

Anthropology and Social Theory

CULTURE, POWER,
AND THE
ACTING SUBJECT

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FOR TIM AND GWEN

With love as always

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Updating Practice Theory

When practice theory came on the scene in the late 1970s, the theoretical landscape was dominated by three major paradigms: interpretive or “symbolic” anthropology, launched by the work of Clifford Geertz; Marxist political economy, whose leading practitioner was probably Eric Wolf; and some form or other of French structuralism, launched by Claude Lévi-Strauss, but by that time beginning to be replaced by various poststructuralisms.

All of these represented important moves beyond an earlier hegemonic functionalism. Where functionalists asked, how do things hang together?, Geertz asked, what do they mean? Where functionalists viewed social systems as largely benign and tending toward stability, Marxists emphasized the exploitative nature of capitalism and other social formations, which provokes ongoing movements for destabilization and change. And where functionalists asked about the practical function of institutions, Lévi-Strauss showed that both practical institutions, like kinship, and seemingly impractical ones, like myth, operated according to an underlying logic or “structure.”

At one level these were very different enterprises, and to some degree were opposed to each other. But from another point of view they all had one thing in common: they were essentially theories of “constraint.” Human behavior was shaped, molded, ordered, and defined by external social and cultural forces and formations: by culture, by mental struc-

tures, by capitalism. Of course, structural constraints of various kinds are real and are not being denied. Indeed I will argue later that some critiques of the culture concept have lost the important element of constraint in that concept. But a purely constraint-based theory, without attention to either human agency or to the processes that produce and reproduce those constraints—social practices—was coming to seem increasingly problematic.

In sociology (less in anthropology) an early challenge to this constraint perspective was mounted in the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1967) and other practitioners of so-called interactionism. But interactionism in turn was too extreme, setting aside virtually all structural constraints and focusing on the microsociology of interpersonal interaction. Interactionism never achieved anything like the influence of the other schools, but it staked out and occupied the space of the opposition, and kept alive a version of the so-called structure/agency opposition.

Practice theory took up the challenge of overcoming this opposition. Three keyworks came out within a very short space of time in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1978), Anthony Giddens's *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), and Marshall Sahlins's *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (1981). Each in its own way set out to conceptualize the *articulations* between the practices of social actors "on the ground" and the big "structures" and "systems" that both constrain those practices and yet are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them. They accomplished this by arguing, in different ways, for the *dialectical*, rather than *oppositional* relationship between the structural constraints of society and culture on the one hand and the "practices"—the new term was important—of social actors on the other. They argued as well that "objectivist" perspectives (like Wolf's political economy) and "subjectivist" perspectives (like Geertz's interpretive anthropology) were not opposed ways of doing social science but represented "moments" (Bourdieu 1978:3) in a larger project of attempting to understand the dialectics of social life. These works were, in short, enormously important in at least beginning to lay out the mechanisms by which the seeming contradiction—that "history makes people, but people make history" (Ortner 2003:277)—is not only not a contradiction, but is perhaps the profoundest truth of social life.¹

Put in other words, practice theory offered genuine resolutions of problems that had been plaguing the field, some dating back to functionalism, and some generated by the new schools of theory of the '60s and '70s. It restored the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) social action. It “grounded” cultural processes—discourses, representations, what we used to call “symbol systems”—in the social relations of people “on the ground.” Its conception of those grounded social relations in turn was (to varying degrees) Marxist and/or Weberian, rather than functionalist, opening up the space for questions of power and inequality with which I and many others had become increasingly concerned in the 1970s.

From that period on, practice theory became the general frame within which I would cast my work. Yet for all the invaluable ways in which it potentially liberated the field from the old oppositions, it in turn—how could things be otherwise?—had some significant limitations. Thus almost from the outset I found myself tinkering with the framework, drawing on other major changes inside and outside of anthropology. This essay is in many ways a history of that tinkering. It involves pulling in a great deal of work by others but emphasizes the ways in which I used both practice theory itself and those other bodies of work within my own writings, including both earlier writings and the essays in this book.

There were three major areas in which significant new work was going on, and which I saw as offering major correctives for and improvements to the basic practice theory framework. The first was what I will call “the power shift,” associated with the work of James Scott, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, and others, and linked in various ways with work in critical studies of colonialism, gender, race, and ethnicity. Next was what Terrence McDonald (1996) called “the historic turn,” a broad movement to historicize work in the social sciences and thus to move beyond the static frameworks that had carried over into practice theory from functionalism.

And finally there was what I will call the reinterpretation(s) of culture. It is this last that is the main focus of the present volume. As I have explored the implications of the power shift (especially in Ortner 1996) and have taken the historic turn (especially in Ortner 1989, 1999, 2003) in earlier works, I will only briefly review them here, although they remain vitally important to the works in this volume as well. But the critiques and retheorizations of culture in the

past several decades remain to be examined, in relation to questions of practice (and power and history).

Early Expansions

THE POWER SHIFT

In more or less the same period in which practice theory came on the scene, there emerged an important body of work rethinking questions of “power.” These included such diverse works as Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Part I* (1979), and James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). These converged in various ways with the florescence of critical studies in gender, race, ethnicity, and colonialism. Since I had been actively working in the arena of feminist anthropology, and specifically in those years with questions of “male dominance,” it was virtually inevitable that I would become aware of the relative weakness of practice theory on this issue. Practice theory did not ignore power, of course, but neither did it make it central to the theoretical framework in the ways that seemed called for by this type of critical work on inequality and domination.

In retrospect it seems to me that my work on gender inequality was pushing me toward some kind of practice theory approach in the first place. On the one hand I wanted to understand the cultural construction of gender relations in more or less the classic Geertzian way. In fact, in the introduction to *Sexual Meanings* (1981), Harriet Whitehead and I adapted Geertz’s famous phrase and wrote that the book was concerned with “gender as a cultural system.” But we went on to say that we were interested in more than the logic and workings of the gender system, that we wanted to understand, as it were, where it was coming from. Put in other words, we wanted to understand the ways in which such systems were “grounded” in various kinds of social relations, and, I would now say, social practices.

My own article in that volume, called “Gender and Sexuality in Hierarchical Societies” (1981), involved inventing a kind of practice theory approach without knowing exactly what I was doing. I had not yet read any practice theory,² but looking back at that paper, I realize I was groping toward a method that would help me solve some of the puzzles of unequal, and sometimes violently unequal, gender relations in a range of Polynesian societies. For example, I was interested in the treatment of daughters of chiefs, who

were on the one hand elaborately beautified and on the other hand kept under very tight paternal control. I argued that these girls were pawns in an elaborate cultural game (as I would now call it) of male prestige. The idea was that, once one figured out the game—that is, the configuration of practices involving the players in question, its underlying logic, and its cultural goal—the puzzling elements would make sense. I will not spend time summarizing the interpretation. The point here is simply that my work in a particular arena of power relations—gender—was pushing me toward some kind of a practice theory framework, which involved pushing an analytic device that I later (1996a) came to call “(serious) games.”

The early practice theorists did not, as I said earlier, ignore issues of power. They dealt with it in various ways. At issue in part is the relative weight given to power as organized into the cultural or institutional order (which Giddens calls “domination”), and “power” as an actual social relation of real on-the-ground actors (which Giddens calls “power”). Both are important, but a strong emphasis on structural power tends ironically to move away from the question of real practices. We see this most clearly in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Social relations of power and inequality, especially patriarchal relations, are central to the book. But they are never explored as specific formations of power, involving specific ideologies and practices. Rather, Bourdieu devotes most of his intellectual efforts to the elaboration of the notion of *habitus*, a deeply buried structure that shapes people’s dispositions to act in such ways that they wind up accepting the dominance of others, or of “the system,” without being made to do so. Sahlins tends to follow a similar pattern. While he describes practices of interpersonal power in the Hawaiian case, he tends to give a much greater role to impersonal forms of constraint, built into the structures of asymmetry that ran through every relationship in that hierarchically organized society. Giddens appears somewhat different. He has a useful discussion of what he calls “the dialectic of control” (1979:145 ff), in which he argues that systems of control can never work perfectly, because those being controlled have both agency and understanding and thus can always find ways to evade or resist. His arguments fit well with those of James Scott, one of the power theorists to be discussed below. The difference is perhaps that for Giddens power is just one of many modalities of practice, while for Scott and the other power theorists it is absolutely central to the framework.

Let me turn to those power theorists and what they had to offer. My choice of theorists here—Foucault, Scott, and Williams—may appear somewhat puzzling. At the very least the reader might be wondering why I list no theorists of gender, racial, or colonial domination. I can only say that these three figures offer the most general tools for examining any form of domination and inequality, including those of gender, race, and colonialism. Thus Foucault has played a major role in the work of one of the most influential theorists of feminism, Judith Butler (e.g., 1997), and in the work of the towering figure in (post)colonial studies, Edward Said (e.g., 1978). Scott's work has generated a virtual industry of studies of "resistance" of all sorts, including especially slave and peasant resistance movements. Raymond Williams is the founding ancestor of that vast school of scholarship called "cultural studies," which has generated important work on the power relations of gender, race, class, and youth.

The three theorists can be placed along a spectrum that is defined by one of the central problematics of studies of power: the question of the pervasiveness or invasiveness of power. At one end we have Foucault, who has argued that power is socially ubiquitous, suffused through every aspect of the social system, and psychologically deeply invasive. There is no "outside" of power. At the other end we have James Scott, who takes the position that, while there is certainly a great deal of power in play in social life, it is much less mentally invasive than others have argued.³ He proposes (1990) that dominated people understand very well what is going on, and even have explicit traditions—"hidden transcripts"—of critique and resistance. If they do not actively resist, it is only because they are held back by the sheer political and economic power of the dominating group. Finally, Williams (1977) takes a kind of intermediate position, seeing actors as to some degree in the grip of "hegemonies," but picking up Gramsci's argument to the effect that hegemonies are never total and absolute, in several senses. They are never total in a historical sense, because in the flow of history, while one may talk of hegemonic formation(s) in the present, there are always also remnants of past ("residual") hegemonies and the beginnings of future ("emergent") ones. And hegemonies are also never total in the psychological sense, because people always have at least some degree of "penetration" (if not virtually full awareness, as Scott would argue) into the conditions of their domination.

All of these perspectives are useful for particular purposes, and I have used all of them in one context or another. But I have found the Gramsci-derived

notion of hegemonies as strongly controlling but never complete or total to be the most useful in my various attempts to inject more power into a practice approach. For example, in "Gender Hegemonies" (1996b) the notion of incomplete hegemonies allowed me to move beyond a simplistic notion of "universal male dominance," not so much by finding "cases" of non-male dominance but by recognizing that male dominance always coexists with other patterns of gender relations; what is important is the mix, and the relations between the elements.

Putting this all together in the introduction to *Making Gender* I began to sketch out what I called a "feminist, minority, subaltern, etc., theory of practice," which focused in part on questions of direct resistance, but more on ways in which domination itself was always riven with ambiguities, contradictions, and lacunae. This means in turn that social reproduction is never total, always imperfect, and vulnerable to the pressures and instabilities inherent in any situation of unequal power. I brought this view to bear on the relationship between Sherpas and Western mountaineers ("sahibs") in Himalayan mountaineering (*Life and Death on Mt. Everest*, 1999). In that study I was able to show "real" resistance: It is not well known in the outside world, for example, that the supposedly happy compliant Sherpas often went on strike on Himalayan expeditions. But I also explored a central contradiction in the Western mountaineers' views of, and treatment of, the Sherpas. On the one hand the Westerners were powerful (as white, as Western, as employers, and, in the early years, as quasi-military leaders). On the other hand they often developed a great deal of affection and admiration for the Sherpas with whom they worked. This contradiction was not lost upon the Sherpas, who were able to exploit it often quite successfully, to bring about significant transformations in the structure of the Sherpa-sahib relationship, and of Himalayan expeditions in general, over the course of the twentieth century.

In the end the two bodies of theory can be easily merged. The three founding practice theorists can be interestingly seen to parallel the three positions on the spectrum of the psychological "depth" of power. Bourdieu is most like Foucault, in that his notion of habitus is one of a deeply internalized structure, powerfully controlling and largely inaccessible to consciousness (see also de Certeau 1984). Giddens is more like Scott, emphasizing the ways in which actors are at least partially "knowing subjects" (see, e.g., 1979:5) who are able to reflect to some degree on their circumstances and by implication to

develop a certain level of critique and possible resistance. And finally Sahlins is most like Williams. He subscribes to a notion of strong cultural hegemonies but also allows for certain, shall we say, cracks in the structure, as for example when he talks about how the gendered food taboos of eighteenth-century Hawaiians “did not sit upon Hawaiian women with the force [they] had for men” (1981:46), a small difference that would make a large difference in the long run.

Looking at the relationship from the point of view of the power theorists, we can see that their integration with practice theory was already (potentially) there. Thus, Foucault’s interest in locating the production of power less in macro-institutions like the state and more in micro-interactions like the priest-penitent relationship, has obvious affinities with practice theory’s interest in looking at ground-level sources of larger formations. Scott’s interest in resistance is nothing other than a way of asking the question of how (certain kinds of) practices may transform structures. And Raymond Williams argued that “hegemonies” had to be understood not as “structures” external to individuals but as “the whole lived social process” (1977:109), which “has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified . . . [and] also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged” (1977:112)—which has in short to be both practiced and resisted. In a way one could say that all these new power theories were themselves varieties of practice theory as well.

I said earlier that the emergence of various theories of power was more or less simultaneous with the emergence of early practice theory. The same is true, interestingly, of “the historic turn.” One realizes in retrospect just how theoretically fertile that period during the late 1970s and early 1980s was. We turn then to the historic turn.

THE HISTORIC TURN

My sense of the necessity to historicize practice theory came primarily out of theoretical developments on this side of the Atlantic. Several varieties of historic turn had taken shape in anthropology, including Marxist-inspired historical “political economy,” as in Eric Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History* (1981); certain forms of cultural history (e.g., Geertz’s *Negara* [1980]); and the early work on colonial history launched by Bernard Cohn (1980), which would later become a major enterprise across many academic disciplines. The historic turn(s) were enormously important both methodologi-

cally, in destabilizing the traditionally static modes of ethnographic inquiry, and substantively, in insisting that the traditional world of anthropological objects—"cultures"—were not timeless and pristine objects, but were themselves products of the restless operation of both internal dynamics (mostly local power relations) and external forces (such as capitalism and colonialism) over time.⁴

In the founding works of practice theory, Bourdieu had insisted on the importance of time, not only in the unfolding of interactive practices and their outcomes, but in giving meaning to those interactions. He gives (1978:6–7) the famous example of the meanings produced by the manipulation of temporality in gift giving: If the gift is reciprocated too quickly, this implies an eagerness "to close the books" and end the relationship. If it is reciprocated too slowly, it implies a low level of interest in the relationship, or even active disrespect. Yet Bourdieu never really tried to write historical practice theory (or perhaps better said, practice-theorized history), to look at the ways in which real histories, as both durations and events, are shaped by practices within and against existing "structures."

From my point of view, by contrast, practice theory was not only intrinsically temporalized in the relatively small-scale sense discussed by Bourdieu, but that in effect it did its best work in the context of full-blown historical analysis. Indeed in *High Religion* I said explicitly that "a theory of practice is a theory of history" (192). This is because the playing out of the effects of culturally organized practices is essentially processual and often very slow: the construction of social subjects, often from childhood; the practices of life of young people and adults; the articulation of those practices with larger events in the world, often moving to a very different rhythm. Although one can form hypotheses—guesses, more likely—about the long-term implications of present practices, their effects in terms of social reproduction and social transformation are often not visible, nor interpretable, until some time after the fact.

Of the three founding practice theorists, only Marshall Sahlins proposed an explicitly historical form of practice theory. He develops his theory within the framework of a historical case, that of the encounter between Europeans and native Hawaiians in the eighteenth century. He theorizes from this example a number of important ways in which practices operate to affect the course of history. The first is that acts and objects have different meanings in the "collective symbolic scheme" (1981:69) and in the plans and intentions—the

“interests”—of acting subjects. Sahlins calls this the difference between conventional and intentional meanings (ibid.). The second is that, while people act in the world according to their own cultural conceptions, the world is under no compulsion to conform to those conceptions. In both cases it follows that every practice, every move, puts those cultural categories and conceptions “at risk,” making them vulnerable to revision and reevaluation. Thus, while most practices may be “conservative,” operating within an existing framework of meaning and normally reproducing that framework, yet those meanings can be shifted in practice (especially by powerful people) and in any event all practices operate within “a balky world” (Sewell 2005:179) that threatens to undermine their intended meanings or effects.

Finally, Sahlins insists on seeing historical change as an outcome of the articulation between local and translocal power dynamics. All of my own recent monographs emphasize the importance of this kind of multilevel approach. Thus in *High Religion* (1989) I traced the (local) history of the founding of Buddhist temples and monasteries among the Sherpas, a history of sometimes violently competitive relations among religious leaders and other big men. But this history in turn was shown to be inextricably implicated in larger political histories—the variable effects of (at different times) the British Raj in India, the Nepal state, and the Sherpas’ religious relations with Tibet. In *Life and Death on Mt. Everest* (1999), I traced the history of the changing relations between Sherpas and international climbers in the Himalayas, but again I anchored that history in turn in larger historical shifts. Thus for example I explored the impact of the global feminist movement on mountaineering in the seventies, bringing both Western and Sherpa women into the sport, and wreaking a certain amount of havoc in both social relations and cultural assumptions on both sides. And finally, in *New Jersey Dreaming* (2003), I traced the differential histories of social mobility of members of the Class of ’58 of Weequahic High School in Newark, N.J., as embedded in differential relations of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. But I anchored that history in turn in larger cultural and political movements in the United States—the Beat movement of the 1950s and, in the 1960s and ’70s, civil rights, the counterculture, the women’s movement, and more.

In the present volume “the historic turn” is less visible than in the full-scale, and very obviously historical, monographs just discussed. But it is here in more subtle ways. For after all “history” is not just about the past, nor is it

always about change. It may be about *duration*, about patterns persisting over long periods of time, which is the case with a pattern discussed in “Reading America” and “Identities” (both in this volume), namely the relative absence of a class discourse in hegemonic American culture. It may also be about *situating* an analysis or interpretation in a particular, historically understood *moment*, a move that will also be visible in several of the articles, but especially “Generation X.” There I explore the emergence of the idea of Generation X, and the specific characteristics both attributed to its members (e.g., “slackers”) and evinced by them (mainly anxieties over their financial futures). The article has a section of recognizable “history,” tracing changes in the public representation of Generation X over time. But it is implicitly historical throughout, in that the phenomenon only emerges at a particular point in time, and it is the moment itself—the beginning of the polarization of the American class structure, still going on today—that is the key to the interpretation.

It is probably obvious from the foregoing that the historicization of practice theory was not wholly distinct from “the power shift.” Questions of “history” were largely questions of the reproduction or transformation of relations of power and inequality. The same will be true of questions of “culture,” to which we now turn.

Culture in Practice

Early practice theory, particularly as developed in Bourdieu and Giddens, lacked a recognizable concept of culture. Neither author evinced a sense of the ways in which practice itself was culturally organized, explicitly or implicitly, by things like charter myths (Sahlins 1981), “cultural schemas” (Ortner 1989, Sewell 2005), cultural scripts (Alexander 2004), “serious games” (Ortner 1996a, “Power and Projects” [this volume]), and the like. Both also lacked a sense of (or perhaps an interest in) the ways in which “cultural movements” (anything from the Beat movement, noted above, to the Reformation) reshaped both practices and subjectivities. While certain culture-like elements were present in both of their frameworks (habitus is certainly a kind of cultural formation, and Giddens has a chapter on “Ideology and Consciousness”), it seemed clear from the outset, to this anthropologist at least, that practice theory needed a much more fully developed conception of culture and its role in the social process. But what kind of culture does it need? To

answer that question is to plunge into the recent culture debates, and to try to see the variety of ways in which this old and tenacious concept is being rethought and refashioned.

The critique of the culture concept in anthropology has, as virtually every anthropologist knows by now, centered primarily (though not exclusively) around the problem of essentialism. Classic anthropology tended to portray groups of people as having “a culture,” as being in the grip of that culture, and as acting in ways that could be explained largely by reference to that culture. The (cultural) anthropologist’s job, at least within the dominant tradition of the field almost from the beginning, was to unearth a people’s culture, to work out its logic and coherence, and to show the ways in which it undergirded most of the formalized practices (e.g., rituals), patterns of practice (e.g., child rearing), and the ordinary and extraordinary behavior of members of the group. While the initial development of the anthropological concept of culture emerged from impeccable intentions—as an alternative to the concept of “race,” as providing a sympathetic way of thinking about difference, and as providing a positive way of achieving cross-cultural understanding—it was hard to contain the concept within this basically liberal frame. Thus culture in the classic sense could, within a different political mind-set, easily turn into stereotype (ethnic, racial, class), and sometimes in fact dangerous stereotype—groups can be labeled (even “profiled”) as intrinsically culturally prone to this or that (good or bad, model minorities or terrorists) pattern of behavior.

For this reason and others, over the past several decades many anthropologists have argued for dropping the culture concept altogether (for an overview of the issues, see Ortner, ed., 2000; see also Fox 1999). Ironically, however, scholars in other intellectual arenas sidestepped the whole anthropological quagmire and began both using and transforming the concept in exciting and powerful ways. One can identify at least three distinct but overlapping trends, which again have their roots primarily in the same period as all the other work discussed above—the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first is associated with the original Birmingham School of “cultural studies” which involved both ethnographic work (e.g., Willis 1977) and media studies (e.g., Hall et al. 1980). Second, media studies became a large-scale trend in its own right and has by now swept across virtually all social science fields, including anthropology (e.g., Ginsburg et al. 2002). And finally, as part of retheorizing the concept for anthropology itself, there was the founding of the journal *Public Culture* in

1988. The mission of the journal, as announced in the opening editorial comment, was to look at culture not as attached to and defining of particular groups of people, but as part of “global cultural flows” and “the global cultural ecumene” (1988: 1, 3; see also Appadurai 1996).

These novel approaches to culture have several things in common, differentiating them collectively from the classic view of culture in anthropology. The first is their very tight involvement with “the power shift.” All of them view culture as highly politicized, or as elements of a political process. In addition all of them attempt, in various ways, to loosen up the relationship between culture and specific groups of people. Although there are perhaps “epicenters” of particular cultural formations (what we would have thought of as “cultures” in the past), nonetheless culture has at the same time become an at least partially mobile object. Not only does it move around (like media) across social, cultural, and political boundaries. It also, and perhaps because of that mobility, can be seen to be much more variably deployed or appropriated than had been assumed of culture in the classic sense. Phrases like “public culture” or James Clifford’s “traveling cultures” (1997) capture this more mobile view of cultural forms and forces (see also Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 48–49).

To these important changes I would add one more, which I will illustrate, along with the others, through the articles in this collection. Let me return for a moment to the early Birmingham cultural studies school, which actually embodied two somewhat distinct tendencies. On the one hand there was the media studies work, which treated culture as a set of public texts, to be analyzed for the kinds of ideological work they did. In the present book both “Reading America: Preliminary Notes on Class and Culture” and “Identities: The Hidden Life of Class” essentially follow this strategy. They take a variety of cultural “texts,” including novels (in “Reading America”), labels for groups (in “Identities”), and more and ask what kinds of ideological formations are being constructed in and through those texts—specifically, the near erasure of “class” from dominant American discourse.⁵ “Identities” also goes further and asks—the practice theory move—what kinds of social dynamics have gone into making and sustaining a specific version of that discursive pattern, in which ethnic categories often stand in for class categories?

But the other trend in the early cultural studies work was to use something suspiciously like the classic concept of culture, yet to change it by embedding

it in a different kind of story, a different kind of context. This is to say that the concept itself is not actually reworked. It still embodies the notion, which was part of the classic concept, that culture is both enabling (allowing people to see, feel, imagine, understand some things), and constraining (disabling people from seeing, feeling, imagining, and understanding other things).

But this relatively unreworkeed concept of culture takes on a very different cast when it is embedded in narratives of power and inequality. We see this for example in *Learning to Labor*. Willis's concept of culture is really no different from the classic American model—culture provides a set of frameworks and values through which “the lads” see and act upon the world. Willis does not even see it as “ideological” in and of itself, or at least he does not discuss it primarily in those terms. Rather he asks how it enables a certain pleasurable set of practices of everyday resistance for the lads in the school, while at the same time disabling them from seeing how they are acting contrary to their own interests in the long run. In other words Willis makes the old and relatively unreconstructed concept do new kinds of work, by embedding it in a narrative of capitalist reproduction: “how working class kids get working class jobs.” (See also Ortner, ed., 1999.) I will call this the new-old concept of culture.

Several essays in this collection make use of this embedding move and this new-old concept of culture. I should note here that I am also very drawn to the idea of public culture in the more mobile, and perhaps global, sense discussed above, and will return to this issue at the end of this section. But in a number of these essays I try to hold onto the powerful elements of the old culture concept while getting past its limitations, by deploying it within different kinds of narratives—narratives of power and inequality. Let me start with the idea that culture is “constraining.” This is very much part of the old concept of culture—the idea that people in a particular society are constrained by their cultural frameworks to be as they are and act as they do. When culture was seen through relativist lenses, and was seen as essentially benign, this idea of cultural constraint was itself a relatively benign idea. Yet the issue of “constraint” takes on a very different cast in a different kind of narrative. Thus in “Subjectivity and Cultural Critique” I pursue the idea of cultural constraint via the idea that culture shapes the subjectivities of people not so much as members of particular groups (although that is not totally irrelevant) but under specific historic regimes of power. The regime in question for that essay

is that of late capitalism, and I draw upon the works of Fredric Jameson and Richard Sennett to explore the essentially unhappy forms of consciousness culturally produced under this regime.

It is worth noting in this case that culture is “loosened up” from its mooring within particular groups not so much by geographic mobility, which is what tends to be emphasized by the media studies perspective, or by the idea of “traveling cultures,” but by temporal mobility. This suggests that we think of “the historic turn” as another form of making culture more of a mobile phenomenon, yet one that does not lose the possibility of exploring its—at times, and for some people—deeply constraining power.

Let me turn then to the idea of culture as “enabling.” This too is part of the classic concept of culture. It was central to Geertz’s discussion in “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of Mind” (1973a), where he argued that without culture—external systems of symbols and meanings—people would not be able to think at all. It was also central to his discussion of functions of religion which, when it works, allows people to deal with suffering, meaninglessness, and chaos (1973b). But once again I insert questions of the enabling workings of culture into narratives of power and inequality. Thus in “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” I draw on James Scott’s (1990) notion of “hidden transcripts” as cultural resources that enable the very idea of resistance, as well as many of its specific forms. And in “Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency” I explore the cultural construction of agency as both a kind of empowerment and as the basis of pursuing “projects” within a world of domination and inequality.

Finally, there is one essay in this volume that ties together (or at least includes within the single frame of the essay) questions of “public culture” and questions of culture and subjectivity in the new-old sense discussed above: “Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-Saturated World.” On the one hand I spend time on the public culture, the media representations of “Generation X,” seen as a specific group with its own distinctive consciousness. I trace the ways in which the representations change over time and across social space, as they pass through different hands (novelists, demographers, advertisers and others in marketing, social commentators, and writers of popular journalism). On the other hand I explore, through published ethnographies and some interviews with Xers I conducted in the early ’90s, the “culture” of Gen X itself. Here I use the approach discussed above, taking a