Theories of Agency  
(16:070:515)  
FALL 2010  
PROFESSOR LAURA M. AHEARN

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<tr>
<th>Office hours: Thurs, 1:00 – 3:00 p.m in RAB 308, and by appointment</th>
<th>Sakai information: Use your NetID and password to login at <a href="http://sakai.rutgers.edu">http://sakai.rutgers.edu</a> to download reserve readings and to post your commentaries and responses.</th>
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| Phone: (732) 932-5298 | Classroom: Ruth Adams Building, Rm. 302  
Class time: Thursdays, 9:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m. |

Even in our theoretical stance to the world, we are agents.  
-- Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*

Who acts, people or discourses? The choice is a false one.  
-- Judith Kegan Gardiner, *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*

Just because the director yells “action!” doesn’t mean you have to do anything.  
-- Marlon Brando

**Overview**

This seminar will explore the various meanings surrounding scholars’ uses of the term “agency.” We will debate the utility of the concept and attempt to trace its intellectual history through various theoretical movements, especially practice theory. In the process, we will address related issues such as resistance, attributions of responsibility, and causality. We will ask whether people living in different societies might construct differing theories of agency, and, if so, how we might be able to determine their characteristics. We will pay close attention to the relationship of agency to language – or agency *in* language, including grammatical agency and talk about agency, or meta-agentive discourse. Gender will also be an important theme throughout the course. Although our discussions will by necessity often be abstract, we will ground our observations in particular ethnographic examples as much as possible. By the end of the semester, each of you should have a much clearer idea of how the concept of agency relates to your own research. The final paper will provide you with an opportunity to explore this question in depth.

**Expectations**

The reading load – I’m warning you right off – will be quite heavy. Please complete at least the required readings, if not the recommended readings, before the class for which they are assigned. Let me know if the reading load seems too heavy, but since this is a graduate seminar, I am assuming you all are willing and able to get through (whether by meticulous word-for-word analysis or quick skimming) copious amounts of material. As a rule of thumb, you can expect to put in three hours of preparation for every hour you spend in class – nine hours a week, in other words, very roughly speaking. If you find yourself taking much more or much less time than this, please let me know. There will be times when we
will split the readings among class members in order to reduce the reading load, and I always list the readings in order of importance so that you can prioritize them accordingly.

The backgrounds of the students in this class will be extremely varied, which will present us as a class with both a resource and a challenge. Don’t assume that you don’t belong in the class just because you have never heard of a theorist someone mentions. By the same token, when you yourself mention a theorist not assigned for the course, do more than just name-drop; be generous with your knowledge and clarify who the person is, what relevance s/he has for our discussion, etc. In this way, we can all learn from one another.

**REQUIREMENTS**

(1) Every week you will be required either to post a one- to two-page commentary on the readings or respond to other students’ commentaries one day before class meets. The class will be split in half, and each group will alternate writing commentaries and responses. If it is your turn to write a commentary, please do so by Wednesday at 5:00 p.m. each week on Sakai’s Discussion Board (http://sakai.rutgers.edu). I will be telling you exactly how to do this in class. If it is your turn to be a respondent, please post your response on Sakai’s Discussion Board by 11:00 p.m. Wednesday evening each week. Please try to read all the commentaries and responses before coming to class.

   A good commentary summarizes the main points of the reading, compares and contrasts it to other works the class has read, and then offers the reader’s own assessment, reactions, and questions. These are not formal papers, so please do write them in an informal, first-person register. Each of you will find a comfortable “voice” in which to write your commentaries; don’t worry if there is significant variation in tone and content among the commentaries – that’s a good thing!

   The benefits of commentaries are multiple. First, you will have read the assignment and will have digested it enough to generate some questions and reactions. Second, you will be able to read and, if it is your turn to be a respondent, even respond to your classmates’ commentaries before you come to class each week, thereby jump-starting discussion. Third, you will have your commentaries and responses (and everyone else’s) to look back on as you work on your papers.

(2) In pairs or trios, you will facilitate two class discussions. I mean ‘facilitate’ in its most basic sense, ‘to make easy.’ Thus, I expect the two or three of you to prepare discussion questions and activities that will engage and instruct the class participants. I do not expect or desire mini-lectures.

(3) You will also be expected to contribute to discussions in class on a weekly basis. As this is an advanced seminar, a large part of the responsibility for making it work will fall on your shoulders. Make sure, therefore, that you come to class having done the reading carefully. This does not mean, however, that you need to understand the readings fully before class even starts; I urge you to ask (in your written commentaries or in class) about any uncertainties you may have. Also feel free to bring up any relevant readings or observations from outside the class assignments, as long as you explain these fully.

   I hope we will all work toward creating an atmosphere in which all of you will feel comfortable contributing your thoughts and questions, but if you are the type of person who rarely speaks up during discussions, please come to see me early on in the term, and we can devise some other way(s) of allowing you to participate, either in writing, or by meeting with me individually.

(4) The main written product on which you will be evaluated will be a term paper of twenty to thirty pages in length. In it, you will outline the theoretical approach(es) to agency you find most compelling and explain how you intend to apply those perspectives to your own research. If you are the early stages of your research, you should view this exercise as an opportunity to articulate a hypothetical research project. A five-page prospectus for this paper will be due in class on November 4th, a first draft of the paper will be due in my e-mail inbox by 4:00 p.m. on Monday, Nov. 29th, and the final draft will be due in my e-mail inbox by 4:00 p.m. on Friday, December 17th.
Grading Criteria

Your final grade in Theories of Agency will be determined as follows:

- Weekly commentaries: 20%
- Facilitation of, and participation in, seminar discussions: 20%
- Prospectus for final paper (due Thurs, Nov. 4th): 10%
- Draft of final paper (due Mon, Nov. 29th): 10%
- Final paper (due Friday, Dec. 17th): 40%

Readings

The readings for each week will either be available in electronic form through Sakai or will be from one of the assigned books, all of which are on reserve at the Douglass Library and available for purchase at the Rutgers University Bookstore, in both its Douglass Campus and College Ave. Campus locations.

REQUIRED


RECOMMENDED (You will be required to read one of the first three books for the last week of class; the final recommended book is listed because we will be reading many of the essays in it.)


**Weekly Topic Outline**

These readings are subject to change, so listen to announcements in class, and always check Sakai for any additions or revisions to the week’s readings.

I. **Introduction (September 2)**  
   (You will have time to read these pieces in class, but you can also look at them ahead of time on Sakai.)  

II. **Definitions and Types of Agency (September 16)**  
   **For commentaries to be posted on Sept. 8th:**  

   **For commentaries to be posted on Sept. 15th:**  

   **Recommended:**  

III. **Practice Theorists I: Forerunners (September 23)**  

Recommended:

IV. Practice Theorists II: Giddens (September 30)

V. Practice Theorists III: Bourdieu (October 7)

Recommended:

VI. Language and Agency (October 14)
Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. “Language and Agency.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30:109-37. *(This is an earlier version of “Agency and Language,” which you read earlier in the semester.)*

Recommended:
VII. **Actor-Network Theory and Distributed Agency (October 20th – please note that this class meets on WEDNESDAY this week! We will also be having a guest facilitator, Kartikeya Saboo, this week.)**


Recommended:


VIII. **Practice Theorists IV: Sahlins (October 28)**


Recommended:

IX. Practice Theorists V: Ortner (November 4) [FINAL PROSPECTUS DUE IN CLASS]


Recommended:

X. Agency and Gender (November 11)


Recommended:


XI. Various Other (Mainly Sociological) Approaches (November 18)


Recommended:
DRAFT OF FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY INBOX BY 4p.m. ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29th

XII. Foucault (December 2)
Recommended:

XIII. Ethnographic Approaches to Agency (December 9)
Read AT LEAST ONE of the following three ethnographies in its entirety:
Recommended:

Final paper due in my e-mail inbox by 4:00 p.m. on Friday, December 17th.