Anthropology and Social Theory

CULTURE, POWER,
AND THE
ACTING SUBJECT

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FOR TIM AND GWEN

With love as always
When practice theory came on the scene in the late 1970s, the theoretical landscape was dominated by three major paradigms: interpretive or "symbolic" anthropology, launched by the work of Clifford Geertz; Marxist political economy, whose leading practitioner was probably Eric Wolf; and some form or other of French structuralism, launched by Claude Lévi-Strauss, but by that time beginning to be replaced by various poststructuralisms.

All of these represented important moves beyond an earlier hegemonic functionalism. Where functionalists asked, how do things hang together?, Geertz asked, what do they mean? Where functionalists viewed social systems as largely benign and tending toward stability, Marxists emphasized the exploitative nature of capitalism and other social formations, which provokes ongoing movements for destabilization and change. And where functionalists asked about the practical function of institutions, Lévi-Strauss showed that both practical institutions, like kinship, and seemingly impractical ones, like myth, operated according to an underlying logic or "structure."

At one level these were very different enterprises, and to some degree were opposed to each other. But from another point of view they all had one thing in common: they were essentially theories of "constraint." Human behavior was shaped, molded, ordered, and defined by external social and cultural forces and formations: by culture, by mental struc-
tute, by capitalism. Of course, structural constraints of various kinds are real and are not being denied. Indeed I will argue later that some critiques of the culture concept have lost the important element of constraint in that concept. But a purely constraint-based theory, without attention to either human agency or to the processes that produce and reproduce those constraints—social practices—was coming to seem increasingly problematic.

In sociology (less in anthropology) an early challenge to this constraint perspective was mounted in the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1967) and other practitioners of so-called interactionism. But interactionism in turn was too extreme, setting aside virtually all structural constraints and focusing on the microsociology of interpersonal interaction. Interactionism never achieved anything like the influence of the other schools, but it staked out and occupied the space of the opposition, and kept alive a version of the so-called structure/agency opposition.

Practice theory took up the challenge of overcoming this opposition. Three key works came out within a very short space of time in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1978), Anthony Giddens's *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), and Marshall Sahlins's *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (1981). Each in its own way set out to conceptualize the *articulations* between the practices of social actors "on the ground" and the big "structures" and "systems" that both constrain those practices and yet are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them. They accomplished this by arguing, in different ways, for the dialectical rather than oppositional relationship between the structural constraints of society and culture on the one hand and the "practices"—the new term was important—of social actors on the other. They argued as well that "objectivist" perspectives (like Wolf's political economy) and "subjectivist" perspectives (like Geertz's interpretive anthropology) were not opposed ways of doing social science but represented "moments" (Bourdieu 1978:83) in a larger project of attempting to understand the dialectics of social life. These works were, in short, enormously important in at least beginning to lay out the mechanisms by which the seeming contradiction—that "history makes people, but people make history" (Ortner 2003:277)—is not only not a contradiction, but is perhaps the profoundest truth of social life.

Put in other words, practice theory offered genuine resolutions of problems that had been plaguing the field, some dating back to functionalism, and some generated by the new schools of theory of the '60s and '70s. It restored the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) social action. It "grounded" cultural processes—discourses, representations, what we used to call "symbol systems"—in the social relations of people "on the ground." Its conception of those grounded social relations in turn was (to varying degrees) Marxist and/or Weberian, rather than functionalist, opening up the space for questions of power and inequality with which I and many others had become increasingly concerned in the 1970s.

From that period on, practice theory became the general frame within which I would cast my work. Yet for all the invaluable ways in which it potentially liberated the field from the old oppositions, it in turn—how could things be otherwise?—had some significant limitations. Thus almost from the outset I found myself tinkering with the framework, drawing on other major changes inside and outside of anthropology. This essay is in many ways a history of that tinkering. It involves pulling in a great deal of work by others but emphasizes the ways in which I used both practice theory itself and those other bodies of work within my own writings, including both earlier writings and the essays in this book.

There were three major areas in which significant new work was going on, and which I saw as offering major correctives for and improvements to the basic practice theory framework. The first was what I will call "the power shift," associated with the work of James Scott, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, and others, and linked in various ways with work in critical studies of colonialism, gender, race, and ethnicity. Next was what Terrence McDonald (1996) called "the historic turn," a broad movement to historicize work in the social sciences and thus to move beyond the static frameworks that had carried over into practice theory from functionalism.

And finally there was what I will call the reinterpretation(s) of culture. It is this last that is the main focus of the present volume. As I have explored the implications of the power shift (especially in Ortner 1996) and have taken the historic turn (especially in Ortner 1989, 1999, 2003) in earlier works, I will only briefly review them here, although they remain vitally important to the works in this volume as well. But the critiques and retheorizations of culture in the
past several decades remain to be examined, in relation to questions of practice (and power and history).

Early Expansions

In more or less the same period in which practice theory came on the scene, there emerged an important body of work rethinking questions of "power." These included such diverse works as Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality Part I* (1979), and James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). These converged in various ways with the florescence of critical studies in gender, race, ethnicity, and colonialism. Since I had been actively working in the arena of feminist anthropology, and specifically in those years with questions of "male dominance," it was virtually inevitable that I would become aware of the relative weakness of practice theory on this issue. Practice theory did not ignore power, of course, but neither did it make it central to the theoretical framework in the ways that seemed called for by this type of critical work on inequality and domination.

In retrospect it seems to me that my work on gender inequality was pushing me toward some kind of practice theory approach in the first place. On the one hand I wanted to understand the cultural construction of gender relations in more or less the classic Geertzian way. In fact, in the introduction to *Sexual Meanings* (1981), Harriet Whitehead and I adapted Geertz's famous phrase and wrote that the book was concerned with "gender as a cultural system." But we went on to say that we were interested in more than the logic and workings of the gender system, that we wanted to understand, as it were, where it was coming from. Put in other words, we wanted to understand the ways in which such systems were "grounded" in various kinds of social relations, and, I would now say, social practices.

My own article in that volume, called "Gender and Sexuality in Hierarchical Societies" (1981), involved inventing a kind of practice theory approach without knowing exactly what I was doing. I had not yet read any practice theory, but looking back at that paper, I realize I was groping toward a method that would help me solve some of the puzzles of unequal, and sometimes violently unequal, gender relations in a range of Polynesian societies. For example, I was interested in the treatment of daughters of chiefs, who were on the one hand elaborately beautified and on the other hand kept under very tight paternal control. I argued that these girls were pawns in an elaborate cultural game (as I would now call it) of male prestige. The idea was that, once one figured out the game—that is, the configuration of practices involving the players in question, its underlying logic, and its cultural goal—the puzzling elements would make sense. I will not spend time summarizing the interpretation. The point here is simply that my work in a particular arena of power relations—gender—was pushing me toward some kind of a practice theory framework, which involved an analytic device that I later (1996a) came to call "(serious) games."

The early practice theorists did not, as I said earlier, ignore issues of power. They dealt with it in various ways. At issue in part is the relative weight given to power as organized into the cultural or institutional order (which Giddens calls "domination"), and "power" as an actual social relation of real on-the-ground actors (which Giddens calls "power"). Both are important, but a strong emphasis on structural power tends ironically to move away from the question of real practices. We see this most clearly in Outline of a Theory of Practice. Social relations of power and inequality, especially patriarchal relations, are central to the book. But they are never explored as specific formations of power, involving specific ideologies and practices. Rather, Bourdieu devotes most of his intellectual efforts to the elaboration of the notion of *habitus,* a deeply buried structure that shapes people's dispositions to act in such ways that they wind up accepting the dominance of others, or of "the system," without being made to do so. Sahlins tends to follow a similar pattern. While he describes practices of interpersonal power in the Hawaiian case, he tends to give a much greater role to impersonal forms of constraint, built into the structures of asymmetry that run through every relationship in that hierarchically organized society. Giddens appears somewhat different. He has a useful discussion of what he calls "the dialectic of control" (1979:145 ff), in which he argues that systems of control can never work perfectly, because those being controlled have both agency and understanding and thus can always find ways to evade or resist. His arguments fit well with those of James Scott, one of the power theorists to be discussed below. The difference is perhaps that for Giddens power is just one of many modalities of practice, while for Scott and the other power theorists it is absolutely central to the framework.
Let me turn to those power theorists and what they had to offer. My choice of theorists here—Foucault, Scott, and Williams—may appear somewhat puzzling. At the very least the reader might be wondering why I list no theorists of gender, racial, or colonial domination. I can only say that these three figures offer the most general tools for examining any form of domination and inequality, including those of gender, race, and colonialism. Thus Foucault has played a major role in the work of one of the most influential theorists of feminism, Judith Butler (e.g., 1997), and in the work of the towering figure in (post)colonial studies, Edward Said (e.g., 1978). Scott's work has generated a virtual industry of studies of "resistance" of all sorts, including especially slave and peasant resistance movements. Raymond Williams is the founding ancestor of that vast school of scholarship called "cultural studies," which has generated important work on the power relations of gender, race, class, and youth.

The three theorists can be placed along a spectrum that is defined by one of the central problematics of studies of power: the question of the pervasiveness or invasiveness of power. At one end we have Foucault, who has argued that power is socially ubiquitous, suffused through every aspect of the social system, and psychologically deeply invasive. There is no "outside" of power. At the other end we have James Scott, who takes the position that, while there is certainly a great deal of power in play in social life, it is much less mentally invasive than others have argued. He proposes (1990) that dominated people understand very well what is going on, and even have explicit traditions—"hidden transcripts"—of critique and resistance. If they do not actively resist, it is only because they are held back by the sheer political and economic power of the dominating group. Finally, Williams (1977) takes a kind of intermediate position, seeing actors as to some degree in the grip of "hegemonies," but picking up Gramsci's argument to the effect that hegemonies are never total and absolute, in several senses. They are never total in a historical sense, because in the flow of history, while one may talk of hegemonic formation(s) in the present, there are always also remnants of past ("residual") hegemonies and the beginnings of future ("emergent") ones. And hegemonies are also never total in the psychological sense, because people always have at least some degree of "penetration" (if not virtually full awareness, as Scott would argue) into the conditions of their domination.

All of these perspectives are useful for particular purposes, and I have used all of them in one context or another. But I have found the Gramsci-derived notion of hegemonies as strongly controlling but never complete or total to be the most useful in my various attempts to inject more power into a practice approach. For example, in "Gender Hegemonies" (1996b) the notion of incomplete hegemonies allowed me to move beyond a simplistic notion of "universal male dominance," not so much by finding "cases" of non-male dominance but by recognizing that male dominance always coexists with other patterns of gender relations: what is important is the mix, and the relations between the elements.

Putting this all together in the introduction to Making Gender I began to sketch out what I called a "feminist, minority, subaltern, etc., theory of practice," which focused in part on questions of direct resistance, but more on ways in which domination itself was always riven with ambiguities, contradictions, and lacunae. This means in turn that social reproduction is never total, always imperfect, and vulnerable to the pressures and instabilities inherent in any situation of unequal power. I brought this view to bear on the relationship between Sherpas and Western mountaineers ("sahibs") in Himalayan mountaineering (Life and Death on Mt. Everest, 1999). In that study I was able to show "real" resistance: It is not well known in the outside world, for example, that the supposedly happy compliant Sherpas often went on strike on Himalayan expeditions. But I also explored a central contradiction in the Western mountaineers' views of, and treatment of, the Sherpas. On the one hand the Westerners were powerful (as white, as Western, as employers, and, in the early years, as quasi-military leaders). On the other hand they often developed a great deal of affection and admiration for the Sherpas with whom they worked. This contradiction was not lost upon the Sherpas, who were able to exploit it often quite successfully, to bring about significant transformations in the structure of the Sherpa-sahib relationship, and of Himalayan expeditions in general, over the course of the twentieth century.

In the end the two bodies of theory can be easily merged. The three founding practice theorists can be interestingly seen to parallel the three positions on the spectrum of the psychological "depth" of power. Bourdieu is most like Foucault, in that his notion of habitus is one of a deeply internalized structure, powerfully controlling and largely inaccessible to consciousness (see also de Certeau 1984). Giddens is more like Scott, emphasizing the ways in which actors are at least partially "knowing subjects" (see, e.g., 1979) who are able to reflect to some degree on their circumstances and by implication to
develop a certain level of critique and possible resistance. And finally Sahlin is most like Williams. He subscribes to a notion of strong cultural hegemonies but also allows for certain, shall we say, cracks in the structure, for example when he talks about how the gendered food taboos of eighteenth-century Hawaiians "did not sit upon Hawaiian women with the force [they] had for men" (1981:46), a small difference that would make a large difference in the long run.

Looking at the relationship from the point of view of the power theorists, we can see that their integration with practice theory was already (potentially) there. Thus, Foucault's interest in locating the production of power less in macro-institutions like the state and more in micro-interactions like the priest-penitent relationship, has obvious affinities with practice theory's interest in looking at ground-level sources of larger formations. Scott's interest in resistance is nothing other than a way of asking the question of how (certain kinds of) practices may transform structures. And Raymond Williams argued that "hegemonies" had to be understood not as "structures" external to individuals but as "the whole lived social process" (1977:109), which "has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified . . . [and] also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged" (1977:112) — which has in short to be both practiced and resisted. In a way one could say that all these new power theories were themselves varieties of practice theory as well.

I said earlier that the emergence of various theories of power was more or less simultaneous with the emergence of early practice theory. The same is true, interestingly, of "the historic turn." One realizes in retrospect just how theoretically fertile that period during the late 1970s and early 1980s was. We turn then to the historic turn.

**THE HISTORIC TURN**

My sense of the necessity to historicize practice theory came primarily out of theoretical developments on this side of the Atlantic. Several varieties of historic turn had taken shape in anthropology, including Marxist-inspired historical "political economy," as in Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (1981); certain forms of cultural history (e.g., Geertz's *Nagare* [1960]); and the early work on colonial history launched by Bernard Cohn (1980), which would later become a major enterprise across many academic disciplines. The historic turn(s) were enormously important both methodologi-
Introduction: Updating Practice Theory

Thanks first to Timothy Taylor for speedy, insightful, and extremely helpful comments on several drafts of this introduction. In addition I presented earlier versions of this introduction, then titled "Serious Games," to the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University and to the "Cultures of Capitalism" group at UCLA. In both cases I received very probing comments (that also reinforced some questions raised by one of the anonymous press readers), and that caused me to change the direction of the essay substantially. I thank them all.

1. Because of the longstanding historical opposition between "structure" and "agency" in the social sciences, and the ways in which this opposition seems to function as a deep structure in the Lévi-Straussian sense, there was and continues to be a tendency to view practice theory itself as a kind of covert revival of theories that underemphasize the real and deeply sedimented constraints under which people live. I have been opposing this view at least since my monograph on the founding of Sherpa monasteries, *High Religion* (1989:11-18) and can only say again that nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed most readers of (especially the early works of) Bourdieu and Giddens would argue that in the end both of these pioneers of practice theory tended to overemphasize structural constraint, even as they viewed structures as produced through (never-free) social practices.

2. Marshall Sahlins kindly sent me the manuscript of *Historical Metaphors . . . when I was writing that paper. At the time I read it mainly for "data." It was only on a later rereading that I focused on his theoretical framework and its resonances with other practice theory work coming out in that era. I made the connections in Ortner 1984.

3. Scott casts his argument against an exaggerated version of Gramsci’s position on hegemony, taking "hegemony" to be something that totally controls the minds of the dominated party.

4. Most recently William H. Sewell Jr’s very important *Logics of History* (2005) has provided a theorization of "events" that not only illuminates Sahlins’s "possible theory of history" (as Sahlins had called it), but provides a powerful theorization of the relationship between historical thinking and social and cultural theory much more broadly.
The degree to which the media attend to issues of class varies a great deal over time. Recently, for example, the New York Times ran a multi-part series on class in America. But at the level of popular consciousness, "class" is virtually unthought and untalked about. See Ortner 2003.

Bourdieu later (2000) shifted and/or defended his arguments to some degree. Throughout this essay I refer primarily to the early works in which his basic outlines of a theory of practice (to coin a phrase) were laid out: 1978 and 1990.

1. Reading America: Class and Culture

This paper was written while I was a visiting member at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, supported by funds from the University of Michigan and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Arjun Appadurai, Nicholas B. Dirks, and Elliot Shore read the first draft on short notice and gave me extremely useful comments. Later drafts were read by Nancy Chodorow, Salvatore Cucchiari, Richard Fox, Abigail Stewart, and Peter van der Veer, all of whom provided excellent insights and suggestions. There was also very constructive and stimulating discussion of the paper in the Thursday night seminar of the Program in the Comparative Study of Social Transformations, which nourished and provoked me intellectually at the University of Michigan throughout the late '80s and early '90s.

1. Ethnographic work by sociologists began to diminish in the 1950s, presumably coinciding with the achievement of hegemony of quantitative research in that field.

2. Schneider and Smith's Class Differences and Sex Roles in American Kinship and Family Structure (1973) is one of the rare anthropological works on America with "class" in its title, but it is not a monograph. There are also some older review articles by Goldschmidt (1936, 1935). A review article by Raymond Smith on "Anthropological Studies of Class" (1984) focuses largely on the study of third world societies.

3. Television sitcoms of both white and black lower-class families (such as All in the Family and Sanford and Son) have long followed the tradition of representing both groups as endearing ethnic others.

4. It will be no surprise to the anthropologists that Lloyd Warner, whose work with Australian aborigines focused on kinship terms—that is, on native categories of social relationships—was essentially the founding father of the second—native category—approach.

5. It might be argued that "middle class" is not a class term at all, since it is not generally seen as part of a class structure, that is, as a positional or relational category vis-à-vis other classes. In ordinary discourse it seems simply to mean a general allegiance to the nation and to large, overarching values like freedom and individualism.

6. This is the so-called multiple domination position, with which I am in basic agreement. One of the clearest statements of this position is to be found in Cohen (1982).

7. Another version is developed in Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Feminist theory in general also tends toward a multiple domination position; see, for example, Sacks (1989).

8. There is a problem of terminology here. The terms for the lower end of the class structure are to some extent racially coded. The term "working class" seems naturally to refer to whites. For black people one more often sees "lower class." I will use the terms interchangeably for both.

9. There seems to have been more introjection in the nineteenth century, when the split between the middle class and the working class was played out within middle-class gender relations (see Smith-Rosenberg 1986).

10. The authors also identify an important ethnographic category: "nobody," as in, "Her? Oh, she's nobody." More work needs to be done on nobodies.

11. In Willis's account of the discourse of the nonconformist (i.e., the most "hooded") working-class lads, they claim this greater sexual experience and knowledgeability for themselves, and Willis thinks it is probably true that they have more active sex lives than the earlores.

12. I am indebted to Arjun Appadurai for putting these particular pieces together. Some of my students have argued that this sexual-run-class division no longer applies, because even middle-class kids are having a lot of sex in high school. Although I accept my students as valid informants, the question needs to be investigated more closely. I suspect that the situation is similar to that described by Eckert in her high-school study with respect to drugs: both middle-class and working-class kids do drugs, but the use of drugs plays an entirely different role in their respective symbolic economies (Eckert 1989).

13. The phrase is from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966).

14. A little known but very interesting example is Raymond Sokolov's 1975 novel Native Intelligence.

15. This also suggests that they were socialists, but Roth does not develop the political contrasts in the story.

Another painful irony with respect to hidden injuries of class: while the middle class endows the working class with a free and imaginative sexuality, sociologists tell us that sex as actually practiced in the working class is just the opposite: repressed, unimaginative, and—according to informants—largely unsatisfying (see Reiche 1971).

2. Resistance and Ethnographic Refusal

1. An earlier and very different version of this essay was written for "The Historic Turn" Conference organized by Terrence McDonald for the Program in the Comparative Study of Social Transformations (CSS) at the University of Michigan. The extraordinarily high level of insightfulness and helpfulness of critical comments from my colleagues in CSS has by now become almost routine, and I wish to thank them collectively here. In addition for close and detailed readings of the text, I wish to thank Frederick Cooper, Fernando Coronil, Nicholas Dirks, Val Daniel, Geoff Eley, Ray Grew, Roger Rouse, William H. Sewell Jr., Julie Skurski, Ann Stoler, and the excellent readers who reviewed this work when it was first published in Comparative Studies in Society and History (37:1 (1995): 171--93). I have incorporated many of their suggestions and know that I have ignored some at my peril. Finally, for valuable comments as well as for the heroic job of organizing the conference, I wish especially to thank Terrence McDonald.