

S W E D I S H  
COLLEGIUM  
*for* ADVANCED STUDY

Lecture

**JOEL ISAAC**

Pro Futura Scientia Fellow, SCAS.  
Senior Lecturer in the History of Modern Political Thought, University of Cambridge

*Clifford Geertz's World*

Thursday, 17 November, 6:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall  
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala

The lecture will be followed by a reception. Prior registration is required.  
Please contact [rsvp@swedishcollegium.se](mailto:rsvp@swedishcollegium.se) no later than 11 November to sign up for the event.



## ABOUT JOEL ISAAC

Joel Isaac trained as a historian at Royal Holloway, University of London, and at Trinity College, Cambridge. From 2007 to 2011, he held a lectureship at Queen Mary, University of London. He is currently Senior Lecturer in the History of Modern Political Thought at the University of Cambridge.

Isaac's research focuses on the history of social and political thought in the United States and Great Britain. His earliest research examined how theories of knowledge drove important changes in the human sciences during the twentieth century. Much of his work in this area is presented in his first book, *Working Knowledge: Making the Human Sciences from Parsons to Kuhn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), which was awarded the Gladstone Prize by the Royal Historical Society.

During his time at SCAS, Isaac will be writing a book on the revival of eighteenth-century categories of political and moral thought in the twentieth century. Its principal thesis is that in the writings of a cohort of influential philosophers, economists, and political theorists who published in the interwar and post-Second World War decades, we can see an attempt to rethink Enlightenment notions of sociability, practical reasoning, property, and the state. Crucially, this process of reappraisal was refracted through more modern idioms: neoclassical economics, analytical philosophy, decision theory, and empirical political science. The ideas that resulted from this encounter of Enlightenment concepts and modern idioms provided the foundations of modern liberal and neoliberal thought. The working title for this research project is 'the Cold War Enlightenment'.

## ABSTRACT

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) was the most widely read anthropologist of his time. His semiotic theory of culture has inspired scholars across the social sciences and humanities. In particular, Geertz's claim that social change must be grasped in terms of the interaction between cultural systems and social and economic structures has proven especially challenging – and difficult to unpack.

Even at this late date, however, we lack a comprehensive reconstruction of Geertz's project in anthropology. The tendency has been to assess his texts in a piecemeal fashion. This leads to a partial view of Geertz's work as a whole. The purpose of the present lecture is to offer a more integrated account of Geertz's social thought. Drawing on unpublished as well as published writings, I show how Geertz's vision of social life in the modern age rested on two distinct strands of analysis. The first, and most well-known, turned on the role of religious and political symbols in forging social order. The second rooted everyday social existence in the circuits of production and exchange. In Geertz's anthropology, a certain kind of semiotics confronted a certain kind of political economy. In my lecture, I will describe this confrontation, and the ways in which it shaped Geertz's work.