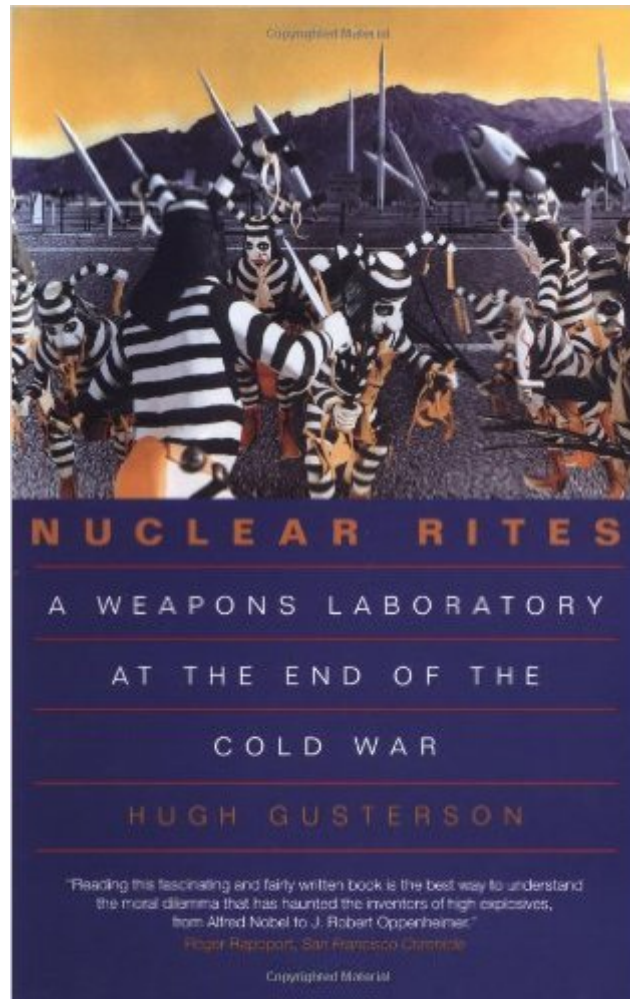


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Nuclear Rites: A Weapons Laboratory At The End Of The Cold War



Synopsis

Based on fieldwork at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory—the facility that designed the neutron bomb and the warhead for the MX missile—Nuclear Rites takes the reader deep inside the top-secret culture of a nuclear weapons lab. Exploring the scientists' world of dark humor, ritualized secrecy, and disciplined emotions, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson uncovers the beliefs and values that animate their work. He discovers that many of the scientists are Christians, deeply convinced of the morality of their work, and a number are liberals who opposed the Vietnam War and the Reagan-Bush agenda. Gusterson also examines the anti-nuclear movement, concluding that the scientists and protesters are alike in surprising ways, with both cultures reflecting the hopes and anxieties of an increasingly threatened middle class. In a lively, wide-ranging account, Gusterson analyzes the ethics and politics of laboratory employees, the effects of security regulations on the scientists' private lives, and the role of nuclear tests—beyond the obvious scientific one—as rituals of initiation and transcendence. He shows how the scientists learn to identify in an almost romantic way with the power of the machines they design—machines they do not fear. In the 1980s the "world behind the fence" was thrown into crisis by massive anti-nuclear protests at the gates of the lab and by the end of the Cold War. Linking the emergence of the anti-nuclear movement to shifting gender roles and the development of postindustrial capitalism, Gusterson concludes that the scientists and protesters are alike in surprising ways, and that both cultures reflect the hopes and anxieties of an increasingly threatened middle class.

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Customer Reviews

Hugh Gusterson's book, "Nuclear Rites: A Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War" (1996), is so rich, so packed with myriad concepts, that it is difficult to decide where to launch a discussion about it. An early critical point made by Gusterson is his identification of two competing regimes of truth: that of the weapons manufacturing industry and that of the antinuclear movement. For many people, a typical response to this identification might be the desire to determine which regime is the correct or true one. For Gusterson, however, that is not the question to ask. Rather, Gusterson is attempting to identify the multiple processes that inform and establish these respective truth regimes. What are the political, social, economic, bureaucratic, and even grammatical forces that empower these competing regimes of truth with their respective justification and validity? Gusterson argues that the nuclear weapons scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory as well as policy advocates throughout the broader nuclear weapons community utilize a technostrategic discourse which affords them a degree of presupposed expertise when interacting with non-expert opponents outside of their truth regime. (p. 205) However, once each respective regime gradually accumulates a number of specific intellectuals who can effectively communicate with one another but nevertheless disagree with each other, the ensuing discourse opens the door to public skepticism and increased independent thinking with regard to the issue under discussion. (p. 206) One of the strengths of Gusterson's book is that it draws upon relatively complex sociological, political, and anthropological theories to clearly explicate the mundane and workaday elements of the story he is relating.

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