ANTH 423, Political Anthropology  
Max Forte, Concordia University  
Reading Questions for Session 6


1. What were the apparent advantages of the “new political anthropology” that became prominent in the 1960s?  
2. From what, and when, did the interest with “structure and agency” emerge?  
3. For yourself, trace some of the main intellectual influences—the line of historical development—of ideas that magnified focus on the power of individuals.  
4. Where does Marxist political anthropology stand on the issue of individual agency?


1. List some of the main elements of “action theory”.  
2. Related to #1, what are some of the “key words” of action theory in political anthropology, that is, the bundle of core concepts?  
3. What are some of the theoretical problems faced by action theorists? For example, were the local systems to be analyzed as “closed”?  
4. What do Firth’s concepts of “structure” and “organization” involve, and why are they significant to understanding social action?  
5. On what grounds were the work of early developers of action theory criticized?  
6. Note Turner’s concepts of arenas, social dramas, and political fields.  
7. Barth’s work on Swat is provided as an example of “transactional” (or instrumentalist) analysis. What were the problems with the work, according to critics?  
8. What is the Marxist challenge to transactionalists?  
9. Note the passages dealing with “big men,” patrons, political entrepreneurs, brokers, and followers.  
10. In which cases is a “small group analysis,” typical of ethnography, useful?  
11. How would you summarize the directions in which the action approach ultimately went?


1. In which basic ways do instrumentalist and primordialist approaches differ? But how do they also overlap?  
2. Related to #1, make a list of key arguments presented by instrumentalist and primordialist theories.
3. Bentley says that both instrumentalist and primordialist approaches suffer from a critical gap in their explanations. What is that gap?
4. In terms of practice theory bridging the divide between instrumentalism and primordialism, what is the meaning and importance of “habitus”?
5. In practice theory, do ethnic elites consciously exploit their followers?