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

Fall 2019
Fridays, 9:30am-12:10pm
Sabin 394
Instructor: Thomas Malaby
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 1:30-3 pm
Office: Sabin 397
Phone: 414-229-5247
Email: malaby@uwm.edu

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 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 appreciable 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 subtlety 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, follow assigned readings and other guidance on Canvas, and participate actively in discussion (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:
All shorter readings are available on the course website, through UWM’s Canvas course management system (some longer texts are available as well). The following books are required and can be purchased through the UWM Bookstore (cheaper options online may be available):
- Austin, J.L. How to Do Things with Words (ISBN 978-1684222650)
- De Certeau, Michel The Practice of Everyday Life (ISBN 978-0520271456)

Possibly helpful to read before the course begins (see my Welcome announcement on Canvas):
- Basso, Keith. Wisdom Sits in Places (978-0826317247)

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 (9/6)
Goffman, E. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, pp. 1-166

Week 2 (9/13)
Turner, Victor. Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society (Chapters 1 & 2 [Chapter 3 recommended]) (Canvas)
Peacock, James. “Ethnographic Notes on Sacred and Profane Performance” (Canvas)

Language & Poetics: Tropes in Action

Week 3 (9/20)
Austin, J.L. How to Do Things with Words (Lectures 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, & 11)
Rosaldo, Michelle. “The Things We Do with Words” (Canvas)

Week 4 (9/27)
Jakobson, Roman. “Linguistics and Poetics” (Canvas) (Note: the full text of “The Raven” is available here: http://www.eapoe.org/works/poems/ravent.htm)
Recommended: Sontag, Susan. “Notes on Camp” (Canvas); Fernandez, James. Selection from Persuasions and Performances (Chapters 1 & 2) (Canvas)

Social Poetics: The Emergence of Sociality

Week 5 (10/4)
Bauman, Richard. Verbal Art as Performance
Bauman, Richard. “The Role of Performance in the Ethnography of Speaking” (Canvas)

Week 6 (10/11)
Tambiah, Stanley. “A Performative Approach to Ritual” (Canvas)
Herzfeld, Michael. “Social Poetics in Theory and Practice” (Canvas)
Falk Moore, Sally. “Uncertainties in Situations, Indeterminacies in Culture” (Canvas)

Practice Theory: Action and Structure

Week 7 (10/18)
Bourdieu, Pierre. Outline of a Theory of Practice Part I (Selections TBA)
Jenkins, Timothy. “Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life” (Canvas)
Recommended: Ortner, Sherry. “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties” (Canvas)

Week 8 (10/25)
Bourdieu, Pierre. Outline of a Theory of Practice Part II (Selections TBA)
Bourdieu, Pierre. “Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits” and “Authorized Language” (Canvas)
Recommended: Bourdieu, Pierre. “Forms of Capital” (Canvas)

Week 9 (11/1)
Mauss, Marcel. “Techniques of the Body” (Canvas)
De Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life Part I (Selections TBA)

Week 10 (11/8)
De Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life Part II (Selections TBA)

Week 11 (11/15)
De Certeau, Michel. The Practice of Everyday Life Part III (Selections TBA)

11/22 – Thanksgiving Break – No Course Meeting

Week 12 (11/29)
Falk Moore, Sally. “Explaining the Present” (Canvas)
Giddens, Anthony. The Constitution of Society Part I (Selections TBA)

Week 13 (12/6)
Giddens, Anthony. The Constitution of Society Part II (Selections TBA)
Lambek, Michael. “The Continuous and Discontinuous Person” (Canvas)
Final Papers Due Friday, December 20th