

THEORIES OF AGENCY  
(16:070:515)  
SPRING 2014  
PROFESSOR LAURA M. AHEARN

Office hours: Wed Thurs, 1:00 – 2:00 p.m in RAB 308, and by appointment	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.
E-mail address: <a href="mailto:ahearn@rci.rutgers.edu">ahearn@rci.rutgers.edu</a>	Website: <a href="http://anthro.rutgers.edu/faculty/ahearn.shtml">http://anthro.rutgers.edu/faculty/ahearn.shtml</a>
Phone: (848) 932-4301	Classroom: Ruth Adams Building, Rm. 302 Class time: Wednesdays, 2:15 p.m. – 5:15 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 Monday 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 Tuesday at 5:00 p.m. 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, you will **facilitate two class discussions**. I mean 'facilitate' in its most basic sense, 'to make easy.' Thus, I expect the two 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 electronically by the beginning of class on March 26<sup>th</sup>, **a first draft** of the paper will be due electronically by the beginning of class on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, and **the final draft** will be due electronically by 4:00 p.m. on Friday, May 9<sup>th</sup>. You will make a 15-minute **oral presentation** of your paper in our final class on April 30<sup>th</sup>. Late assignments will be penalized one half-step of a grade per day.

**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 March 26 <sup>th</sup> )	10%
Draft of final paper (due April 23 <sup>rd</sup> )	10%
Oral presentation of final paper (April 30 <sup>th</sup> )	10%
Final paper (due 4pm, May 9 <sup>th</sup> )	30%

**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**

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN:0-521- 29164-X

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 978-0-19-925605-1

Ortner, Sherry B. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press. ISBN: 978-0822338642

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0-19-876061-2

**RECOMMENDED**

Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. University of Michigan Press. ISBN: 0-472-06784-2

Duranti, Alessandro. 1994. *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village*. University of California Press. ISBN:0-520-08385-7

Giddens, Anthony. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. University of California Press. ISBN:0-520-03975-0

Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. University of California Press. ISBN: 978-0-520-27611-6

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press. ISBN: 0-691-08695-8

Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. University of Michigan Press. ISBN: 0-472-02721-2

## Weekly 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 (January 22) – No reading assignment for this session; we will read some pieces together in class**
- II. **Satire, Irony, and Political Agency (January 29) – Guest speaker, Prof. Angelique Haugerud (I have to miss class this week). Class will begin at 3:45 p.m.**

Haugerud, Angelique. 2013. *No Billionaire Left Behind: Satirical Activism in America*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, Introduction, Chapters One, Six, and Seven (pp. 1-53, 163-203).

Also watch this video: "Wealth Inequality in America," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM>

## II. Definitions and Types of Agency (February 5)

- Desjarlais, Robert. 1997. *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood among the Homeless*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp.197-205.
- Hay, M. Cameron. 2010. "Suffering in a Productive World: Chronic Illness, Visibility, and the Space Beyond Agency." *American Ethnologist* 37(2):259-274.
- Strauss, Claudia. 2007. Blaming for Columbine: conceptions of agency in the contemporary United States. *Current Anthropology* 48(6):807-832.
- Ahearn, Laura M. 2010. "Agency and Language." In Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Östman, and Jürgen Jaspers (eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics*, pp.28-48.
- Duranti, Alessandro. 2004. "Agency in Language." In Duranti, A. (ed.), *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp.451-473.

### Recommended:

- Frank, Katherine. 2007. Agency. *Anthropological Theory* 6(3):281-302.
- Andermahr, S. 1997. Agency. In *A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory*, ed. S Andermahr, pp. 11–12. New York: Arnold.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa and Ann Mische. 1998. What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4):962-1023.
- Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. Agency. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9(1):9-12.
- Overbye, Dennis. 2007. Free will: now you have it, now you don't. *New York Times*, 2 January 2007.
- Kockelman, Paul. 2007. Agency: The Relation between Meaning, Power, and Knowledge. *Current Anthropology* 48(3):375-401.

## III. Practice Theorists I: Forerunners (February 12)

- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, pp.75-141 (and skim rest of the book if you have the time).
- Marx, Karl. 1978(1852). The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. RC Tucker, 2nd ed. pp. 594–617.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1957. "The study of philosophy and of historical materialism." In *The Modern Prince, and Other Writings*. New York: International Publishers, pp.55-75.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. "The intellectuals." In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers, pp.3-23.

## Recommended:

- Kirsch, Scott and Don Mitchell. 2004. The nature of things: dead labor, nonhuman actors, and the persistence of Marxism. *Antipode* 36(4):687-705.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday, pp.47-92.

**IV. Practice Theorists II: Giddens (February 19)**

- Giddens, Anthony. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press, pp. 1-131.
- Karp, Ivan. 1986. Agency and social theory: a review of Anthony Giddens. *Am. Ethnol.* 13(1):131-137.
- Sewell, Jr., William H. 1992. A theory of structure: duality, agency, and transformation. *American Journal of Sociology* 98(1):1-29.
- New, Caroline. 1994. Structure, agency and social transformation. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 24(3):187-205.

**V. Practice Theorists III: Bourdieu (February 26)**

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, pp.72-95, 159-197.
- Agha, Asif. 2007. *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.228-232.
- Farnell, Brenda. 2000. Getting out of the *habitus*: an alternative model of dynamically embodied social action. *J. R. Anthropol. Inst.* 6:397-418.

## Recommended:

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Transl. G Raymond, M. Adamson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, Intro and Chapters 1 & 7.

**VI. Language and Agency (March 5)**

- Austin, J.L. 1961. "Performative utterances." In *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford: University Press, pp.233-52.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, pp.1-41.
- Duranti, Alessandro. 2004 "Agency in Language." In Duranti, A. (ed.), *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp.451-473. **(Required reading from earlier in the semester.)**
- Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. "Language and Agency." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30:109-37. **(This is an earlier version of "Agency and Language." I believe you read it for 514.)**

## Recommended:

- Kockelman, Paul. 2007. "Agency: The Relation between Meaning, Power, and Knowledge." *Current Anthropology* 48(3):375-401.
- Keane, Webb. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1-34.
- Taylor, Charles. 1985. *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, pp.1-44.
- Wee, Lionel. 2007. "The Hunger Strike as a Communicative Act: Intention Without Responsibility." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17(1):61-76.

## VII. Actor-Network Theory and Distributed Agency (March 12)

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Entire book.

Note: You can sign up for a MOOC on “Scientific Humanities” with Prof. Latour before Feb. 11<sup>th</sup> if you go to:

[https://www.france-universite-numerique-mooc.fr/courses/SciencesPo/05004/Trimestre\\_1\\_2014/about](https://www.france-universite-numerique-mooc.fr/courses/SciencesPo/05004/Trimestre_1_2014/about).

Recommended:

- Butler, Judith. 2010. “Performative agency.” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2):147-161.
- Bennett, Jane. 2005. “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout.” *Public Culture* 17(3):445-465.
- Pickering, Andrew. 1995. *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.1-27.
- Latour, Bruno. 1998. “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications.” <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9801/msg00019.html> and <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9801/msg00020.html> (both accessed 26 August 2010).
- Callon, Michel. 2006. “What does it mean to say that economics is performative?” D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa and L. Siu (Eds.), *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*, Princeton University Press.
- Castree, Noel. 2002. “False Antitheses? Marxism, Nature and Actor-Networks.” *Antipode* 34(1):111-146.
- Callon, Michel. 1998. “Introduction: The Embeddedness of Economic Markets in Economics.” In *The Laws of the Markets*. M. Callon, ed. Pp. 1–57. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Callon, Michel. 2005. “Why Virtualism Paves the Way to Political Impotence.” *Economic Sociology: European Electronic Newsletter* 6(2):3-20.
- Law, John. 1999. “After ANT: Complexity, Naming, and Topology.” In John Law and John Hassard (eds.), *Actor Network Theory and After*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp.1-14.
- Miller, Daniel. 2002. “Turning Callon the Right Way Up.” *Economy and Society* 31(2):218-233.
- Miller, Daniel. 2005. Reply to Michel Callon. *Economic Sociology: European Electronic Newsletter* 6(3):3-13.
- Holm, Petter. 2007. “Which Way is Up on Callon? In Do Economists Make Markets?” *On the Performativity of Economics*. D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa, and L. Siu, eds. Pp. 225-243. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

## VIII. Practice Theorists IV: Sahlins (March 19)

Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. Ann Arbor: Univ. Mich. Press.

Kulick, Don. 1992. Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self, and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinean Village. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.1-25.

Recommended:

Borofsky, Robert. 1997. Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere, and Sahlins. *Current Anthropology* 38(2):255-282.

**IX. Practice Theorists V: Ortner (March 26) [FINAL PROSPECTUS DUE BEFORE CLASS]**

Ortner, Sherry B. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.  
Please read at least the following chapters:

“Introduction: Updating Practice Theory”

“Chapter Two: Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal”

“Chapter Five: Subjectivity and Cultural Critique”

“Chapter Six: Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency”

Ortner, Sherry B. 2001. Specifying agency: the Comaroffs and their critics. *Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 3(1):76-84.

Recommended:

[HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!] Ortner, Sherry B. 1984. Theory in anthropology since the sixties. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26(1):126-166.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1996. Making gender: toward a feminist, minority, postcolonial, subaltern, etc., theory of practice. In *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, pp. 1-20.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1989. Expanding practice theory. In *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, pp. 11-18.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2010. Access: reflections on studying up in Hollywood. *Ethnography* 11(2):211-233.

**X. Agency and Gender (April 2)**

McElhinny Bonnie. 1998. Genealogies of gender theory: practice theory and feminism in sociocultural and linguistic anthropology. *Social Analysis* 42(3):164-89

Wardlow, Holly. 2006. “Chapter Two – ‘To Finish My Anger’: Body and Agency among Huli Women” in *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinean Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.63-98.

Gardiner, Judith K. 1995. Introduction. In Judith K. Gardiner (ed.), *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*. Urbana: Univ. Illinois Press, pp.1-20.

Messer-Davidow, Ellen. 1995. Acting Otherwise. In Judith K. Gardiner (ed.), *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*. Urbana: Univ. Illinois Press, pp.23-51.

Davies, Bronwyn. 2000. The concept of agency. In *A Body of Writing, 1990-1999*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, pp.55-68.

Recommended:

Kumar, Nita, ed. 1994. *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*. Charlottesville: Univ. Virginia Press, Introduction (pp.1-25).

Hilsdon, Anne-Marie. 2007. Introduction: reconsidering agency – feminist anthropologies in Asia. *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 18(2):127-137.

McNay, Lois. 2000. Body, position, power: Bourdieu and Butler on agency. In *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, pp.31-73.

**XI. Various Other (Mainly Sociological) Approaches (April 9)**

de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Transl. S Rendall. Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press, pp.15-42.

Archer, Margaret S. 2000. *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, pp.1-13.

Sztompka, Piotr. 1991. *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, pp.ix-xi, 120-145.

Recommended:

Shilling, Chris. 1997. The undersocialised conception of the embodied agent in modern sociology. *Sociology* 31(4), pp.737-755.

## XII. Foucault (April 16)

Rabinow, Paul and Nikolas Rose (eds.). 1994. *The Essential Foucault*. Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II (pp.58-63), The Subject and Power (pp.126-144), and Technologies of the Self (pp.145-169). New York: The New Press.

Recommended:

O'Hara, D.T. 1992. *Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency After Foucault*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, pp.60-73.

## XIII. Ethnographic Approaches to Agency (April 23)

Read AT LEAST ONE of the following three ethnographies in its entirety:

Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. University of Michigan Press.

Duranti, Alessandro. 1994. *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village*. Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press.

Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. University of California Press. ISBN: 978-0-520-27611-6

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

**\*\* COMPLETE DRAFT OF FINAL PAPER DUE IN MY INBOX BEFORE CLASS ON APRIL 23<sup>rd</sup> \*\***

## XIV. Oral Presentations of Projects (April 30)

Final paper due in my e-mail inbox by 4:00 p.m. on Friday, May 9<sup>th</sup>.

