

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Sherry B. Ortner**, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Duke University press, 2006, 200pp. \$US 21.95 paper (0-8223-3864-5), \$US 74.95 (0-8223-3811-4).

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Practice theory stands as one of the most significant theoretical developments in the social sciences over the last half century. In *Anthropology and Social Theory*, Sherry Ortner sets out to show how, when well-grounded in original empirical research, practice theory throws new light on questions of culture, power, agency and subjectivity.

Ortner positions the emergence of practice theory in the late 1970s and early 1980s as one voice in the midst of a cacophonous chorus (Marxist political economy, interpretive and symbolic anthropology, French structuralism) seeking ascendancy as structural functionalism's stranglehold, in the US at least, finally began to fade. Ortner aligned herself with practice theory because it does not begin, which she asserts the others do, as a constraint theory. Practice theory is willing to take subjectivity and agency seriously, without sacrificing attention to power in its structural and situational forms. Rather than viewing persons as thoroughly beholden to structural conditions or as free-floating actors voluntarily authoring their lives according to their own whims and fancy, Ortner traces a line of theorizing that gives agents a deeply embedded place. No mere application of concepts from practice theory's holy trinity (Bourdieu, Giddens, Sahlins), Ortner's practice theory recognizes that agents simply have practices and that by closely studying practices in the field and in public culture more generally we can learn about agency, subjectivity, and power.

Organized chronologically, *Anthropology and Social Theory* collects "straight theory" and "interpretive" papers, which, when taken together demonstrate why Ortner is one of the anthropologists *par excellence* of contemporary American culture. This is, in part, because she carefully navigates through the analytic minefield that is analyzing class in the US. She shows how examining the cultural construction of class provides the most fruitful access point for understanding contemporary US society. For example, her discussion of the "relative absence of a discourse of class in hegemonic American culture," weaves together half a century of theorizing and ethnographic work from both sides of the Atlantic,

threaded through with a strand or two of popular fiction, to demonstrate how “class meanings” in the US are displaced into languages of gender and sexuality. A later chapter adds another layer by teasing apart the complex ways that American culture finds to both displace class and fuse it to “other discourses of social difference,” like race. It is difficult to do justice to the way she moves seamlessly between dense yet clear theoretical exposition, ethnographic observation, and examples from magazine journalism, bestselling novels, and popular film. She treats her data as both topic and resource in examining the slippage between popular and academic uses of class terms and the rich and densely textured connotative life of cultural categories in contemporary America.

As an anthropologist her structuralist tendencies remain strong. She elaborates the dialectical process by which cultural categories, organized primarily around domination and subordination, mutually shape one another. Her structuralist inclinations are tempered by a richly hermeneutic bent, however, aligning her with the structural hermeneutics of the New American Cultural Sociology. Ortner’s teacher, Clifford Geertz, looms large as one of her principal influences, reflected in her engaging style and penchant for thick description of the connections between subjectivity and culture. Her book is a compelling and original combination of Geertz’s literary flair, Bourdieu’s reflexivity, and Sahlins’s comprehensiveness, together with a capacity for synthetic thought that is very much her own.

Reading this book, one quickly realizes that Ortner is, at heart, a theoretically minded ethnographer who recognizes that the best kind of cultural analysis cannot be based on ethnography alone. Avoiding the media/cultural studies position that media and cultural products are *the* lens through which to understand our times, for Ortner “ethnographic theory and public culture [are] held in productive tension.” Thus, not only is this a book of serious cultural critique, it is, as the title suggests, a work of social theory, and in particular, an example of how theories of subjectivity and agency are advanced when they encounter trouble in the field. In a masterful chapter on the question of resistance, Ortner tackles what she calls “ethnographic refusal,” and takes to task the tendency of many anthropologists (and doubtless, quite a few sociologists) to romanticize resistance. She notes that theories of resistance, while politically compelling, are all too often ethnographically thin. In particular, she cautions against theoretical edifices that purposely insulate themselves from the messiness of social reality, in the knowledge that their encounter with the tumult of social life would, at best, reveal insufficiencies, and at worst, rend them asunder. Proclamations that the ordinary activities of the powerless and the marginal are wilfully construed, masterful expres-

sions of resistance are used to bolster weak theories, and worse still, they fail to do justice to “the subjective ambivalence of the acts for those who engage in them.”

Though Ortner might not put it as indelicately as I have here, anthropologists have certainly become enlivened to the problem of “ethnographic refusal,” and we sociologists might do well to take their lead. This is especially pertinent in Canada, where in the recent past, sociologists and anthropologists were joined in one professional association. A book like Ortner’s provides compelling evidence that dialogue — both theoretical and practical — between sociologists and anthropologists invariably bears fruit for both.

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