Toward a Theory of Social Practices
A Development in Culturalist Theorizing

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Abstract

This article works out the main characteristics of 'practice theory', a type of social theory which has been sketched by such authors as Bourdieu, Giddens, Taylor, late Foucault and others. Practice theory is presented as a conceptual alternative to other forms of social and cultural theory, above all to culturalist mentalism, textualism and intersubjectivism. The article shows how practice theory and the three other cultural-theoretical vocabularies differ in their localization of the social and in their conceptualization of the body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process and the agent.

Key words
■ action ■ culture ■ knowledge ■ practice ■ Wittgenstein

In the complex landscape of contemporary social theories after the 'interpretative turn' of the 1970s, 'practice theories' or 'theories of social practices' have formed a conceptual alternative that seems attractive to an audience dissatisfied with both classically modern and high-modern types of social theories,[1] but that, at the same time, has never been systematically elaborated. We can find elements of a theory of social practices in the work of a multitude of social theorists in the last third of the twentieth century who are of diverse theoretical origin: Pierre Bourdieu has explicitly pursued the project of a 'praxeology' since *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) up to his latest *Cartesian Meditations* (1997), a project which at least at the beginning was still influenced to a considerable degree by structuralism. Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) develops his version of practice theory in the framework of a 'theory of structuration', heavily influenced by late Wittgenstein. Michel Foucault, who in his works of the 1960s and 1970s tried out a number of diverse theoretical options between structuralism, post-structuralism and a Nietzschean theory of the body, arrives in his late works on ancient ethics (1984a, b) at a framework of analysing the relations between bodies, agency, knowledge and understanding that can likewise be understood as 'praxeological'. In empirical sociology, cultural studies and anthropology it is above all works in the wake of Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (1967), Judith Butler's 'performative' gender studies (1990) and Bruno Latour's science

studies (1991) that can be understood as members of the praxeological family of theories. In social philosophy Charles Taylor's neo-hermeneutical model of embodied agency and the self-interpreting animal (1993a, b) follows a 'praxeological' path. Eventually, Theodore Schatzki outlined in *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (1996) a social philosophy explicitly focused on the practice concept.[2]

Upon first consideration, it might not be clear why the common label of 'practice theories' is justified to embrace these diverse authors, apart from certain rather diffuse affinities. The turn to practices seems to be tied to an interest in the 'everyday' and 'life-world'; all the authors in question are influenced by the interpretative or cultural turn in social theory; finally, it seems that late Wittgenstein and, to a lesser degree, early Heidegger are common philosophical points of reference (which are, however, hardly ever systematically scrutinized).[3] Yet these are rather superficial commonalities. One might even suspect that the 'practice theorists' are hardly more than well-disguised successors to the time-honoured sociological tradition of a theory of action as it was founded by Max Weber: After all, 'practices' form structures of action which in some way are treated by all kinds of social theories stemming from the tradition of action theory.

The lack of theoretically systematic analysis displayed by some of the practice theorists should, however, not lead to their hasty dismissal. Rather, there are good reasons to argue that there is something new in the social-theoretical vocabulary the practice theorists offer. They do form a family of theories which, in certain basic ways, differs from other, classical types of social theory. The task of this article is to work out more precisely the points at which a theory of social practices can be distinguished from its theoretical alternatives, and how its basic vocabulary thus amounts to a novel picture of the social and of human agency.[4] To that end, however, it is necessary to build up 'ideal types' of theories which hardly correspond to the variability and distinctiveness of 'real' authors. I will use an idealized model of practice theory which leans partly on different and largely common elements of Bourdieu, Giddens, late Foucault, Garfinkel, Latour, Taylor or Schatzki, ignoring the peculiarities of the single authors, and which is partly of programmatic character.[5] Similarly, I confront this ideal type of practice theory with idealized theoretical alternatives: the model of the homo economicus and the homo sociologicus, but in particular with culturalist mentalism, textualism and intersubjectivism. Only by working out these theoretical differences can one succeed in approaching the identity of practice theories (an identity, which is doubtless still not highly stable).

My argument will follow four steps: My point of departure is that practice theories provide a specific form of what I will label 'cultural theories'. Consequently, I will first very briefly elucidate how cultural theories basically differ from the two classical vocabularies of social theory: that of the homo economicus and that of the homo sociologicus. Cultural theories, including practice theory, are founded upon a different form of explaining and understanding action, namely by having recourse to symbolic structures of meaning (1). Although practice

theory is an example of cultural theory, not all cultural theories are practice theories. Rather, one can distinguish between four forms of cultural theories: culturalist mentalism, textualism, intersubjectivism and practice theory. On a very basic level, these schools of thought offer opposing locations of the social and conceptualize the 'smallest unit' of social theory differently: in minds, discourses, interactions and 'practices' (2). Thus, it becomes possible to work out in some detail the new conceptualization that elementary social-theoretical terms experience in practice theory in comparison with the three other, 'intellectualist' versions of cultural theories. These differences concern the ideas of body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/ process and the agent (3). In the end, I will briefly discuss the 'effects' of practice theory (4).[6]

1 Practice Theory as Cultural Theory

Practice theory – as it is exemplified in authors such as Bourdieu, Giddens, late Foucault, Garfinkel, Latour, Taylor or Schatzki – is a type of cultural theory. What does that mean? Since its emergence with Scottish moral philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century, modern social theory has developed three fundamentally different forms of explaining action and social order: The first option – which was that of the Scottish utilitarianists themselves, but which reaches to contemporary Rational Choice Theory – is that of a purpose-oriented theory of action. The second vocabulary, which Durkheim and Parsons presented as the proper perspective of 'sociology', is a norm-oriented theory of action. These two classical social-theoretical perspectives understand one another as opposing conceptual options – but they both have been challenged by a third vocabulary, which has emerged as a result of the 'culturalist' revolutions in twentieth-century social philosophy. These 'cultural theories' are rooted primarily in structuralism and semiotics, phenomenology and hermeneutics, and in Wittgensteinian language game philosophy. Influenced by structuralism, cultural theories in the social sciences reach from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu; influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, they embrace Alfred Schütz, Harold Garfinkel and (in a very specific way) Niklas Luhmann; in the wake of Wittgensteinian philosophy, they contain the works of Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens. What distinguishes all these diverse cultural theorists from the two classical figures of the 'homo economicus' and the 'homo sociologicus' is their way of grasping the conditions of human action and social order. The model of the homo economicus explains action by having recourse to individual purposes, intentions and interests; social order is then a product of the combination of single interests. The model of the homo sociologicus explains action by pointing to collective norms and values, i.e. to rules which express a social 'ought'; social order is then guaranteed by a normative consensus. In contrast, the newness of the cultural theories consists in explaining and understanding actions by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms,

and to behave in corresponding ways. Social order then does not appear as a product of compliance of mutual normative expectations, but embedded in collective cognitive and symbolic structures, in a 'shared knowledge' which enables a socially shared way of ascribing meaning to the world. From the point of view of cultural theory, the seemingly opposed classical figures of the homo economicus and homo sociologicus share a common 'blind spot': They both dismiss the implicit, tacit or unconscious layer of knowledge which enables a symbolic organization of reality. The basic distinctions and schemes of this knowledge lay down which desires are regarded as desirable and which norms are considered to be legitimate; morever, these cognitive-symbolic structures (of which language is a prominent example) reproduce a social order even in cases in which a normative consensus does not exist.[7]

All practice theorists are examples of cultural theory in this sense: Their vocabularies stand opposed to both the purpose-oriented and the norm-oriented models of explaining action (which, needless to say, are anything but discarded in the current discussion). They all highlight the significance of shared or collective symbolic structures of knowledge in order to grasp both action and social order. Yet, this conceptual strategy is not an exclusive possession of practice theory. Not all cultural theorists are practice theorists. Therefore, to understand practice theory we require a second set of distinctions.

2 Four Versions of Cultural Theory: Mentalism, Textualism, Intersubjectivism, Practice Theory

The field of cultural theories, that is, of social theories which explain or understand action and social order by referring to symbolic and cognitive structures and their 'social construction of reality' (Berger/Luckmann) is highly complex. Practice theory represents a subtype of cultural theory. There are a number of differences between a theory of social practices and other forms of cultural theory, but the most important and very elementary one – which then leads us to all the other differences – is that practice theory situates the social in a different realm from those of other cultural theories. The 'place' of the social here is different. Simultaneously, this means that the 'smallest unit' of social theory and social analysis in practice theory is conceptualized differently.

Where is the social 'localized'? Apart from the 'naturalist' approaches which located the social in the non-meaningful strata of a 'social structure' (e.g. in Durkheim's 'social density' and 'population size' or in Simmel's morphological social 'forms' of formal regularities and networks), classical social theory above all offered two answers to this question. The model of the homo economicus placed the social on the level of the intended or unintended product of subjective interests – a common will or distribution of values on 'markets' – whereas the model of the homo sociologicus situated the social in a consensus of norms and roles. The smallest unit of social analysis, then, is respectively, single actions or normative structures. Of course, for cultural theories the 'locus' of the social

must be connected with symbolic and cognitive structures of knowledge. Yet, this general idea can amount to rather diverse solutions: culturalist mentalism (in an objectivist and a subjectivist version), culturalist textualism, intersubjectivism – and practice theory.

One branch of cultural theories – in fact, that with the longest tradition – locates the social or collective in human mind. Mind is the place of the social because mind is the place of knowledge and meaning structures – this is the basic idea of culturalist mentalism. The social can be found, so to speak, in the 'head' of human beings. The 'smallest unit' of social analysis, then, is mental structures. Culturalist mentalism appears in two different branches, an objectivist and a subjectivist. It is classical structuralism as it was developed first by de Saussure (1995[1916]) and later on in anthropology by Lévi-Strauss (1950, 1989[1962]), that exemplifies the objectivist branch of a mentalist theory of culture in a paradigmatic way. For structuralism human behaviour is an 'effect' of symbolic structures in the 'unconscious' mind. Therefore, these unconscious symbolic systems must be the smallest unit and final aim of social analysis. Here, the social is the mental; the social and psychological level turn out to be identical. It seems hardly misleading to regard cognitive psychology (including cognitive linguistics) as the empirical discipline that carries out this structuralist programme in a systematic way.

If Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism provides the prototype of an 'objectivist' and 'scientistic' version of mentalism in cultural theory, then Alfred Schütz's social phenomenology, as it is developed in *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1991[1932]) can be regarded as prototype of a mentalist 'subjectivism'. If structuralism represents one theoretical root of mentalism in cultural theory, then phenomenology represents its second source. For social phenomenology, the aim of social analysis is to take over the 'subjective perspective', i.e. to reconstruct the sequence of mental acts of consciousness which are located 'inside' and are directed in the form of phenomenological 'intentionality' at outward objects to which the consciousness ascribes meanings. The social then is – as Husserl elucidated it classically in his fifth *Cartesianische Meditationen* (1992[1932]) – the subjective *idea of* a common world of meanings. So the social is located here in the mind as well, even if 'mind' now turns out to be something quite different: not unconscious cognitive structures, but the sequence of intentional acts in consciousness. The aim of social-as-cultural analysis from the point of view of social phenomenology, then, is to describe the subjective acts of (mental) interpretations of the agents and their schemes of interpretation.

Culturalist mentalism in both its versions is thus based upon – to quote Theodore Schatzki – 'the idea that mind is a substance, place, or realm that houses a particular range of activities and attributes' (1996: 22). Mental structures and activities are treated as an incontestable 'centre' of the social-theoretical vocabulary. The cognitive structures or acts of interpretation located here appear as 'inward' causes or conditions of the 'outward' human behaviour. It is these mental structures of knowledge which guarantee social order – consequently, at the end of empirical social analysis we must have worked out a set of mental,

cognitive structures or regular mental acts. Mentalism has three powerful concep-
tual allies: one is philosophical Kantianism which provides the forefather of both
structuralism and phenomenology; the second is an 'intellectualism' in the
empirical studies of mind, which model human mind as an 'internal machine'
that functions according to law-like rules; the third is a Western everyday vocabu-
lary of action and mind which is based upon the central idea of 'inwardness' (C.
Taylor), the idea of mind as 'ghost in the machine' (G. Ryle).[8] Culturalist mental-
ism provides an influential – negative – backdrop against which practice theory
situates itself. Yet, apart from practice theory, there are still two other versions of
cultural theory which gain their profile against mentalism – and which are them-
selves targets of a theory of social practices: textualism and intersubjectivism.

For culturalist textualism, symbolic structures are not situated 'inside' the
mind. Instead, they have their place 'outside' – in chains of signs, in symbols,
discourse, communication (in a specific sense) or 'texts'. In order to explain the
structurality of the social world, one need not climb down into the inwardness
of mental qualities, but rather must stay on the level of signs and texts in their
'publicness' (Geertz): here symbolic structures must be located. The social cannot
be anchored on the psychological level of minds (including a 'conscience collec-
tive'), but only on the (by definition) extrasubjective level of signs in their 'materi-
ality' (Foucault). 'Mental' qualities, then, turn out to be nothing more than very
specific *concepts* within discourse *about* something which is described as mental.
Culturalist textualism (no doubt an awkward label, but there is no convention-
ally shared concept in sight) has emerged in the last third of the twentieth century
as a result of a basic critique of mentalism, in both its phenomenological and its
structuralist strand. It is anti-foundationalist in its elementary doubt that we can
find a last 'foundation' of social analysis in the human mind.

Above all, three theoretical contexts can be distinguished in whichever versions
of a culturalist textualism have been developing. The first branch is post-
structuralism and semiotics, which have 'decentred the subject' and which define
the social as the level of discourses or sign-systems. The best theoretical formu-
lation of this position can be found in Michel Foucault's *L'archéologie du savoir*
(1969). Here Foucault proposes that discourse is not to be treated as a mere
'document' of the mental qualities 'behind' it, but as a sequence of external events
in which symbolic structures ('formative rules') are manifested. Knowledge is a
quality of discursive events; these *define* subjects. Parallel to the anti-mentalist
heirs of structuralism, radical hermeneutics provides the anti-mentalist heir of
phenomenology and a second strand of textualism. Clifford Geertz's outline of a
symbolistic anthropology (1973[1972]), in which he argues for regarding 'culture
as a text', can be interpreted as an adequate expression of this tendency. The 'thick
description' of the cultural here does not refer to 'what is in people's head', but
to the symbolic quality of material objects, including events of behaviour. Niklas
Luhmann's constructivist theory of social systems (1991), situated at the cross-
roads of the influences of semiotics and phenomenology, represents a third
version of culturalist textualism which keeps its distance from 'old-European
thought' of mentalism. On the social level, Luhmann ascribes the quality of

'observing' the world – i.e. of interpreting it according to certain systems of differ-
ence – to communication itself. The sequences of communication, defined by
Luhmann as self-reproducing social systems, are themselves the place of codes,
of knowledge, and of interpretation. Thus, acts of communication, which are
understandable without any reference to psychological attributes, are the proper
site of the social. Culturalist textualism in its radical anti-mentalism and under-
standing of mental attributes as conceptual ascriptions in discourse (including
the localization of knowledge and the social beyond bodily acts) thus represents
a second mode of thinking within cultural theories against which practice theory
gains its profile.

Finally, there remains the specific outlook on the social offered by culturalist
intersubjectivism. Intersubjectivism locates the social in interactions – the para-
digmatic case is the use of ordinary language. The social thus has the structure
of 'intersubjectivity': In their speech acts, the agents refer to a non-subjective
realm of semantic propositions and of pragmatic rules concerning the use of
signs. Sociality can be nowhere other than in a constellation of symbolic inter-
actions between agents. Intersubjectivism has likewise emerged as a product of a
critique of mentalism, here understood as the tradition of a theory of conscious-
ness. For intersubjectivists, mentalism has misunderstood the qualities of
language: Instead, language represents a sort of 'world 3' (Popper) of propositions
and rules irreducible to psychological factors. At the same time, however, inter-
subjectivism, classically formulated in Jürgen Habermas's 'theory of communi-
cative action' (1981a, b), does not follow the radical anti-subjectivism of the
textualists. It is agents endowed with minds who interact with one another: The
agents internalize and use the contents and patterns of the oversubjective, 'objec-
tive' realm of meanings in their mutual speech-acts. Interaction is thus a process
of a transference of meanings which have been internalized in the mind. It is
obvious that intersubjectivism cannot conceal a certain proximity to the model
of rule-governed behaviour of the homo sociologicus – but this one is given a
decidedly 'linguistic' turn. At any rate, the intersubjectivist identification of the
social with interrelations between agents – itself a target of textualism – provides
a third negative background of practice theory.

Practice theory does not place the social in mental qualities, nor in discourse,
nor in interaction. To say that it places the social in 'practices' and that it treats
practices as the 'smallest unit' of social analysis is at first nothing more than tauto-
logical. One needs to clarify what practices are. First of all, it is necessary to distin-
guish between 'practice' and 'practices' (in German there is the useful difference
between *Praxis* and *Praktiken*). 'Practice' (*Praxis*) in the singular represents merely
an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to 'theory'
and mere thinking). 'Practices' in the sense of the theory of social practices,
however, is something else. A 'practice' (*Praktik*) is a routinized type of behaviour
which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily
activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background know-
ledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and moti-
vational knowledge. A practice – a way of cooking, of consuming, of working,

of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc. – forms so to speak a 'block' whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific inter-connectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements. Likewise, a practice represents a pattern which can be filled out by a multitude of single and often unique actions reproducing the practice (a certain way of consuming goods can be filled out by plenty of actual acts of consumption). The single individual – as a bodily and mental agent – then acts as the 'carrier' (*Träger*) of a practice – and, in fact, of many different practices which need not be coordinated with one another. Thus, she or he is not only a carrier of patterns of bodily behaviour, but also of certain routinized ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring. These conventionalized 'mental' activities of understanding, knowing how and desiring are necessary elements and qualities of a practice in which the single individual participates, not qualities of the individual. Moreover, the practice as a 'nexus of doings and sayings' (Schatzki) is not only understandable to the agent or the agents who carry it out, it is like-wise understandable to potential observers (at least within the same culture). A practice is thus a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood. To say that practices are 'social practices' then is indeed a tautology: A practice is social, as it is a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds. Yet, this does not necessarily presuppose 'interactions' – i.e. the social in the sense of the inter-subjectivists – and nor does it remain on the extra-mental and extra-corporal level of discourses, texts and symbols, i.e. the social in the sense of the textualists.

3 Body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process, the agent and the shifted status of these in practice theory

There is a certain danger of trivializing practice theory. At first sight, its approach might seem relatively close to everyday talking about 'agents' and their behav-iour. In fact, this is not the case. Although praxeological 'new speak' is highly modest in its terminology (in contrast to, say, Luhmann's theory of autopoietic-self-referential systems), it implies a considerable shift in our perspective on body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process and the agent. One could point out the philosophical background of practice theory, above all Ludwig Wittgenstein's late works (1984[1953, 1969]) and Martin Heidegger's early phil-osophy (1986[1927]) and their radical attempts to reverse common philo-sophical and everyday vocabularies – and in fact, we find everything that is original in practice theory already in the work of these authors. Yet, it seems more promising to contrast the specific way in which practice theory and the other versions of cultural theory conceptualize certain social-theoretical key terms in order to clarify the praxiological world view – again in the form of theoretical ideal-types.

Body

At the core of practice theory lies a different way of seeing the body. Practices are routinized bodily activities; as interconnected complexes of behavioral acts they are movements of the body. A social practice is the product of training the body in a certain way: when we learn a practice, we learn to be bodies in a certain way (and this means more than to 'use our bodies'). A practice can be understood as the regular, skilful 'performance' of (human) bodies. This holds for modes of handling certain objects as well as for 'intellectual' activities such as talking, reading or writing. The body is thus not a mere 'instrument' which 'the agent' must 'use' in order to 'act', but the routinized actions are themselves bodily performances (which does not mean that a practice consists only of these movements and of nothing more, of course). These bodily activities then include also routinized mental and emotional activities which are – on a certain level – bodily, as well. The conclusion: if practices are the site of the social, then routinized bodily performances are the site of the social and – so to speak – of 'social order'. They give the world of humans its visible orderliness.

For the other versions of cultural theory, bodies are not the site of the social, but are rather epiphenomena or instuments. For mentalism, there is an unequivocal, neo-Cartesian inside–outside distinction between mind and body. The 'outward' behaviour may necessarily be tied to bodily acts; the proper place of the social and of the cultural is, however, in the 'inside' of the mind. The body thus gains the status of an epiphenomenon: it carries out what mind – unconscious categories or acts of consciousness – has prescribed. There is a causal priority of thinking to bodily acting. Nevertheless, the body can in a very specific way achieve a central status in mentalism: Objectivist mentalism can come to the conclusion that mental structures are at the end of the day identical with structures of the brain.

In textualism, the body provides one of the objects which can become a symbol, a theme of discourse. We talk about the body and interpret it in a certain way; thus the body is an object of cultural meanings just as other – concrete or abstract – objects are. In intersubjectivism, there might be a certain sense of the 'bodily' basis of action as it proceeds from the constellation of 'agents'. Yet, as action here is primarily identified with symbolic interaction, it is simple to identify behaviour with norm-following symbolic acts, not with bodily routines. So, at the end of the day in the constellation of intersubjectivity (and very similarly to the textualists), the body appears primarily as a referent of propositions just as other objects do.

Mind

Social practices are sets of routinized bodily performances, but they are at the same time sets of mental activities. They necessarily imply certain routinized ways of understanding the world, of desiring something, of knowing how to to do something. For practice theory, this is not a contradiction: A practice such as, say,

playing football consists of a routinized set of bodily performances. Yet, within the practice these bodily performances are necessarily connected with certain know-how, particular ways of interpretation (of the other players' behaviour, for example), certain aims (most of all, of course, to win the game) and emotional levels (a particular tension) which the agents, as carriers of the practice, make use of, and which are routinized as well. Without these mental and bodily activities, we could not imagine a practice of 'playing football'. For practice theory, a social practice consists of certain bodily *and* certain mental activities. If somebody 'carries' (and 'carries out') a practice, he or she must take over both the bodily and the mental patterns that constitute the practice. These mental patterns are not the 'possession' of an individual 'deep inside', but part of the social practice. Thus, it is not at all incorrect, but must be properly understood when we say that for practice theory not only are bodily routines the place of the social, but that mental routines and their 'knowledge' are also the place of the social: the mental routines and their knowledge are integral parts and elements of practices. A 'practice' thus crosses the distinction between the allegedly inside and outside of mind and body.

'Mind' is a delicate problem in the other three versions of cultural theory – all of them are explicitly or implicitly taking trouble about it all the time. 'Mind' is a neuralgic (not to say a neurotic) issue in modern philosophy as it is in social theory.[9] As we have seen, mentalism understands mind as an ontological realm of the 'inner' which is distinct from outward behaviour and is at the same time its cause. The difference between objectivist and subjectivist mentalism, then, is whether this inner realm represents a structure or a process. Textualism interprets 'mind' as a cultural ascription carried out in certain types of – above all, modern – discourses. Thus, the outward world is not a causal product of the inward realm, but vice versa: the 'outward' world of discourse 'produces' mental attributes as a specific 'theme'.[10] Here lies the difference from intersubjectivism: In Habermas's intersubjectivism, mind is a real product of social interactions; the mental appears as a socialized result of social rules and meanings 'from outside to inside'. Though practice theory shares with intersubjectivism (in opposition to textualism) the position that mental qualities are not only a theme, but 'real' (at least not less real than bodies or discourse are), they differ also in this point: Intersubjectivism regards the relation between the social realm – here, interactions – and mind according to a logic of cause and effect between two separate realms. First, interactions 'bring about' a certain content of individual mind; then the socialized and competent mind can bring about corresponding (inter)action. For practice theory, there is no such logic as there are no different realms: bodily and mental patterns are necessary components of practices and thus of the social.

Things

For practice theory, objects are necessary components of many practices – just as indispensable as bodily and mental activities. Carrying out a practice very often means using particular things in a certain way. It might sound trivial to stress that

in order to play football we need a ball and goals as indispensable 'resources'. Maybe it is less trivial, meanwhile – after studies of the history of communicative media – to point out that writing, printing and electronic media 'mould' social (here, above all, discursive) practices, or, better, they enable and limit certain bodily and mental actitivities, certain knowledge and understanding as elements of practices (cf. Kittler, 1985; Gumbrecht, 1988). When particular 'things' are necessary elements of certain practices, then, contrary to a classical sociological argument, subject–subject relations cannot claim any priority over subject–object relations, as far as the production and reproductions of social order(liness) is concerned. The stable relation between agents (body/minds) and things within certain practices reproduces the social, as does the 'mutually' stable relation between several agents in other practices. Moreover, one can assume that most social practices consist of routinized relations between several agents (body/minds) and objects. At any rate, the social is also to be located in practices in which single agents deal with objects (besides, also in practices in which a single agent deals only with himself, with neither other subjects nor objects) and in this sense also the objects – television sets, houses and brownies – are the place of the social insofar as they are necessary components of social practices. There is no necessary link between the observability of social orderliness and 'inter-subjectivity'.

Basically, the other types of cultural theory share a common viewpoint on things: namely, that they are primarily objects of knowledge and thus a cultural symbol. In mentalism, the symbolic categories or intentional interpretations are 'about objects' (just as Kantian categories were). In textualism and inter-subjectivism respectively the discourses or the propositions produce these objects as meaiful entities or make statements about them. The things are not used, they are known and interpreted, they are objects of the knowing subject (even if the subject might be replaced by discourse or the intersubjective community). Of course, in practice theory things also appear as always-already-interpreted – but here they are things to be handled and constitutive elements of forms of behaviour.

Knowledge

A specific social practice contains specific forms of knowledge. For practice theory, this knowledge is more complex than 'knowing that'. It embraces ways of understanding, knowing how, ways of wanting and of feeling that are linked to each other within a practice. In a very elementary sense, in a practice the knowledge is a particular way of 'understanding the world', which includes an understanding of objects (including abstract ones), of humans, of oneself. This way of understanding is largely implicit and largely historically-culturally specific – it is this form of interpretation that holds together already for the agent herself (the carrier of the practice) the single acts of her own behaviour, so that they form parts of a practice. This way of understanding is a collective, shared knowledge – but not in the sense of a mere sum of the content of single minds: Just as the

bodily activities are 'social' as a consequence of their stable reproduction beyond the limits of space, time and single individuals, their 'corresponding' forms of understanding must be 'collective' – right from the beginning, they are necessary components of a practice as a non-subjective pattern. The practice of falling in love with someone in the sense of 'Romantic love' for instance consists – as a culturally understandable practice – of a pattern of routinized (bodily) behaviour and of a certain way of understanding (oneself and another person). Single agents in their single mind/ bodies then – independent of one another – 'take over' the practice, and thus also its interpretative perspective. Yet, the knowledge that is a constitutive element of a practice is not only a way of understanding; it is – in connection with that – also a know-how and a certain way of wanting and feeling. Every practice contains a know-how knowledge of ethno-methods. Every practice implies a particular routinized mode of intentionality, i.e. of wanting or desiring certain things and avoiding others. And, finally, every practice contains a certain practice-specific emotionality (even if that means a high control of emotions). Wants and emotions thus do not belong to individuals but – in the form of knowledge – to practices.

The status of knowledge in other cultural theories is not absolutely, but relatively, different. In general, they downplay the know-how and motivational, as well as, to a lesser extent, the understanding-enabling character of knowledge. In objectivist mentalism, knowledge is identified with unconscious systems of distinctions that have effects on behaviour and do not contribute to the agent's understanding (treated as a potentially ideological epiphenomenon here). The textualist concept of knowledge has a similarly 'intellectualist' tendency: Here, knowledge is by definition not ascribed to minds or bodies, but to texts, discourses or communication; a 'code', then, that produces certain chains of signs. The concepts of knowledge in mentalist subjectivism and intersubjectivism are closer to practice theory. Here knowledge is presented as the background of understanding on the part of the agent. However, in the first case there is a tendency toward an emphatic individualization of knowledge which seems separate from collective bodily routines. In the second case, knowledge is above all a background for communication, not for practices in general. At any rate, these approaches do not work within the idea that a social practice is a two-sided block of patterns of bodily behaviour and patterns of knowledge and understanding. Rather, they attribute behaviour and knowledge to two different realms.

Discourse/Language

In practice theory – in contrast to textualism and intersubjectivism – discourse and language lose their omnipotent status. Discursive practices are one type of practices among others. Discursive practices embrace different forms in which the world is meaningfully constructed in language or in other sign-systems. At any rate, discursive practices must, as practices, be more than chains of signs or 'communication' (in the sense of Luhmann), but they are not identical to speech-acts. A discursive practice also contains bodily patterns, routinized mental

activities – forms of understanding, know-how (here including grammar and pragmatic rules of use), and motivation – and above all, objects (from sounds to computers) that are linked to each other. However, this is not a structural difference to other, non-discursive practices. Practice theory must stress that 'language exists only in its (routinized) use': in discursive practices the participants ascribe, in a routinized way, certain meanings to certain objects (which thus become 'signs') to understand other objects, and above all, in order to do something.

In objectivist mentalism, language is primarily understood as a mental set of competences which is thus untied from the discursive practice of language use – 'parole' appears as an actualization of 'langue'.[11] Textualism identifies the entire realm of the social with texts, signs, symbols or communication. Moreover, it understands these discourses as extra-mental and extra-bodily patterns. The concept of speech-acts in intersubjectivism contains some similarities to 'discursive practices'. But there are two differences: The concept of discursive practices does not imply the idea of 'transferring meanings from ego to alter' – rather, every practice already contains a routinized, non-subjective way of understanding, so that there is nothing to be transferred (a process which in intersubjectivism must remain opaque). Moreover, practice theory does not share with intersubjectivism the priorization of 'communicative action' over other forms of action.

Structure/Process

For practice theory, the nature of social structure consists in routinization. Social practices are routines: routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things, interconnected in a practice. Structure is thus nothing that exists solely in the 'head' or in patterns of behavior: One can find it in the routine nature of action. Social fields and institutionalized complexes – from economic organizations to the sphere of intimacy – are 'structured' by the routines of social practices. Yet the idea of routines necessarily implies the idea of a temporality of structure: Routinized social practices occur in the sequence of time, in repetition; social order is thus basically social reproduction. For practice theory, then, the 'breaking' and 'shifting' of structures must take place in everyday crises of routines, in constellations of interpretative interdeterminacy and of the inadequacy of knowledge with which the agent, carrying out a practice, is confronted in the face of a 'situation'.

In objectivist mentalism, structure is tied to the existence of oversubjective mental categories. Structure exists in this sense 'beyond time', it is a stock of structures in mind whereas 'process' appears as the infinite actualization and application of the structures in action. From this point of view, it becomes highly difficult to conceptualize processes that 'break up' the structures. In contrast, intersubjectivism regards social structure primarily according to a paradigm of a 'consensus' of meanings. Social structure manifests itself in an agreement between subjects/agents to believe the same. One must see the 'breaking' of structure, then, primarily in a constellation of dissent, in a disagreement between speakers. The idea of structure/process in textualism, finally, comes nearest to that in

practice theory: Here, structure consists in the autopoiesis of codes in a sequence of discursive events (early Foucault and Luhmann are very similar in this regard). Structure is thus temporal and always implies the possibility of breaking down in 'new events' which do not conform to the code. However, these discursive sequences are not bodily-mental routines in the sense of practice theory, and the accidental emergence of new events is not identical with a constellation of interpretative indeterminacy and pragmatic innovation in a crisis of practice.

The Agent/Individual

The agent stands at the centre of classical theories of action. Here he presents himself either as the self-interested figure of the homo economicus, or as the norm-following and role-playing actor of the homo sociologicus. In the former case, the social world seems first and foremost to be populated by independent individuals who confront one another with their decisions. In the latter case, the social world is first and foremost a system of normative rules and expectations, to which agents/actors as rule-following figures conform (or become 'deviant'). In practice theory, agents are body/minds who 'carry' and 'carry out' social practices. Thus, the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents. Agents, so to speak, 'consist in' the performance of practices (which includes – to stress the point once more – not only bodily, but also mental routines). As carriers of a practice, they are neither autonomous nor the judgmental dopes who conform to norms: They understand the world and themselves, and use know-how and motivational knowledge, according to the particular practice. There is a very precise place for the 'individual' – as distinguished from the agent – in practice theory (though hitherto, practice theorists have hardly treated this question): As there are diverse social practices, and as every agent carries out a multitude of different social practices, the individual is the unique crossing point of practices, of bodily-mental routines.[12]

In intersubjectivism the idea of an agent comes nearest to the classical (norm-oriented) theory of action, though in a linguistically enlightened version: agents here are 'speakers' who interact with one another. Thus, the leading idea is that 'there are agents' (a statement which is not problematized) who in a constellation of interaction follow pragmatic and semantic rules. In different ways, mentalism and textualism have given up the idea of 'agents': In mentalism, the role of the agent is replaced by that of mind of consciousness. Mentalist objectivism is based upon the dualism between outward acts of behavior and mind as an internal self-producing system of schemes. In mentalist subjectivism, agents are at the end of the day intentional consciousnesses, action is the result of consciousness. In both cases there is a problematic link between mind and action which can only be veiled by the term 'agent'.[13] In its radical gesture, textualism presents the agent as a specific cultural definition in discourse, as a discursive 'subject-position' or a simplifying inner-discursive 'attribution' of social events to individual producers. But beyond that, Luhmann (1995) develops an additional concept of the 'individual' independently from the 'agent'. He interprets psychic systems as

'individuals' – these mental sequences appear as outside the realm of the social, outside the diverse sequences of communication. The difference from practice theory is instructive here: Just as Luhmann proceeds from the existence of different social systems, practice theory proceeds from the existence of different complexes of social practices which make up the social. However, for Luhmann the social systems are processes outside mind (and the body) so that every mind must appear as individual per se. For practice theory, social practices are bodily and mental routines. Thus, mental activities do not appear as individual, but as socially routinized; the 'individual' consists in the unique crossing of different mental and bodily routines 'in' one mind/body and in the interpretative treatment of this constellation of 'crossing'.

4 The Effects of Practice Theory

We hardly need mention that practice theory is not 'true' (in the sense of corresponding to the 'facts'), nor are the other versions of social and cultural theory 'false' (or vice versa). After all, social theories are vocabularies necessarily underdetermined by empirical 'facts'. As vocabularies they never reach the bedrock of a real social world, but offer contingent systems of interpretation which enable us to make certain empirical statements (and exclude other forms of empirical statements). The pertinent questions, then, are: Where does a certain vocabulary lead us? What are its effects? What are the effects of practice theory? There are two sorts of effects to be distinguished. On the one hand, a social-theoretical vocabulary is a heuristic device, a sensitizing 'framework' for empirical research in the social sciences. It thus opens up a certain way of seeing and analysing social phenomena. On the other hand, as vocabularies social theories mould and change 'our' self-understanding.[14] Even without being applied in empirical research, social theories provide us with a certain way of defining our position as human beings in a social world, which inevitably implies a political and ethical dimension. Above all, social theories (and social philosophies alike) provide cultural traditions of grasping ourselves – and frequently they are ways of breaking with cultural traditions of human self-perception, changing them and opening up 'new' possibilities of self-understanding.

Understood as a heuristic device, practice theory – in comparison with social-theoretical alternatives – is handicapped in one point: Hitherto, it has not offered a theoretical 'system' which could compete in complexity with Parsons's homo sociologicus, Luhmann's constructivist theory of social systems, Habermas's theory of communicative action or the theories of cognitive psychology. So, if one is looking for a systematized 'new speak', practice theory and the tentative praxeological remarks of Bourdieu, Giddens, late Foucault, Garfinkel, Latour, Butler or Taylor might not be the first place to look.[15] But even if we do not find a full-blown 'grand theory' here, we can estimate the heuristic effects of practice theory, as it is has already been employed in such diverse fields as science studies, gender studies and organizational studies. The general effect of *cultural* theories in

contrast to the classical and still influential models of a homo economicus and homo sociologicus consists in bringing to light the sphere of the symbolic and the cognitive and in asking how these structures give meaning to the world in a contingent way. *Practice* theory, however, prevents cultural theory from following the path of 'culturalism' or 'idealism'. Other versions of cultural theory tend toward an 'intellectualization' of culture by taking as a point of departure very specific entities: either mind or consciousness as in the tradition of Western, post-Cartesian philosophy; or texts and communicative action, i.e. the use of symbols and language. Practice theory thus has a double-effect: Compared to mentalism, it does not invite the analysis of mental phenomena 'as such', but the exploration of the embeddedness of the mental activities of understanding and knowing in a complex of doings, thus, the analysis of the interconnectedness of bodily routines of behaviour, mental routines of understanding and knowing and the use of objects. Compared to textualism and intersubjectivism, practice theory does not encourage the regard of institutional complexes solely as spheres of discourse, communication or communicative action, but their consideration as routinized body/knowledge/things-patterns of which discursive practices (understood in the sense elucidated above) are components. The way, for instance, that organizational, gender or science studies change their outlook under the influence of practice theory can be imagined even if one does not know the works that actually are influenced by it.[16] There is a considerable heuristic difference between whether we are, for instance, encouraged to analyse the 'mental maps' that scientists, men/women or members of an organization use; to explore scientific discourses, gender discourse or 'organization as communication'; or whether our interest is directed to reconstruct how gender, science or organization is produced by a nexus of (non-discursive and discursive) practices as body/knowledge/things-complexes.

Not only the model figures of classically modern social theory, the homo economicus and the homo sociologicus, but also the 'high-modern' theories of culture in mentalism, textualism and intersubjectivism imply a rigid formal rationalization of what human agency and social order are. From the point of view of practice theory, Charles Taylor and Pierre Bourdieu make very clear this tendency of 'hyperintellectualization' and situate themselves in opposition to it. Taylor (1971, 1985) has again and again reconstructed the tradition of 'rationalism' in modern philosophical and social thought. This tradition has in diverse ways narrowed our understanding of human agency and the social. Above all, the traditions of atomism and mentalism, rooted already in early modernity, have promoted the understanding of a 'disengaged subject' and marginalized the importance of the 'significance feature', i.e. the importance of practical understanding. In the form of his critique of the 'scholastic habitus', Bourdieu (1997, ch. 2) has arrived at a similar judgement: modern social theory and social philosophy have a tendency to present human agency as a highly reflexive and formally rational enterprise which resembles to an amazing extent the self-images of modern intellectuals and their life-world – in the form of calculating or duty-obeying agents, in the form of consciousness or mental machines, of dominating texts or conversation.[17]

In fact, it seems that practice theory revises the hyperrational and intellectualized picture of human agency and the social offered by classical and high-modern social theories. Practice theory 'decentres' mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary. The 'hyperrationalism' of mentalism consists in encouraging us to understand ourselves not as agents, but either as systems of unconscious mental categories or as intentional streams of individual consciousness. Intersubjectivism invites us to understand ourselves as participants in the highly specific constellation of conversational acts. Textualism calls upon us to regard the social world as a chain of discourses, symbols and communication – all of them preferred intellectual motives – thus, as an unintended play of meanings, distinct from 'agents'. Practice theory, in contrast, encourages a shifted self-understanding. It invites us to regard agents as carriers of routinized, oversubjective complexes of bodily movements, of forms of interpreting, knowing how and wanting and of the usage of things. We can only speculate on which shifts such a self-understanding could also mean for our ethical outlook on agency and the social. However, it does not seem out of place to assume that practice theory encourages us to regard the ethical problem as the question of creating and taking care of social routines, not as a question of the just, but of the 'good' life as it is expressed in certain body/understanding/things complexes.[18] Ethics thus does not refer only to the relation between subjects, but also to the relation to things (including nature) and to oneself (including the body, the motivations and emotions) – a distinctive shift in relation to the utilitarian ethics of the homo economicus, the ethics of duties of the homo sociologicus, the existential ethics of mentalist subjectivism, the discourse ethics of intersubjectivism and the general scepticism towards ethics as it is furthered by mentalist objectivism and textualism.

Practice theory should develop more philosophical perseverance and at the same time not give up its embeddedness in empirical social and cultural analysis. Then, in future the hitherto loose network of praxeological thinking might yield some interesting surprises.

Notes

1 'Classically modern social theories' embrace the paradigms of the homo economicus and of the homo sociologicus (see section 1). The label 'high-modern social theories' in this context refers to 'universalist' and 'intellectualist' versions of cultural theory as we find them in mentalism, intersubjectivism and textualism (see section 2).

2 Not all of the authors in question use the term 'practice theory' themselves. The term is important in the work of Bourdieu and Schatzki. In contrast, Stephen Turner (1994) gives the label a different meaning which I do not follow: He describes all cultural theories as practice theories (concerning the concept of cultural theory and its difference to practice theory see sections 1 and 2 of this article).

3 Practice theory in this sense stands in a rather loose relation to the tradition of classical American pragmatism in the work of Dewey, James or Mead. Yet, the relationship between practice theories and Hans Joas's neo-pragmatism deserves a closer analysis.

4 The task in this article is thus not to argue in favour of practice theories (although such a positive evaluation forms my background), but, more basically, to make plain what practice theories are in comparison with other conceptual options.

5 Therefore, in my presentation of the approach and its particular aspects, I will not give references to single texts or passages of single authors; the task is to develop a programmatic ideal type of a 'practice theory'.

6 A closer critical analysis of the relationship between cultural theories and the two classical figures of homo economicus and homo sociologicus, above all, however, a detailed reconstruction of the emergence of practice theory as a result of a transformation of structuralist and interpretative cultural theories and their mentalist assumptions can be found in my *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien. Zur Entwicklung eines Theorieprogramms* (2000).

7 Classical instances of such a critique of the homo economicus and the homo sociologicus from the angle of cultural theories are the works of Schütz, Goffman, Cicourel, Taylor and Bourdieu.

8 Cf. on this topic the works of Ryle (1990), Rorty (1979) and Taylor (1989), part II.

9 The 'totalization' of mind is a very common reproach and the decentring of the subject is a very common cure in contemporary social theory – however, in highly different ways. So, Luhmann can reproach Habermas for sticking to the tradition of old-European philosophy of consciousness – and Habermas can confront Luhmann with the same reproach. Similarly, structuralism criticizes the subject-fixation of phenomenology – and now is itself confronted with the critique of mentalism, as it is formulated by practice theorists or textualists.

10 Luhmann holds a specific position here. For him, the mental is, on the one hand, a set of attributions within communications; on the other hand, there is the 'real mind' in what he calls psychic systems. But these psychic systems are, by definition, processes outside the realm of the social.

11 Subjectivist mentalism, i.e. phenomenology, is characterized by the well-known difficulty of how one can grasp language while remaining in the 'subjective perspective'. I do not address this classical topic in greater detail here.

12 It is Simmel who invented the idea of defining the individual as a crossing-point of different social spheres; see Simmel (1992[1908], ch. 6). However, Simmel understands the social in form of 'social circles', i.e. of networks, not in the sense of complexes of social practices.

13 Concerning the status of the individual in mentalism, one could say with only slight exaggeration that either there is none at all (in structuralism or in transcendental phenomenology) or every consciousness is an individual (in existential variations of phenomenology).

14 Generally, this idea has been developed by Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1989).

15 Yet Schatzki (1996) has begun such a systematic elaboration in a highly fruitful way, though from the perspective of social philosophy.

16 Examples of empirical studies influenced by practice theory can be found in science studies (Knorr-Cetina, 1981), in gender studies (Butler, 1990 and Hirschauer, 1993), and in organizational studies (Ortmann, 1995).

17 In this context, it can be instructive to situate practice theory and the other social and cultural-theoretical paradigms in the context of the debate on 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. In general, we can define 'modernist' social theories as theories which support strong concepts of rationality towards human action and social order whereas theories which are sceptical towards modernism weaken these criteria of

rationality. In this sense, the paradigms of the homo economicus and of the homo sociologicus represent classical types of social-theoretical modernism. In general, cultural theories relativize the rationalist models of the interest-following or the norm-following transparent agent by situating action in implicit or unconscious, collective symbolic structures. However, the exact relation towards modernism in mentalism, intersubjectivism, textualism and practice theory differs. Structuralism, phenomenology and Habermas's intersubjectivism follow a sort of critical modernism which searches for 'hidden' universal structures of human culture (in mind, consciousness or interaction). Both textualism and practice theory are opposed to these universalizing models and stress cultural contingency and historicity. Textualism chooses the path of 'postmodernism', which stresses the discursive or semiotic 'constructedness' of all entities. For practice theory, this focus on signs, texts and discourse secretly tends to become high-modernist. For practice theory, only the new focus on the groundedness of human action in bodily routines and in practical understanding is suitable to remain aloof from modernist models of the social and of the agent. Wittgenstein, Heidegger and hermeneutics are philosophical forerunners of such a project.

18 Schmid (1998) outlines an approach to such an 'ethics of the good' based on a concept of practices.

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