Anthropology 744 – Theories of Social Action: Understanding Agency and Social Structure

Spring 2017
Fridays, 9:30am-12:10pm
Sabin 394

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This seminar serves as an introduction to two schools of thought which attempt to understand social action: performance theory and practice theory. Focusing primarily on classic texts, this course investigates the fundamental claims by these schools and inquires as to what extent links can be drawn between them. While much recent work on performance has been concerned primarily with its role in the construction of identity, it is not always clear how the shaping of identity leads to consequences of a more apprehensible kind. What is at stake in such social action, beyond claims about identity, and how is this action connected to larger structural conditions for action? By pursuing J.L. Austin’s call (1962) for the recognition of the power of expressive forms to – under felicitous conditions – constitute cultural realities, this course seeks to explore the theoretical obstacles and ethnographic challenges involved in bridging the gap between micro-level expression and action and macro-level social structure and processes.

Crucial for this examination is a consideration of the vulnerability of local convention to creative invention, and in this respect the “poetic function” (Jakobson 1960) provides a means of linking cultural norms to innovation. With a heightened awareness of the stakes, expressive action becomes, then, more than a “playing” with form; it is the means by which, through exposing themselves to the risks of such social performance, actors seek to pursue their interests as well as generate new forms (which subsequently become the basis for other actions). The manipulation of the timing of actions and the capricious enforcement of bureaucratic rules, for example, are “poetic” means by which those embedded in structural relationships may nonetheless exert influence; they also demonstrate the role of unpredictability in social processes. This approach raises several key ethnographic challenges: How does the ethnographer, once aware of the range of historical, linguistic and other meanings which a given action may invoke, come to understand which of these are relevant in the interpretations of this action by local actors, particularly when the action is non-verbal? How may this approach privilege the actions of those who play with expressive forms more dramatically, and exclude other, less obvious performances which may rely, for example, on the subtility of irony? How is the researcher to distinguish between effects which are intended and those which are unintended?

Assignments:
Students are expected to do the weekly readings, attend seminar without exception, and participate actively in discussion. In addition, students are required to present on the week’s material or provide a critical response to another student’s presentation when called upon to do so (60% of grade). Students will in addition write a final paper for the course (40% of grade). This is a graduate-level course only.

Course Readings:
The coursepack (“cp”) of shorter readings is available on the course website, through UWM’s Desire2Learn course management system. The following books are required and can be purchased at the UWM Bookstore:


Note: Here is a link to the Uniform Syllabus Policy web page; students should go to the web page for more information on their rights and responsibilities as students: www.uwm.edu/Dept/SecU/SyllabusLinks.pdf
Course Schedule

Social Action as Social Drama: Ritual and Theatre

Week 1 (1/27)
Course Introduction

Week 2 (2/3)
Goffman, E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, pp. 1-166

Week 3 (2/10)
Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Chapters 1 & 2 [Chapter 3 recommended]) (on reserve)
Peacock, James. “Ethnographic Notes on Sacred and Profane Performance” (D2L)

Social Poetics: Metaphor and Meaning

Week 4 (2/17)
Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words* (Lectures 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, & 11)
Rosaldo, Michelle. “The Things We Do with Words” (D2L)

Week 5 (2/24)
Jakobson, Roman. “Linguistics and Poetics” (D2L) (Note: the full text of “The Raven” is available here: http://www.eapoe.org/works/poems/ravent.htm)
Recommended: Sontag, Susan. “Notes on Camp” (D2L); Fernandez, James. Selection from *Persuasions and Performances* (Chapters 1 & 2) (D2L)

Week 6 (3/3)
Bauman, Richard. *Verbal Art as Performance*
Bauman, Richard. “The Role of Performance in the Ethnography of Speaking” (D2L)

Week 7 (3/10)
Tambiah, Stanley. “A Performative Approach to Ritual” (D2L)
Recommended: Herzfeld, Michael. “Social Poetics in Theory and Practice” (D2L)

Practice Theory: Action and Structure

Week 8 (3/17)
Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Part I (TBA)

3/24 – Spring Recess – No Course Meeting

Week 9 (3/31)
Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Part II (TBA)
Jenkins, Timothy. “Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life” (D2L)

Week 10 (4/7)
Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital” (D2L)
Bourdieu, Pierre. “Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits” and “Authorized Language” (D2L)

Week 11 (4/14)
deCerteau, Michel. Selection from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (pp. ix-42 [Chapters 4 & 6 rec’d]) (D2L)

Week 12 (4/21)

Week 13 (4/28)
Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish*, Part I

Week 14 (5/5)
Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish*, Part II

Final Papers Due Friday, May 19th