the necessary foundations to go beyond it. Who better than anthropologists — with their studious emphasis on symbols, myth, and ritual — to bring the relative autonomy of culture back to the center of modern social science? By emphasizing interpretation over function, aesthetics over pragmatics, and autonomous symbolization over rationality, Geertz reimagined the concepts of ideology, social status, and conflict, and the very meaning of interpretive empirical research. Without Geertz and the new movement of cultural *anthropologists* he led (including Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and Marshall Sahlins), there could be no cultural *sociology*.

3 Ideology as a Cultural System

Geertz articulated these new ideas most clearly in the exquisitely argued "Ideology as a Cultural System" (1973a), which became his single most influential theoretical work — not only in *The Interpretation of Cultures* but the entirety of his life's work. Not only did "Ideology" speak to fears that radical left- and right-wing movements were overwhelming Western democracies following the Second World War, but it also challenged the narrowly normative and binary modernist thinking that was hegemonic in the social science of that time. Ideology itself had come to be used "ideologically," as a way of explaining ideas that were deemed irrational and unreasonable. By calling antisemitism, racism, communism, and fascism "ideologies," social scientists were coding them as backwards, anti-modern and anti-scientific. By this logic, it should be possible to do away with ideology entirely, since it was widely believed that a modern society could be based only on beliefs that are rational and empirically valid.

While a card-carrying social scientist, Geertz viewed such a clean and neat resolution to society's ills as utterly implausible. "Having become an accusation," he wondered, how could ideology "remain an analytic concept" useful for social science (Geertz, 1973a, p. 194)? He answered this question by rejecting the rationalist framework upon which such conceptualizations of ideology were based. A social science that claims exclusive devotion to rationality assumes that rationality is constant and unchanging, no matter where you are in the world.

3. Writing to an anthropological audience, Poornima Paidipaty (2020) makes a similar argument in emphasizing Geertz's turn away from Parsons. But rather than focus on "Ideology as a Cultural System," Paidipaty argues that "The Impact of Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" — also published in *Interpretation of Cultures* — is *the* undervalued essay for tracking Geertz's theoretical development post-Parsons, and specifically his interest in connecting human psychology (via the concept "ontology") with culture. Paidipaty then reads other essays, like "Ideology," through this "informatic ontology." We have real historical doubts about the temporality of this argument, since Parsons was highly aware of Norton Wiener's cybernetic theory already by the 1950s. More important is that, in our view, cybernetics has little to do with the theoretical innovations Geertz introduced in the early and mid-1960s.

And any cultural anthropologist worth their salt — immersed as they are in different cultures — knows that no belief, nor even rationality, is constant. Such a view upholds the binary of "traditional/modern" — a dangerous, slippery ethical slope.

Ideology should not be conceived, evaluated, valued, or de-valued as true or false. Ideologies are rather "maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience" (Geertz, 1973a, p. 220).[4] In fact, Geertz argued quite boldly that people in contemporary society *need* ideology! Ideologies allow people to make sense of the world, not rationally in the scientific sense but *meaningfully*. They are "figurative" and aesthetic constructions of reality, like a poem, a play, or a metaphor. Ideology is not a cognitive error — an attempt at *explanation* that fails — but an act of *interpretation*, an attempt to figure out what things mean by symbolizing them in an affective and effective way.

> And it is, in turn, the attempt of ideologies to render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them, that accounts both for the ideologies' highly figurative nature and for the intensity with which, once accepted, they are held. As metaphor extends language by broadening its semantic range, enabling it to express meanings it cannot or at least cannot yet express literally, so the head-on clash of literal meanings in ideology — the irony, the hyperbole, the overdrawn antithesis — provides novel symbolic frames against which to match the myriad "unfamiliar somethings" that, like a journey to a strange country, are produced by a transformation in political life (Geertz, 1973a, p. 220).

Aesthetic constructs cannot be true or false. You need to evaluate whether they work, how they work, and what they evoke. You must analyze their performative effect.

Was Ansel Adams, the great photographer of American nature (Turnage, 2023), a more truthful photographer than Kwame Braithwaite (Braithwaite et al., 2019), the Harlem photographer who invented and then recorded the first stirrings of "Black is Beautiful"? As an artistic movement, is *realism* more truthful than *surrealism*? Is minimalism more truthful than abstract expressionism? Even to ask such questions of art demonstrates their absurdity! Jane Austen's (2000) *Pride and Prejudice* begins with the line, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." (p. 3) Is this statement empirically factual? Whether this sentence — one of the most famous in literary history — is empirically true is beside the point. It is an aesthetically powerful statement, meant to immediately convey the assuredness, or the "pride" and "prejudice," of the two main characters, as well as the sensorial feeling that the entire world *is*, for the Bennets, the small village in which they reside, and that its social norms cover the entire universe — as *they* (or Austen) could possibly imagine it. Surely, then, it is more analytically useful and hermeneutically tuneful, to consider *Pride and Prejudice*, as Said (1993) says in his analysis of *Mansfield Park*, not as true or false, but as a spatially-situated representation of British ideas "of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behavior, moral values" (p. 77), an idealization of family, marriage, and, "by that very odd combination of casualness and stress... the importance of an empire to the situation at home" (p. 85).

Geertz argues that modernist social scientific theories portray ideology as merely a dependent variable. For one popular approach, interest theory, "ideology is a mask and a weapon,"

4. Note the nod to the late Durkheim here. In order to develop his alternative model of ideology, Geertz would have to go back and unearth a different view of Durkheim and the classics.

and "ideological pronouncements are seen against the background of a universal struggle for advantage" (Geertz, 1973a, p. 201). This is the domain of Marx and Weber, where modern persons are described as relentlessly pursuing their own interests to gain power over others. It also harkens back to Parsons, for its explanatory power resides at the level of the social system. Strain theory, on the other hand, is both "a symptom and a remedy," where ideological pronouncements are seen "against the background of a chronic effort to correct sociopsychological disequilibrium" (p. 201). This, too, reflects Parsons and Shils' three-part model, where ideas reflect emotional or psychic anxieties caused by difficult role relationships. "In the modern world at least, most men live lives of patterned desperation," Geertz writes of strain theory, playing on Thoreau's words, arguing that "ideological thought is, then, regarded as (one sort of) response to this desperation" (p. 204).

So, while interest theory emphasizes social situations, and strain theory the psychological reaction to them, neither has anything at all to say about the human need to make meaning. These approaches fundamentally ignore the relatively autonomous, independently causal, vigorously *cultural* level of ideology, the level that makes ideology into a "cultural system."

> The reason for this weakness is the virtual absence in strain theory (or in interest theory either) of anything more than the most rudimentary conception of the processes of symbolic formulation. There is a good deal of talk about emotions "finding a symbolic outlet" or "becoming attached to appropriate symbols" — but very little idea of how the trick is really done. The link between the causes of ideology and its effects seems adventitious because the connecting element — the autonomous process of symbolic formulation — is passed over in virtual silence (Geertz, 1973a, p. 207).

In contrast, Geertz argues that social science needs to take the meaningful structure of rhetoric seriously, and insists that, to understand what meaning does — to understand "the autonomous process of symbolic formation" — we need to turn to the humanities, which study such things as metaphor, analogy, irony, ambiguity, and style, the patterning of words themselves.

Consider these tropes: "the sanctity of life"; "baby killers"; "get big government off our backs"; "make America great again!" People on the left are inclined to explain such right-wing ideas, and the reactionary movements connected with them, in terms of interest theory, suggesting they are fueled by the greedy self-interest of wealthy conservatives like the Koch brothers, conservative radio networks, extremist think tanks, and the interests of big business. Strain theory is also invoked to explain conservative movement towards the far-right. Books like *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), a memoir by Yale Law graduate and U.S. Republican Senator J.D. Vance, and *Strangers in their Own Land* (2016), a sociological study by scholar Arlie Hochschild, both argue that American conservatism can be explained as an anxious or stress-induced reaction to the plights of white poverty, undereducation, drug abuse, and feelings of being left behind or left out of the American dream. Both of these approaches ignore the appeal of radical individualism as a *creed* at all levels of American life, not to mention the ideational impact of Christianity, patriotism, sexism, and racism.

Ideology's power resides in its *symbolic* ability to cohere and communicate social reality to wide swaths of people — and this power, Geertz alleges, *eludes* the tempered and rationalistic language of social science. Cultural patterns aren't just "models *of*" reality, or "manipulations of symbolic structures" that bring them into alignment with non-symbolic systems that preceded them; nor are they "models *for*" life that serve to coordinate the non-symbolic by provid-

ing guidelines of the symbolic. Rather, ideology is like religion — it has "an intrinsic double aspect" that gives meaning "to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves (Geertz, 1973a, p.93).

"Ideology as a Cultural System" initiated the cultural turn in American social science. While Geertz adapted the notion of "cultural system" from Parsons, he made a vastly more vigorous and far-reaching case, both theoretically and empirically, for the "relative autonomy of culture." There were profound disciplinary implications of Geertz's argument, too, for it suggests the need for social sciences to make use of theories and methods from the humanities rather than the natural sciences. In the words of the French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1971), social action should be considered as a *text*.

4 The Balinese Cockfight as Play

Eight years after "Ideology" was first printed, Geertz published the essay "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" (1973b), an empirical illustration of "how to do" the cultural social science he was advocating. It became one of the most widely cited essays in modern social science, and beyond, but it also illustrated a fateful weakness that would have the effect of partially undermining what the "Geertzian" tradition. In order to more forcefully turn away from Parsonian modernism and to more closely intertwine social science in aesthetic form, Geertz pivoted away from systematic theorization itself. Description, not theory, became the defining feature of the Geertzian theory. But for a meaning-centered sociology in pursuit of explanation, this is far from being enough.

A brilliant stylist, Geertz (1973b) drops us straight away into the dramaturgy of Balinese society by establishing that he and his wife, Hildred Geertz (also an anthropologist), were seen as professional intruders — "nonpersons, specters, invisible men" — helping to establish the credibility that, in ethnography, comes with seemingly objective distance (p. 412). But more importantly, the contrast he paints with other places he's visited, like Morocco or elsewhere in Indonesia, where people have flocked to them as curiosities, helps demonstrate that there is a nuanced and unique social order in Bali to be aware of. Geertz — a man with a wife (his family) and a status as outsider — is brought into the drama of Balinese society through this outsider-*ness*, and the drama of his distance between others in the village.

When it comes to the specifics of the Balinese cockfight, there are also nuanced "rules": the deeply respected umpires, the meaning of who stands where in the circle, and the chaos of side bets around each fight. Cockfights are illegal, Geertz tells us in the opening pages of the essay, but they are also revered metaphorical representations of the structures of masculinity and status in Balinese society. While there is big money laid down by betters, money is not the point; to believe this would be to follow the interest rather than cultural approach to ideology. The big betting should also not be considered a reflection of the emotional issues that "strain theory" might suggest. Big bets are, rather, a *sign* or a *symbol* of the "deepness" of the role that the cockfight drama plays in Balinese society. The deepness of the cockfight, Geertz insists, can be explained only if we focus on the autonomous process of symbolization.

The cockfight should be seen as an aesthetic performance that crystallizes deep meanings in Balinese life. It's the creation of a "moment" in the here and now, an event that dramatizes — makes aesthetically clear — social understandings that are usually repressed: men, their families, and their status. Bali has an extremely hierarchical social order (as the Geertzes felt when they arrived), and the fighting cocks and related betting are between relatively equally powerful clans and status groups. Yet, the cockfight is not actually a "status conflict" in the sense of Max

Weber's later, more materialistic and reductive theory.[5] To see it this way would suggest one party was defeated and another won, that a real commodity — social status — was depleted for one side and gained for another. This approach to status is redolent of conflict theory, which draws heavily on Weber's later, anti-cultural work.

Instead, Geertz wants us to understand that, in a materialistic sense, in the cockfight nothing "actually" happens and nothing "really" changes. The cockfight is a significant social event, but its importance derives from its *aesthetic* power, like the power of famous pieces of art. A cockfighter's win doesn't change his social status, nor does his loss. Nonetheless, Geertz insists that in a cultural sense a great deal is going on — inside the heart and the head.

> You cannot ascend the status ladder by winning cockfights; you cannot, as an individual, really ascend at all. Nor can you descend it that way. All you can do is enjoy and savor, or suffer and withstand, the concocted sensation of drastic and momentary movement along an aesthetic semblance of that ladder, a kind of behind-the-mirror status jump which has the look of mobility without its actuality (Geertz, 1973b, p. 443).

The clash between the cocks is a dramatic conflict between symbolic antagonists, and it reveals *and* "controls" the fierceness of Balinese status hierarchies. "An image, fiction, a model, a metaphor, the cockfight is a means of expression," Geertz (1973b) writes (p. 444). The birds are social symbols, and their fight to the death is described by Geertz as a "status bloodbath," a horrible rendition of violence and aggression played out inside a society that demands absolute civility, good manners, and self-control. The cockfight is therefore "deep" because it dramatically displays what is hidden just beneath the displays of civility: the dark side of Bali.

So, the cockfight is *interpretive*, not *functional*. It provides a meaningful "meta-commentary" of Balinese life, "a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz, 1973b, p. 448). This is not a product of the social system but the cultural system. Geertz writes, quite beautifully, that "any expressive form lives only in its own present — the one it itself creates," and that in the cockfight "that present is

5. By "status conflict," we refer to conflict between Weber's (2013) idea of "status groups" which he defines in the fourth chapter of *Economy and Society*:

> A "status group" means a plurality of persons who, within a larger group, successfully claim a) a special social esteem, and possibly also b) status monopolies. Status groups may come into being: a) in the first instance, by virtue of their own style of life, particularly the type of vocation: "self-styled" or occupational status groups, b) in the second instance, through hereditary charisma, by virtue of successful claims to higher-ranking descent: hereditary status groups, or c) through monopolistic appropriation of political and hierocratic powers: political or hierocratic status groups. The development of hereditary status groups is generally a form of the (hereditary) appropriation of privileges by an organization or qualified individuals. Every definite appropriation of political powers and the corresponding economic opportunities tends to result in the rise of status groups, and vice versa (p. 306).

Weber (1946) also discusses this concept in the essay "Class, Status, Party" in *From Max Weber*. Because of later discussions of charisma, Weber is often interpreted as having brought non-rational and irrational "meaning" into his theory status, recognizing the impact, inside modernity, of such "pre-modern" elements as religion, race, ethnicity, and nationalism. From the perspective of contemporary cultural sociology, however, Weber's status theory tends sharply toward the instrumental and reductive, for it conceptualizes status as a means to power and money rather than as an end in itself, an end nested inside broader systems of meanings. For more on this critique, see J.C. Alexander's (1983) *The Classical Attempt at Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber*.

served into a string of flashes, some more bright than others, but all of them disconnected, aesthetic quanta" (p. 445). By focusing on the aesthetic components of Balinese life — the metaphors, tropes, images, the "medium of feathers, blood, crowds, and money" — Geertz turns analytic focus away from both functionalist institutionalization/internalization and the material structures of conflict theory (p. 119). This is a hermeneutical *description* of culture, not an evaluation.

With the Balinese cockfight in Bali being what we today call popular culture, it's easy to think of other examples in our own society of "deep" play. Why, for instance, are people obsessed with podcasts about true crime? The gore and violence, the looming anxiety — rather than turning people away out of fear and disgust, it seems to draw them in. Most people aren't interested in *how* to commit murders, so this has nothing to do with material practicality. It is also easy to slip into strain theories, or pop psychoanalysis; maybe this strange obsession has to do with people's growing sense of loneliness? A symbolic hypothesis would be that the performance is both affective and effective, drawing on tropes of woundedness and redemption, drawing listeners into the solving of a story that, like Shakespeare's tragedies, inspires audiences to feel as if they are part of something bigger themselves. Geertz would ask for a "thicker" description than that, a deep dive into each story — the characters, the antagonists, the symbolism of the weapon. We might also think about the metacommentaries on American social life provided by the intense antagonisms depicted in such immensely popular long form television series such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Game of Thrones*. But especially revealing are the *agonistes* of popular sports.

Take American football as an example. Here you have deep play and powerful interpretive expression, with fans fanatically devoted to their team, usually in their home region. This is well-illustrated in the venerated longform television series "Friday Night Lights," which focused on a high school level team in the oil-rich reaches of Texas where football becomes a dense dramatic representation, and symbolic resolution of, the conflicts over class, race, and masculinity in local communities. American football is an intensely aggressive sport, with such violent impact that it often leads to traumatic brain injuries. Just so, the United States, unlike Balinese society, is rife with violence and aggression. The physical contact, the pushing and resisting at the beginning of the play, the quarterback's clever elegant cross-stepping back to throw the ball forward downfield, the receiver's often desperate, leaping catch — all this eerily mimics, through the art of the game, the intensity of American social life. When a fan's team wins, they experience, like the Balinese, a feeling that their status has been elevated. Of course, it hasn't been in "reality." The win lives only "in its own present." When broad swaths of American football fans became enraged when Colin Kaepernick kneeled to protest racism and support Black Lives Matter, they were less interested in Kaepernick the individual or citizen than they were in Kaepernick as a "player," a metaphorical representation of in this uniquely American game (Bittner, 2023). Much the same could be said about what the rest of the world calls football, and what we Americans call "soccer." Just think of those highly dramatized fouls and performances of "injury" — the wailing, the grimacing — only for it to be a farce designed to win a free kick; it's more Roland Barthes' (1972) "World of Wrestling" than a material event. Football, no matter where you live, is a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Despite its revelatory empirical breakthroughs, "Deep Play" contains some debilitating weakness. Geertz (1973b) makes his point well, that there is a rich symbolic layer of social life to study, and his writing is engaging, even charismatic. But the impressionistic style of the essay takes precedence over an interest in theorizing the big point systematically. In fact, it's often difficult to know exactly what line of analysis and interpretation Geertz is taking. We don't get

much sense of the cultural order of Balinese life save one footnote and a few descriptive lists of "aesthetic quanta" or tropes in action: blood sacrifice, masculinity, hatred, violence, status rivalry, gambling, and so on. It is ironic that this stalwart attempt to resist systematic theorization compels Geertz to return to the arms of the very theories he sought to avoid: "The question of why such matches are interesting — indeed, for the Balinese, exquisitely absorbing — takes us out of the realm of formal concerns into more broadly sociological and social-psychological ones" (p. 444). Rather than describing how cultural structures influence the Balinese sense of status or order — the "really real," as Geertz calls it — he instead spends a great deal of time describing the social structure of Balinese society and how its influence the cockfight performance. It seems that his heightened wariness of systematic theory has left Geertz struggling with the anxiety of the shapeshifting, the fluid, the anxiously indeterminate; all that is left to focus on is the "really real" — the social structures and psychological strain of Parsonian theory that he was trying to avoid.

5 Thick Description

This problematic feature of "Deep Play" was starkly exposed in an essay Geertz published the very next year. Entitled "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," (1973c) it formed the introduction to *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the immensely influential collection of essays that we have come together to celebrate in this special issue. It was in this essay that Geertz introduced the notion of "thick" versus "thin" description, counterposing mere surface observations of social behavior with interpretive reconstructions that demonstrate the motives, meanings, and symbols at work. To illustrate what he means by thick versus thin description, Geertz uses the example of three boys whose eyelids are both rapidly moving. One boy's eye is involuntarily twitching, the second boy is communicating "a conspiratorial signal to a friend" — a wink — and the third boy is parodying the first two (p. 6). How do we know the difference between the three, Geertz asks. And what about a potential fourth boy, one who could be at home practicing a winking gesture in the mirror? The complexities to these gestures are endless, Geertz says. The purpose of these illustrations is to demonstrate that the difference between "thin description," e.g. the observation that the boys' eyelids are rapidly moving, and "thick description," e.g. the observation that winking is so important to the schoolboys that it has led the fourth boy to stand in front of the mirror at home, rehearsing the winking gesture, so that he can artfully nail the opportunity to either parody the other boys or win admittance into their coded club.

> A stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, *as a cultural category*, are as much nonwinks as winks are nontwitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids (Geertz, 1973c, p. 7).

Thick description — "sorting out the structures of signification... and determining their social ground and import" — is the goal (Geertz, 1973c, p.9), and, while Geertz acknowledges that "where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go," he insists that, in order to be thick, description must be "microscopic," local, immersive, and ethnographic (pp. 21–23). Instead of the "mega-concepts with which contemporary social

science is afflicted — legitimacy, modernization, integration, conflict, charisma, structure," Geertz advocates what he calls "almost obsessively fine-comb field study in confined contexts." Only such a "microscopic" focus on social meanings can provide "the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them" (p. 23, emphasis original).

In the 50 years since the publication of this essay, the term thick description has become part of the basic lexicon of cultural social science. The problem, however, is that nobody knows what thick description *actually* is! One can assemble stacks of field notes and write lengthy descriptions of beliefs, practices, and logics of morality in this town or that school — but how do we know, truthfully, if we are providing a systematic account of cultural systems?

What precisely was Geertz (1973c) aiming at when he announced this famous methodological prescription? He tells us that thick description is about locating the structures of signification that relate to a particular time and place, like the cockfight, winks between friends, American civil religion, or the Protestant ethic. But even as we locate these structures, he also warns us not to *overly* isolate the cultural system; as we give it autonomy, we must make it clear that culture performs a critical social role, that it makes things go or not go in the social world. But after these pretty skimpy and hardly unexpected suggestions, Geertz does something surprising that is significantly detrimental: he attacks "theory," declaring that, instead of thinking about abstract generalizations and models, cultural analysts should just get into the specifics of the empirical case. There are no predictive models or established theorems to use or prove here, but only the continuous building of thick description upon past descriptions that eventually form some semblance of concreteness, which can then be built upon even more. Theories are useful only insofar as they fit with such descriptions, in his view, and "if they cease being useful with respect to such problems, they tend to stop being used and are more or less abandoned" (p. 27). In the end, a deep "plunge into the mist" of meaning will produce a record of humanity that we can treasure. And this seems to be the purpose of social science à la Geertz.[6]

6 Ideology and After

Clifford Geertz was a foundational figure in the modern development of cultural social science and, even as his influence waned in anthropology, his ideas played an absolutely pivotal role in the creation of cultural sociology. In "Ideology," as well as Geertz's (1973d) "Religion as a Cultural System" essay — which applies similar theoretical arguments to understanding the sphere of traditional religion — Geertz instructed social science to pay attention to aesthetic expression in social life. Yet, while he bequeathed inspiring manifestos and sensitizing directives about where to take cultural social analysis, his resistance to structured analysis left us with little by way of an explanatory conceptual apparatus. What exactly *are* the typical and recurring patterns out of which culture is made? *How* are symbolic codes and narratives constructed, and *what* are some substantive examples of them? How do we know what to look for, what to describe? How *do* we actually analyze ritual-like social action? Instead of just brilliantly writing about the social having aesthetic power, one must actually conceptualize the elements that create these performances and how they are received.

6. In a later essay, the "Introduction" to his book *Local Knowledge*, Geertz (1983) expresses his antagonism to theorizing even more polemically, writing that "calls for 'a general theory' of just about anything social sound increasingly hollow, and claims to have one megalomaniac" and that "the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and encasements."

Other than telling us to look to the humanities for conceptual pathways to see and explain autonomous symbolization, and to illuminate how far aesthetics counts — that symbols, codes, narratives, and performances are central — Geertz produced little in the way of concepts that could direct later interpretive and explanatory efforts. And then, in his "Thick Description" essay, he sought to make a virtue out of necessity by saying theory actually wasn't important! While we do not claim to know why Geertz turned away from the challenge of theorizing, which contrasts so significantly with his early writing on ideology, this move paradoxically coincided with the period of Geertz's extraordinary popularity. Even as Geertz became a household name, a younger generation of anthropologists turned away from his ideas and embraced, instead, the kinds of culturally sensitive versions of conflict theory created by thinkers like Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Edward Said. Talal Asad even made "Religion as a Cultural System" the main foil to his book, *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), condemning it for failing to historicize institutional powers like the medieval Christian church as foundational for the creation of the category of "religion."[7] As we hope we have made clear, however, the nature of Geertz's contribution was to understand the relatively autonomous internal complexities of cultural systems, not to explain how any particular cultural system emerges in historical terms.

To develop a cultural sociology, scholars need to at once metabolize and move beyond Geertz to incorporate the insights of other, more explicitly theoretical models from cultural anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, and theater studies. While we agree with Asad that cultural reconstructions must also pay attention to contingencies of power and pragmatic action. we caution that, in doing so, they must not reduce culture to a product of social systems, as Parsons did.

Today, the relative autonomy of culture that Geertz so boldly illuminated for the human sciences can be more systematically understood (Alexander & Smith, 1993). After "Ideology," cultural sociologists in the tradition of the Strong Program have gone on to develop a layered and sophisticated *theoretical* apparatus; to not only uncover and describe cultural meaning in the social world, but to also generalize and explain it. For example, the contributions of "Ideology" are incorporated specifically into the social performance model (Alexander, 2004; Mast, 2013; Reed, 2013; McCormick, 2015; Karakaya, 2018; Villegas, 2020), a cultural pragmatic tradition that resolves the flaws of "Deep Play" and "Thick Description" by introducing analytic tools not only for describing cultural structures, but also detailing *how* they are enacted, with attention to the interpretive contingencies of power and the agency of the audience (Malacarne, 2021; Taylor, 2022 & 2024; Bittner, 2023). The centrality of aesthetics in powering and constraining human action is also developed in the burgeoning theoretical tradition of iconicity or iconic consciousness (Alexander, 2010 & 2020; Bittner, 2024).[8] As Geertz (1973b) wrote in his envoi in *The Interpretation of Culture*, "Whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own

7. Talal Asad is also known as a founder of the critical secularism studies tradition, popular in Religious Studies for offering a definition of religion, not as a "universally viable" definition but rather as a "historically produced, reproduced, and transformed" assemblage of beliefs and practices (Asad, 1983, p. 238). Ironically, once you consider the larger picture of Geertz's specific rejections of Parsons, this definition fits with the contributions of the "Ideology" essay to pull out the cultural structures of human action, and thickly describe them. Cultural pragmatics' emphasis on performative action, as well as its inclusion of the analytic element of "boundaries of social power," incorporates the attention to contingency that Asad called for in his critique of Geertz.

8. These analytical tools are the six elements of the cultural pragmatics model: background representations, foreground scripts, actors, audiences, means to symbolic production, mise-en-scène, and boundaries of social power.

interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them" (p. 453).[9]

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9. Toward the end of his life, in May 2005, Geertz attended and actively participated in a four-day conference marking the inauguration of the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) at Yale, though he did not present a paper of his own. As he was preparing to depart, Geertz remarked to the first author of this paper, "You know, Jeff, I had no idea there was such a thing as cultural sociology," adding "but now I do," and promising to return the next year to deliver a paper "on the origins of a cultural sociology." Sadly, this was never to be. Geertz died a year later, on October 30, 2006. In 2007, CCS hosted a conference at Yale dedicated to analyzing Geertz's impact, and the papers were compiled into the book, *Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences*. The volume, co-edited by Alexander, Philip Smith, and Matthew Norton, investigates the relation between Geertz and cultural sociology in much greater detail.

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