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Making Gender

The Politics and Erotics of Culture

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Sherpas Through Their Rituals

High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism

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Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality
(with Harriet Whitehead)

Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory
(with Nicholas B. Dirks and Geoff Eley)

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Preface

I find it strange to put together a collection of my own essays. It is not that I do not like to reflect upon them, but there is a sense of packaging the self that makes me uncomfortable. Nonetheless, here it is.

These essays span approximately twenty-five years, a fact that is quite astonishing to me. At one level I think of all of them as very much alive in the present. They embody issues that are still debated, positions that are still held, and a fair number of truths that still seem true. Yet at another level all of the essays exist for me as parts of a history, and this has several implications. First, although I have cleaned up some grammatical errors and the like, I have decided not to tamper with their contents. There are things I probably would not write today, and things I wish I had written differently, but there is something science fiction-like in trying to unwrite and rewrite the essays now, and I could not bring myself to do it.

The historicity of the papers also means that each was embedded in a particular context of writing that is still alive in my memory and consciousness. Each was written at a certain point in time, usually for a particular purpose, and often in the context of particular relationships—of friendship and solidarity, or of antagonism and competition, or both. I have thus added a note for each of the previously published essays detailing a bit of the personal and professional context, and the sometimes quite acrimonious intellectual politics, within which it was written.

Finally, of course, each essay has its own historically situated debts. The

acknowledgments must thus for the most part be taken essay by essay. But a few broader thanks need to be expressed here, beginning with Lauren Bryant, formerly of Beacon Press, who urged me gently over the years to put this book together, and Marya Van't Hul, now of Beacon Press, who shepherded it through reviews and production with a combination of warmth, good will, and effectiveness that I consistently appreciated. Thanks also to Louise Lamphere and several anonymous press readers of the manuscript as a whole, for useful comments and reactions. And a vote of appreciation to Suzanne Calpestri, librarian extraordinaire of the Anthropology Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

On a more personal level, I have dedicated the book to Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, who first drew me into feminist anthropology. Shelly and I were at once personally close and professionally competitive, and when she died in a fieldwork accident in 1981 I mourned the loss not only of an intense and compelling friend, but of a sharp critic who kept me on my toes intellectually. I have also dedicated the book to my daughter, Gwen, now a maddening teenager and a wonderful human being, who keeps me on my toes in ever so many other ways.

Finally, for extraordinary friendship at every level—personal, political, intellectual—over the years I thank Abigail Stewart; for warm friendship as well as generosity in providing extensive and astute intellectual feedback, I thank Nancy Chodorow and Judith Stacey; and for daily backup and love, as well as always kind but insightful criticisms, I thank Timothy D. Taylor.



Making Gender

Toward a Feminist, Minority, Postcolonial, Subaltern, etc., Theory of Practice

With the title phrase “Making Gender,” I point to the double meaning of “making” that operates in contemporary social and cultural studies. On the one hand we have a variety of “constructionisms” in which cultural categories, or historical subjects, or forms of subjectivity are—passive voice—made. The guiding theoretical frameworks here derive from a number of strands of French theory as represented by, among others, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. Despite significant differences between these figures, all have in their own ways directed us to see subjects as constructed by, and subjected to, the cultural and historical discourses within which they must operate. The usual terminology in this context is the heavier “construct” rather than the lighter “make.” Within this perspective, the methodology is textual analysis in a broad sense—asking what forms of difference, what kinds of identities and subject positions are constructed within the framework of a given cultural, ideological, or discursive formation.

On the other hand we have “making” from the actor’s point of view. The question is how actors “enact,” “resist,” or “negotiate” the world as given, and in so doing “make” the world. This making may turn out to produce the same old social and cultural thing—“reproduction.” Or it may turn out to produce something new, although not necessarily what the actors intended. Indeed intention plays a complex role in the process, for while intention is central to what the actor seeks to accomplish—and therefore must be

understood very carefully—its relationship to the outcome is often quite oblique. In any event, the terminology here is more from the language of craft than from heavy industry, “making” rather than “construction,” as in E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*. And the methodology is fundamentally ethnographic rather than textual, descriptive and analytic rather than interpretive or deconstructionist—looking at and listening to real people doing real things in a given historical moment, past or present, and trying to figure out how what they are doing or have done will or will not reconfigure the world they live in.

The anthropological project in the fullest sense, as I see it, must always comprise both kinds of work. Studies of the ways in which some set of “texts”—media productions, literary creations, medical writings, religious discourses, and so on—“constructs” categories, identities, or subject positions, are incomplete and misleading unless they ask to what degree those texts successfully impose themselves on real people (and *which people*) in real time. Similarly, studies of the ways in which people resist, negotiate, or appropriate some feature of their world are also inadequate and misleading without careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their “agency,” and that limit the transformative potential of all such intentionalized activity.

There is by now an important body of theory that ideally unites these two forms of analysis—a range of loosely interrelated work that I have elsewhere pulled together under the rubric of “practice theory” (Ortner 1984, 1989). Practice theory represents one of several kinds of theoretical response to earlier structural determinisms—Parsonian systems theory and related functionalisms, Lévi-Straussian structuralism, certain kinds of mechanistic Marxism. Within a practice framework, there is an insistence, as in earlier structural-determinist models, that human action is constrained by the given social and cultural order (often condensed in the term “structure”); but there is also an insistence that human action *makes* “structure”—reproduces or transforms it, or both. Despite the label, practice theory is not really “a theory,” in part because it does not pretend to some sort of formal unity, and in part because it lacks two key characteristics of classic social theory: an underlying narrative (for example, the march of modernization), and an underlying norm of the social order (as in functionalism’s assumed norms of homeostasis and integration). There is only as it were an argument—that human action is made by “structure,” and at the same time always makes and potentially unmakes it.

The first round of formal work articulating various aspects of this theoretical framework was done in the late 1970s and early 1980s—the key texts were Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Anthony Giddens’s *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979), Marshall Sahlins’s *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981), and Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Together this work offers one of the potentially most powerful and comprehensive frameworks available for the understanding of cultural and social life. Yet in some ways it seems by now to have stalled out. Although its earlier theorists positioned themselves, and the theory, broadly on the side of the subaltern—the underlying question was always how relations of power and inequality tend to get reproduced but can be changed through practice—yet in fact (with the partial exception of de Certeau) they made little effort to link up with the exciting body of work emerging from feminist and other forms of engaged scholarship in that same era.¹ Explorations of the multiple and contradictory forms of power and of resistance; of the multiple forms and degrees of “agency”; of the relationship of the private and intimate to large-scale structural change; of identity in a world carved up by race, ethnicity, class, and gender; of the adequacy of the very concept of structure—these and other issues have remained relatively marginal to practice theorizing, thereby jeopardizing its relevance to large areas of contemporary social thought.

In turn, although feminist anthropologists and others working in “engaged scholarship” have by no means ignored this work,² my sense is that there has been a fairly deep divide between the two arenas of scholarship. For one example, take a recent panel on “Agency” at the American Anthropological Association meetings (1995). This panel was concerned with theorizing agency for women and other subaltern subjects. While it seemed self-evident to me that the question of “agency” had been put on the table precisely as part of the development of practice theories beginning in the 1970s, in fact there was very little reference to that body of literature in the panel. Similarly, in the introduction to their important collection of essays, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (1992), Judith Butler and Joan Scott specifically raised (partly in order to challenge) a range of questions surrounding the absence of an intentional subject, or a notion of “agency,” in poststructuralist feminist theory. The contributors to the collection included philosophers, literary critics, legal theorists, political theorists, historians, and an anthropologist. Yet none of them addressed either the gen-

eral theoretical arguments of practice theory, or (with the exception of one footnote on Bourdieu) its specific theorists. Even in my own writings I have unintentionally tended to segregate the two perspectives. In the work in which I have most explicitly addressed practice theories (1984, 1989) I have not incorporated gender or feminist issues (as commented on by Collier and Yanagisako 1989 and Lutz 1990), while my feminist work has fairly consistently worked from some form of practice perspective without invoking the intellectual genealogies or articulating the theoretical issues at stake.³

My purpose in this essay, then, which may both stand in itself and be taken to introduce the essays that follow, is to critique practice theory from a feminist and more generally subaltern perspective. The purpose of this exercise in turn is to attempt to draw practice theory more fully into the orbit of feminist and other subaltern theorizing, in part because these perspectives themselves often fall into one or the other trap with which I opened the essay: too much construction (textual, discursive, etc.) on the one hand, too much making (decontextualized “resistance”) on the other. Since I see practice theory as the only framework that theorizes a necessary dialectic between the two extremes, this strikes me as a useful, and even urgent, endeavor.

Losing Power

I begin with the problem of the peculiar status of power in theories of practice.⁴ None of the major theorists of practice ignores power, yet it is always in some sense offstage.⁵ For Bourdieu (e.g., 1990), for example, there are structures of inequality and of domination, and various practices reproduce these structures (or more specifically, reproduce the categories that underlie them, and the mechanisms that render them unrecognizable). But the practices themselves are largely utilitarian and economic, with actors seeking to maximize various forms of capital to enhance their own positions within these structures. Practices in Bourdieu are not practices of power as such—acts of domination, control, violence; exercises of authority and claims of truth; performances of strutting, boasting, humiliating. Or the other side: rage, impotence, pain, humiliation; collaboration and sleeping with the enemy; struggle, resistance, revolution. This is not to say that such relationships and practices exhaust the totality of social life. But the argument within feminist, minority, etc., theorizing is to say, let us move these things—for a change—to the center of the theory and see what happens.

PT Of the three main practice theorists, Giddens is actually the strongest in

foregrounding issues of power. He argues that “orthodox sociology lacked a theory of action [and] . . . this was directly linked to a failure to make questions of power central to social theory” (1979: 253). Yet his work, too, often seems detached from the concerns of feminist, minority, postcolonial, and subaltern theorists. One can tease out a number of possible reasons for this: that he is primarily concerned with social reproduction rather than change; that issues of power are locked into the formalist language of “structure” and “agency”; that his primary model of power is drawn from capitalist class relations and bureaucratic structures, which operate differently than relations of gender, race, and colonial domination.

Finally, let us look at Marshall Sahlins’s handling of power in *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981), a gem of a book from which I take a great deal of inspiration. In this book, Sahlins lays out his original formulation of a practice-theoretical framework. He illustrates the arguments sketchily (it is a short book) but persuasively with material from eighteenth-century Hawaii pertaining to the arrival and eventual death of Captain James Cook in the islands.

Sahlins organizes his theoretical framework around what he calls “structures of the conjuncture,” historical moments in which different systems of thought and practice—different cultures in this case, but Sahlins claims that other forms of difference would work just as well—come into engagement with one another, and potentially set in motion radical kinds of conceptual and practical unravellings. The illustrative case is the way in which aspects of traditional Hawaiian culture began to unravel, as Hawaiians—chiefs and commoners, men and women—engaged differentially with a variety of European persons and practices.

Sahlins is attentive to the internal politics of rank and gender among the Hawaiians themselves. Indeed these internal relationships of power and privilege are central to his narrative and his theoretical framework. Yet the engagement *between* the Europeans and the Hawaiians is curiously not treated as a relationship of power—here Sahlins moves into the more abstract language of “event” and “structure of the conjuncture.” In the end, within Sahlins’s account, Cook was killed not because of anything he or his men did to the Hawaiians, but because he violated a set of Hawaiian cultural expectations.

Sahlins’s book became the target of a critique articulated from an explicitly postcolonial perspective: Gananath Obeyesekere’s *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (1992). Obeyesekere

did not himself focus on the question of power; he primarily went after Sahlins's assertions that the Hawaiians took Captain Cook to be a god, arguing that such a claim is a projection of European orientalist fantasies rather than a representation of Hawaiian realities. Sahlins responded vigorously in a 1995 book, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example*. Most commentators have considered that Sahlins effectively demolished this particular part of Obeyesekere's argument at multiple levels—in terms of greater control of the data and greater plausibility of its interpretation, and in terms of the ironic reversal of positions wherein the scholar writing from the postcolonial position was forced to deny the authenticity of native Hawaiian culture in favor of a universalized "common sense."

Yet there is a strand of Obeyesekere's book that I found very compelling, and that—unless I missed something in the extraordinary detail of Sahlins's response—Sahlins never refuted. Obeyesekere foregrounded incidents in which Cook, the other British captains, and the crewmen all regularly committed acts of humiliation and violence vis-à-vis the Hawaiians, including an ambiguous incident in which a wooden fence around a ritual compound was taken away by them for firewood; severe and excessive floggings of Hawaiians who stole goods from the ships; and Cook's own increasing moodiness, rage, and violent reprisals in the face of the Hawaiians' increasing "insolence."⁶ Although this strand of Obeyesekere's argument got lost in the tangle of trying to prove whether or not the Hawaiians took Cook to be a god, it provides the launching point for re-reading the British-Hawaiian encounter in terms of its fundamental inequality. It forces a recognition of the systematic practices of power and domination, and small and large acts of resistance, that shadowed the economic, sexual, and cultural exchanges that comprised the "structure of the conjuncture." I am inclined to take this piece of Obeyesekere's critique quite seriously, not only because Obeyesekere supports it well and the almost indomitable Sahlins is unable to blow it away, but because it takes shape precisely in the gap that I am pointing to here, the displacement of power and struggle in some of the most influential works of practice theory.

Recovering Agency

If practice theory is somewhat problematic on issues of power, it is nonetheless important for its contributions to questions of agency. Indeed it is precisely for this reason that I am arguing for a greater rapprochement between feminist, minority, postcolonial, and subaltern scholarship, on the one

hand, and practice theory on the other. Before launching on this discussion, however, it must be emphasized that the practice-theoretical perspective on agency is in no way a form of voluntarism, does not presume that agents are free individuals, does not construct the agent as a bourgeois subject, and so forth. Rather, practice theory is a site—perhaps the only site—in which there is an effort to theorize human agency without falling into any of those traps.

THE EXCLUSION OF THE SUBJECT AND OF AGENCY

Earlier forms of social theory—British-American structural-functionalism, certain kinds of deterministic/mechanical Marxism, French structuralism—were specifically elaborated without an intentional subject. For both theoretical and real-world reasons, there was a commitment to a view of society and history as machines or organisms, operating according to their own laws and logics, quite apart from the desires and intentions of social actors. The 1970s saw a variety of reactions against these models, including practice theories, but also a range of work gathered under the rubric of poststructuralism. Poststructuralisms also saw themselves as reacting against the mechanism and determinism of the earlier structural(ist) frameworks, yet in contrast to practice-oriented approaches, these schools sustained the position that the intentional subject or "agent" must be excluded from the theoretical model.

For specific historical reasons, in turn, this anti-subject or anti-agent poststructuralism had what many felt to be a surprising impact on certain strands of feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Feminist theorists who take the poststructuralist position clearly assume that the deconstruction of the subject is a radical act, and that leaving any notion of the subject intact poses grave dangers, both intellectual and political: "What are the political consequences for feminism of embracing the subject? What kinds of racial and class privileges remain intact when the humanist subject remains unchallenged?" (Butler and Scott 1992: xvi). The entire theoretical apparatus is often directed toward showing the ways in which the (apparent) subject is actually an ideological effect, a discursively constructed position that cannot recognize its own constructedness.

The anti-subject position has taken a related, but slightly different turn within discussions of postmodernity (as a historical era) and postmodernism (as a theoretical position). Recent accounts of postmodernity have emphasized among other things the fragmentation of the postmodern sub-

ject, its depthlessness and lack of coherence. Some (e.g., Baudrillard 1988, Lyotard 1984) have celebrated this development, while others (especially Jameson 1984) have lamented it, but all have agreed that the era in which subjects sought coherence, meaning, and purpose in life, and experienced alienation in the absence of such meaning and purpose, was over.

In response to these positions that omit, exclude, or bid farewell to the intentional subject, there has been a good deal of critical reaction across a broad front of feminist, minority, postcolonial, and subaltern theorizing. The general point across these various responses is that the denial of the intentional subject, and of "agency," both misreads and works against the intellectual and political interests of women, minorities, postcolonial, and other subaltern subjects. In a powerful recent paper, for example, José Limón considers some of the arguments about the postmodern subject in relation to his experiences with and observations of barroom dancing and brawling among poor, working-class Mexican Americans of south Texas (1991). Limón argues eloquently that, while life for these people is indeed full of discontinuity, disruption, and fragmentation, the forms and patterns of their dancing represent a struggle *against* these things, an effort, however momentary and inadequate, to construct a world of meaning and coherence. Similarly, in a discussion of minority and postcolonial discourse, Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd address the poststructuralist rather than postmodernist variant of the problem:

But where the point of departure of poststructuralism lies within the Western tradition and works to deconstruct its identity formations "from within," the critical difference is that minorities, by virtue of their very social being, must begin from a position of objective *non-identity* which is rooted in their economic and cultural marginalization vis-à-vis the "West." The non-identity which the critical Western intellectual seeks to (re)produce discursively is for minorities a given of their social existence. But as such a given it is not yet by any means an index of liberation. . . . On the contrary, the non-identity of minorities remains the sign of material damage to which the only coherent response is struggle, not ironic distancing. (1987: 16)

THE UNMAKING OF FEMALE AGENCY

Before considering the ways in which practice theory can restore agency without reproducing the bourgeois subject. I want to explore briefly, and through a concrete example, the notion of identity "damage" raised by Jan-

Mohamed and Lloyd (see also Ortner 1995a). I once spent some time analyzing *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, with an interest in seeing the ways in which female agency was constructed differently from male agency, the ways in which heroines were different from heroes.⁷ I suppose I expected to find the usual binaries: passive/active, weak/strong, timorous/brave, etc. What I had not quite expected to see was a recognition in the tales that female characters had to be *made* to be passive, weak, and timorous, that is, a recognition that agency in girls had to be *unmade*. Most of the Grimms' heroines are in the mode of what the folklorist Propp (1968) calls "victim heroes": although they are the protagonists, the action of the story is moved along by virtue of bad things happening to them, rather than their initiating actions as in the case of the majority of male heroes. Thus non-agency, passivity, is to some extent built into most of them from the outset. Yet in many cases even these victim heroines take roles of active agency in the early parts of the story. Though their initial misfortunes may have happened to them through outside agency, they sometimes seize the action and carry it along themselves, becoming—briefly—heroines in the active questing sense usually reserved for male heroes.

The structure of virtually all the tales is one of "passage," of moving from childhood to adulthood. For the boy heroes, passage generally involves the successful enactment of agency—solving a problem, finding a lost object, slaying the dragon. For all of the female protagonists, on the other hand, passage almost exclusively involves the *renunciation* of agency. Agentic girls, girls who seize the action too much, even for altruistic reasons, are punished in one of two ways. The less common form of punishment, first, is the denial of passage to adulthood. Five of the tales have heroines who are fully active and fully successful in enacting their projects.⁸ To take the most familiar example among these, in "Hansel and Gretel" it is Gretel who tricks the witch and pushes her into the oven. But at the end of the story Gretel returns to her natal home, still in the status of child. She does not achieve what the vast majority of the Grimms' heroines achieve—the mark of female adulthood, marriage.

In the more common female tale, the heroine gets married at the end. But if she has been at all active in the early part of the tale, she must invariably pass through severe trials before being worthy of marrying the prince, or indeed being worthy of any man at all. These trials always involve symbols and practices of utter passivity and/or total inactivity, as well as practices of humility and subordination. For example, in "Sweetheart Roland" she

cleverly saves her skin at the beginning, and then saves both herself and her lover, but for her pains her lover betroths another woman. In response, the heroine turns herself first into a stone, then into a flower, and finally cleans house for some time for a shepherd before marrying her sweetheart in the end.⁹ The renunciation of agency here is quite painful. To be a stone is to be utterly inert and identityless; to be a flower is to hope to be crushed: “‘Somebody at least will tread upon me,’ she thought” (*Grimms’* . . . 1945: 65).

If any sort of agency must be punished, even for “good” girls, the punishment is even worse for “bad” female characters, witches and wicked stepmothers. These women are highly agentic—they have projects, plans, plots. Needless to say, they all come to terrible ends. After trying and failing to kill Snow White, for example, the stepmother/witch is invited to the wedding of Snow White and the Prince, but once there she is forced to dance in red-hot slippers until she falls down dead. Since she and similar characters have done wicked things, their punishments seem justified on moral grounds, yet within the general pattern of punishing any sort of female agency, it seems fair to suggest that they are punished as much for their excessive agency as for its moral content.¹⁰

This detour through *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* was meant to make a number of points. At one level I am in agreement with poststructuralist and other constructionist positions: the forms and distributions of “agency” are always culturally and politically constructed. Thus *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, like any other cultural texts, must be treated as elements of a larger discourse, a universe of politically inflected meanings through which (among other things) agency is culturally shaped and organized. At the same time, however, we must assume that “agency”—defined minimally as a sense that the self is an authorized social being—is part of simply being human, and thus that its absence or denial is as much of a problem as its construction. Here the tales have been treated as parables of a certain failure in poststructuralist and other anti-subject positions, a failure to recognize that the absence of agency and legitimate intentionality must be seen very critically as effects of power.

This argument is not new; the debates about the political and epistemological adequacy of both poststructuralism and postmodernism, specifically with respect to the agency question, have been going on for some time (see, e.g., Alcoff 1994 [1988]). But that is just the problem. The debates tend to be posed in such a way that one appears to have to choose between

total constructionism and total voluntarism, between the Foucauldian discursively constructed (and subjected) subject, or the free agent of Western fantasy. It is the argument of a practice theory framework, however, that this choice is both unnecessary and wrong, which brings us back, finally, to the point of departure: the construction of agency within practice theory, and its potential for resolving this problem.

PRACTICE THEORY AND THE RECOVERY OF THE SUBJECT

If poststructuralism was one response to earlier mechanistic and deterministic frameworks, practice theory was another. But whereas poststructuralism, like earlier theories, excluded the intentional subject, practice-oriented theories offered a way to put human intention and desire back into the picture. Ironically enough, one of the chief architects of practice theory, Pierre Bourdieu, nonetheless held out against the idea of the intentional subject: for Bourdieu there are practices, there are actors, but there are no significant intentionalities: actors strategize, but their strategies are drawn from an internalized *habitus* that is itself a virtual mirror of external limits and possibilities. Actions are thus “intelligible and coherent without springing from an intention of coherence and a deliberate decision; [they are] adjusted to the future without being the product of a project or plan” (1990: 50–51).¹¹

On this particular point, then, we must set Bourdieu aside. But both Giddens and Sahlins are, in different ways, quite strong on issues of agency, and specifically on the ways in which agency is both a product and a producer of society and history. Giddens theorizes knowledgeable and intentional agents who have the capacity to reflect on their own actions and the ability to see, to some extent, into the workings of the larger forces that are impinging upon them. At the same time he recognizes, and theorizes, the always complex relationship between subjects’ intentionality and knowledgeability, on the one hand, and, on the other, the actual shape (“structure”) of a world which is never a direct outcome of those intentions.

Sahlins works from the same basic assumptions, but handles them differently. Whereas Giddens takes questions of “agency” at the generic level, Sahlins’s discussions are always embedded within the interpretation of ethnographic and historical cases. He is thus able to show in quite nuanced ways the cultural construction of subjects and agents, and the ways in which those varying constructions both inflect the historical process, and are themselves transformed over time (see especially Sahlins 1985 as well as

1981). Moreover, Sahlins's actors are always enmeshed within complex social and political processes, and we are never able to imagine (as sometimes happens with Giddens's abstract modeling) a pure "agent" standing apart from some larger, and constantly shifting, set of relationships.

At this point, we must begin to start pulling the pieces of the discussion together. The problem is in many ways one of representation. Writing in terms of the old binaries—structure/event, structure/agency, habitus/practice—is, I think, a dead end. The challenge is to picture indissoluble formations of structurally embedded agency and intention-filled structures, to recognize the ways in which the subject is part of larger social and cultural webs, and in which social and cultural "systems" are predicated upon human desires and projects. Giddens and Sahlins point us in the right direction, but we need to go further.

Serious Games

Drawing on the essays in this volume, I want to propose a model of practice that embodies agency but does not begin with, or pivot upon, the agent, actor, or individual. While there are very definitely in this view actors and agents, desires and intentions, plans and plots, these are embedded within—what shall we call them? games? projects? dramas? stories?—in any event, motivated, organized, and socially complex ways of going about life in particular times and places. Of the terms just noted, and for reasons that I hope will become clear in the discussion to follow, I find "games" to be the most broadly useful image. But because the idea of the game in English connotes something relatively light and playful, I modify the term: "serious games."¹² The idea of the "game" is meant to capture simultaneously the following dimensions: that social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous "agents"; and yet at the same time there is "agency," that is, actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is "serious" is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high. It follows in turn that the games of life must be played with intensity and sometimes deadly earnestness. As a final note there is an assumption that

there is never only one game, a point that will take on some importance as the discussion proceeds.

Other terms could be used to represent these forms of embedded agency, or what might be called "structures of agency." "Project," for example, is useful in emphasizing the purposiveness of the enterprises of life, but perhaps carries overtones of too conscious a level of intentionality, and at the same time does not conjure up a picture of an intensely social process, with multiple players. "Drama" come closer in this respect—there are multiple interacting characters—but the term seems to put too much weight on the prior "scripting" of the play.¹³ "Stories" and "narratives" can be powerful frames for this kind of discussion, yet they may also seem too exclusively linguistic or discursive, and carry overtones of inappropriate fictionality as well.¹⁴ Nonetheless, I have used all of these terms in certain contexts, and have found all of them analytically and interpretively effective for certain purposes. I do not mean to exclude them but have settled for the moment on "serious games" as the most comprehensive theoretical category.

At the same time I do not want to fetishize "games" any more than "structure," "agency," and the like. Any such freezing of categories is itself usually a mistake. The idea of the game is on the one hand drawn from a variety of past social theories (including practice theory; Bourdieu [1990] uses it extensively) as a way of getting past the free agency question, and theorizing a picture of people-in-(power)-relationships-in-projects as the relatively irreducible unit of "practice." At the same time, a feminist/minority/postcolonial/subaltern perspective forces one—forced me, at any rate—to push the usage of the game idea in various directions, and to put relatively novel kinds of pressures on the concept. As a way of seeing its heuristic twists and turns, then, I turn to the papers in this collection.

We may start, as I once started, with de Beauvoir and the existentialists. One of the central terms of existentialist philosophy is the "project," the intentionalized vision of purpose, of making or constructing the self and the world:

The most rudimentary behavior must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being. This is what we call *the project*. (Sartre 1968:91)

In *The Second Sex* (1953 [1949]), Simone de Beauvoir derives an entire semiotics of gender from placing a particular project at the center of her

analysis. She says, in effect, that one of the central projects of human existence is the attempt to transcend the natural limits of being human—the inevitable and irreducible bodily vulnerability to illness, injury, and death. Both men and women, as human beings, share this project, but they have different relationships to it. From this basic starting point, de Beauvoir is able to develop a very powerful account of the logic of gender in Western cultural thought, and of the system of representations through which it is realized.

In “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” I took this argument and did little more than translate it and update it in relation to some feminist anthropological questions of the 1970s. There were a number of things right and wrong with that paper, which I discuss in several other essays in this volume (“Gender Hegemonies,” and “So, Is Female to Male . . .”). Here I simply point to the methodology, the idea that an understanding of the project, the underlying game, will allow one to unravel extensive aspects of the semiotics of the situation. Thus I began with de Beauvoir’s point that one of the important games underlying gender ideologies is the game of transcendence of nature, of bodily vulnerability and bodily limits. Given women’s bodily hostage to pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, in turn, a situation is created in which women seem to stand for everything that humanity (both men and women) is trying to escape and transcend. For de Beauvoir’s analytic purposes, this situation is what allows men to construct themselves as subjects vis-à-vis women as objects, Selves vis-à-vis women as Others. I was less interested in the construction of subjects and objects, and more in the construction and justification of certain social arrangements, but the basic point was the same.

If, in these arguments, the game is transcendence, the “structure” that frames and produces the game is the organization of human existence itself, the fact that vulnerable bodily beings are also bearers of reflective consciousness who can always imagine or fantasize escapes and alternatives. On a smaller scale than the organization of human existence, but still on a fairly large scale of “structure,” we may look at the emergence in human social evolution of those large-scale formations of organized inequality called “states,” as I did in a paper called “The Virgin and the State.” The official problem of that paper was, under what conditions did ideas of the protection of female purity and virginity, largely absent in “simple” and “tribal” societies, emerge? The short answer was, “the rise of the state.”¹⁵ I have some ambivalence today about this sort of social-evolutionary argument,

the paper seems to work on another level as well, relevant for the present discussion. That is, one can reread the paper as an exercise in the structural production of new games.

States seem to generate at least two new games that have relevance for discussions of gender. One is the game of power and authority we would call patriarchy, in which the role of father as an essentially political role emerges. Fathers are constructed as disciplined positions within a hierarchy, made responsible to the state as “heads of household”; at the same time fathers are accorded tremendous power and authority over the subordinates within their households, the women and the junior males; and finally fathers are highly fetishized within the symbolic order, as ancestors, gods, or God.

The other new game is that of social mobility, the newly conjured desire to move up, now that there is an up to move to. This game intersects with patriarchy in an almost endless variety of ways, but I call attention particularly to the newly emergent practice of hypergamy, of women marrying up the social ladder as part of their fathers’ and brothers’ dreams of mobility. The enforcement of female purity, I argued, is a corollary of this, a way of conducting the woman as worthy of the hoped-for higher-status husband. Yet though this is a man’s game, women often embrace these desires and restrictions as well, for there is always a chance that the game will work to their benefit, or that of their daughters.

(Male) games of status and power are also at the heart of the paper entitled “Rank and Gender.”¹⁶ Here I locate a central “game” in play across a large number of Polynesian societies, and try to show how the analytic perspective of this game illuminates an enormous range of gender and sexual representations and practices in these societies. The game is once again the game of mobility in an ostensibly immobile society, a society with hereditary rankings. It involves a certain kinship strategy in which, among other things, daughters ideally remain attached to their parental households, marry in husbands, and bear children who in turn remain attached. Men’s status is, once again, contingent upon the control they can exercise over the sexuality of their sisters and daughters.

Unlike the previous paper, however, this one explicitly attempts to shift ground and look at the system from the different positions established by the game. Junior men and senior men, chiefs and commoners play it differently. Both women and junior men are in many ways pawns within senior men’s games. But in some parts of Polynesia (especially the Western Polyne-

sian societies), women can be seen to play the game differently as sisters or as wives. As sisters they identify with their brothers' games of status, and they are themselves rewarded in this position with status and respect. In marrying and becoming "wives" however, women often lose both status and power. This contradiction will reappear in other ethnographic contexts as well.

Female Agency?

One of the problems running through the papers discussed so far is a tendency to see women as identified with male games, or as pawns in male games, or as otherwise having no autonomous point of view or intentionality. At the very least it appears that, even if women have their own projects, these do not significantly organize the cultural order of gender representations and practices, which largely embody a male point of view. Thus the question of how to think about women's relationship to a hegemomically masculinist (if not "male dominant") social order must still be addressed.

It is unsatisfactory to assume that women wholly identify with the hegemony, but it is nonetheless difficult to come up with an alternative that does not fall into the opposite trap, casting women as enacting wholly different (and often supposedly morally better—more "nurturant" and so forth) projects. Thus in the paper called "The Problem of 'Women' as an Analytic Category,"¹⁷ I specifically undertake to look at women as agents without—ideally—falling into these various traps. Are there "women's games" as such? More generally, how is subaltern agency constructed and enacted?

The case in point was the founding of the first Sherpa nunnery by a group of young women. The Sherpas are a Tibetan Buddhist people of northeast Nepal whom I have been studying since the mid-1960s. In the early decades of the twentieth century, they began to upgrade their religion by building monasteries. This was a grass-roots movement on the part of some young men from relatively high-status families. Shortly after the first monasteries were built, a group of young elite women secretly ran away from their homes to take religious vows in Tibet, and then returned to found the first nunnery.

Although from one angle the women had their own gendered motivations, coming from specifically female experiences in the society, the fact that both they and the male monks were from the more elite sectors of the

city meant that they shared as many motives as not. Moreover, the men who became monks were often the disadvantaged middle sons in elite families, which rendered them in some ways structurally parallel to the women, who were disadvantaged within elite families by gender. Thus at one level the paper answered the question of these women's intentionalities by saying, once again, that they were not that much different from the men's.

But to say that they shared men's motives is not to say that they lacked (independent) "agency," in the sense of authorization to have one's own point of view and desires. The point is rather that the two forms of agency are differently organized: women's agency may be seen as bound into a contradiction that undermines its possibility for enactment. Sherpa women are in fact culturally constructed as relatively independent and autonomous persons, as many observers have noted. On the other hand they are restricted from enacting their independence because of gender-biased property rules, the normative authority of husbands over wives, and the cultural representations that portray women as weak and excessively self-interested. This contradiction of the simultaneous encouragement and undermining of women's agency appears in other cultural contexts as well. The elite Hawaiian women who will be discussed in a moment seem to have been operating out of a similar contradiction.

Subaltern Practice Theory

In order to discuss the two final essays in this book, I need to return for a moment to the critique of practice theory begun earlier. As R. W. Connell has emphasized (1987), practice theory in the hands of Bourdieu and Giddens in particular tended to emphasize the role of practice in social reproduction rather than change. This was another aspect of its seeming disconnection from, if not opposition to, the bodies of feminist, subaltern, minority, and postcolonial theory also evolving in this period. Of course questions of social reproduction and social transformation can never, and should never, be wholly separated. But there is a difference in the angle of vision and questioning with which one comes at the analysis. One can do practice analysis as a loop, in which "structures" construct subjects and practices, but subjects and practices reproduce "structures." Or one can do—what shall we call it? subaltern practice theory?—and choose to avoid the loop, to look for the slippages in reproduction, the erosions of long-standing patterns, the moments of disorder and of outright "resistance."

One approach to this looser and more disruptive version of practice the-

ory may be seen in the paper called "Gender Hegemonies." Here the point of departure is the lack of totalization of "structure" itself. The paper is primarily concerned with rethinking "universal male dominance" by way of rethinking "culture" or "structure"—seeing these formations not as totalized hypercoherent objects, but as always partial hegemonies. Much of the paper is taken up with looking at ethnographic cases and trying to think about the ways in which they are or are not "male dominant." But the point of the argument is that, whatever the hegemonic order of gender relations may be—whether "egalitarian," or "male dominant," or something else—it never exhausts what is going on. There are always sites, and sometimes large sites, of alternative practices and perspectives available, and these may become the bases of resistance and transformation. Thus in the last part of the paper, I return to Polynesia and look at the famous case of nineteenth-century Hawaii, in which a group of elite women organized what can only be called a cultural coup, and succeeded in overthrowing the gender arrangements and taboos of their society.

At one level the analysis was an enactment of the classic practice theory agenda. I looked at how the Hawaiian women were constructed by their own culture and history (pushed by cultural and historical contradictions, enabled by elite political status, etc.), and how they in turn (re-)made their culture and history. But the emphasis was on the disjunctions in, rather than the coherence of the structure, on the creativity of the women within the limits of their traditional politics, on the transformations rather than the continuities that ensued. This, then, is one aspect of the subaltern version of practice theory, with everything slightly—but not completely—tilted toward incompleteness, instability, and change.

The final paper complexifies the picture in another way, multiplying not so much the sites of practice, and the contradictions of practice, around and within a single cultural game, but the number of games in play. This paper, called "Borderland Politics and Erotics . . ." looks at the entry of women, both "first world" and Sherpa, into high-altitude Himalayan mountaineering. In it I follow a slow interactive process that takes place over the course of the whole twentieth century. I look at how a set of gendered meanings gets worked out interactively, from about the 1920s to the 1970s, between men from western and/or dominant cultures ("sahibs") and (male) Sherpas in the intimate and dangerous arena of extreme high-altitude mountaineering. I then look at how those meanings get destabilized for both sahibs and Sherpas as women enter the sport from the 1970s on. Both first-world

women ("memsahibs") and Sherpa women come in at about the same historical moment. For both it is a relatively radical act, given the till-then overwhelmingly male nature of the sport. But the styles of practice and the meanings at stake are different for the two sets of women, and for the men as well. And in the end, things have changed for all concerned, in desired and undesired ways, by accident as well as by design. Borrowing a phrase from an early feminist manifesto (Firestone 1972), I call this long, multi-stranded and multi-loop process a "dialectic of sex"—the making and re-making of gender over a long duration, through cultural games of both power and (would-be) solidarity.

The story of gender in Himalayan mountaineering is global and transnational; there are many games in play simultaneously—colonial, national, racial, gendered—and they all keep changing over time as well. This multiplicity of games in turn has multiple effects. On the one hand it establishes the limits on any single one of them: within one (historically specific, and now changing) ordering of the games, Sherpas had to play the sahibs' game even if it killed them. On the other hand the sheer multiplicity of games provides a sense of alternatives, a sense that there are other ways of doing the game of life, even if those alternatives are not immediately available or not subjectively desirable. What is important is that they exist, and thus always prevent closure.

Some Brief Conclusions

One of the central games of life in most cultures is the gender game, or more specifically the multiplicity of gender games available in that time and place. The effort to understand the making and unmaking of gender, as well as what gender makes, involves understanding the workings of these games as games, with their inclusions and exclusions, multiple positions, complex rules, forms of bodily activity, structures of feeling and desire, and stakes of winning, losing, or simply playing. It involves as well the question of how gender games themselves collide with, encompass, or are bent to the service of, other games, for gender is never, as they say, the only game in town.

The idea of the game—the serious game—in turn is meant to resolve a number of problems in a broader theory of practice, problems that arise particularly from concerns that animate feminist, minority, postcolonial, and subaltern theorizing. One is the necessity for retaining an active intentional subject without falling into some form of free agency and voluntarism. Here I have argued that, if we take the methodological unit of practice

as the game, rather than the “agent,” we can never lose sight of the mutual determination(s) of agents and structures: of the fact that players are “agents,” skilled and intense strategizers who constantly stretch the game even as they enact it, and the simultaneous fact that players are defined and constructed (though never wholly contained) by the game. One can say about games what Sartre said about projects: they are a “moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity” (1968: 97). A second problem is the necessity for focalizing power relations and struggles within a practice theoretical framework; here the idea of the serious game signals a range of points that every schoolchild knows: that games are always in some sense contests, even if only with the self; that games always entail including some people and excluding others; that in most kinds of games, some people get to be (or are forced to be) “It” and others not; and so forth. Finally, there is the necessity for theorizing ways to break out of the loop of reproduction; here the emphasis is on loosening up (without totally abandoning) the notion of structure—recognizing its incompletely hegemonic character, and recognizing the multiplicity of games in play, both at any given moment, and across time.

A new and improved brand of practice theory, in turn, holds out the hope of mediating the most recent set of unproductive binaries on the theoretical landscape, between textual studies and ethnographically grounded studies, between “lit-crit” and some supposedly objectifying “social science,”¹⁸ between constructionist theories that emphasize the production of subjects, and seemingly voluntarist accounts that emphasize what subjects make. Yet perhaps the final comment needs to be, once again, that this is not “a theory,” something that one either signs up for or rejects. Rather it is a project, a way of trying conceptually and representationally to mimic social life itself as a “moving unity of subjectivity and objectivity.”



Female to Male Nature Is to Culture?

Much of the creativity of anthropology derives from the tension between two sets of demands: that we explain human universals, and that we explain cultural particulars. Given this tension, woman provides us with one of the more challenging problems to be dealt with. The secondary status of woman in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact. Yet within that universal fact, the specific cultural conceptions and symbolizations of woman are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions. Both of these points—the universal fact and the cultural variation—constitute problems to be explained. My interest in the problem is of course more than academic: I wish to see some change come about, the emergence of a social and cultural order in which as much of the range of human potential is open to women as is open to men. The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists in every type of social and economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure. In this paper I try to expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women; I try to