

Response

Making Experiences in the Digital Era

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Practice theory has long been part of the theoretical and methodological repertoire of European ethnology. Pierre Bourdieu's anthropologically inspired sociology has been particularly influential (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990), as well as Michel de Certeau's historical (2000) and ethnographic (1984) investigations. Though they may not have explicitly referred to themselves as European ethnologists, they were doing what we do: investigating the activities of everyday life in European societies and urban settings and at the same time interrogating the boundaries drawn between them and what is labeled non-Western and/or premodern. It is no wonder, then, that they have been a permanent fixture on syllabi and in bibliographies in this field for the last 25 to 30 years. And yet, only in the last ten to fifteen years has there been increasing talk of a 'practice turn' in European ethnology, broadly conceived as a turn away from the dominant paradigm of 'culture as text' and its focus on meaning. Ethnographers have been prompted by this turn to rely more heavily on the data acquired during participant observation and to look more carefully at what people are *doing*, rather than placing the narrative interview, what people are *saying*, at the center of their analysis. And when working with historical material, the 'practice turn' has inspired European ethnologists to think about historical anthropology more explicitly in terms of ethnography, looking in their sources for traces of everyday practices rather than focusing on the discourse the sources reproduce (see e.g. Roodenburg 2012, Wietschorke 2013).

Whereas Bourdieu's theory remains an important touchstone in these debates, it has also come increasingly under fire for focusing too much on the 'structure' side of the dialectic between social structure and individual actors, minimizing the ability of actors to maneuver within it. De Certeau figures prominently as Bourdieu's foil in this regard, but as Andreas Reckwitz (2002) points out, other members of the practice-theory 'family' also view this approach as one that reinstates the importance of the self-reflective actor over and against 'structure' (see e.g. Ortner 2005). 'Practice' is not always used in the Bourdieuan sense. The fact that the recent turn toward practice in European ethnology is motivated by a desire to emphasize the agency of individual actors and their own creativity in everyday life (see Fenske/Bendix 2007) is indicative of this much broader understanding of the concept, one that may not be so opposed to 'performance' as one might think.

Looking less at what people are saying than to what they are doing entails engaging with a concept of performance. I would agree with Simon Bronner (2012) that European

ethnologists tend to subsume performance under practice when conceiving it broadly as ‘doing culture’. There is clearly an interest in the performative aspect of culture in European ethnology and in the humanities in general, as the broad reception of the work of Erika Fischer-Lichte in recent years has suggested (2008). She makes the helpful distinction between performance as event and performativity as principle – both of which have been important in the recent turn to practice. In his essay in this volume, Bronner links practice quite firmly to the cognitive, emphasizing such terms as ‘mind’ and ‘knowledge’, but I would maintain that the turn away from a focus on meaning has led to a focus on aesthetics and ‘experience’ and how they are linked to performance and performativity. European ethnologists working with practice theory tend to think of it more decidedly through the body, as instrument as well as medium, which is to say that the practice turn has led to a more intense engagement with sensory, affective, and emotional dimensions of everyday life (Roodenburg 2012), often embedded in the field’s long-standing interest in material artifacts. The repetitive nature of practice also forces us to turn our attention to the past and to think about how bodies themselves are shaped by the uses they have been put to and the habits they have acquired. This may be just another way of talking about ‘structure’ and ‘structuration’ and emphasizing the reciprocal movements of doing and being done to, of shaping and being shaped, but it is crucial that the body itself be included in this dynamic. The body as the medium for experience is produced by practice, making experience itself historically and culturally situated. That is to say, it is not the meaning of the experience alone which is culturally specific, but also its phenomenological dimension, the way it is had (cf. Scheer 2012).

This is why people invest so much energy in creating the conditions for a certain experience. Perhaps this is even a way of thinking about what performance as a reflective, creative activity is actually doing for people. In Casey Schmitt’s piece, for example, people organize their crossing of the boundary into the wilderness in a way that allows them to arrange their bodies in accordance with the “careful, reverent recreation” (p. 137) they seek or expect. Matthias Klückmann notes that the street festival is put together each year so that residents of a multicultural neighborhood may “actualize themselves as being part of this special community” (p. 45). His piece also shows how the practice theory approach encourages us to think more carefully about what is actually meant by ‘experience’. He delves deeply into this question, asking how we can conceptualize experience as a ‘sense’ – in this case, a sense of community, belonging, collective identity or ‘we-ness’ – that emerges from doing things.

‘Experience’ is often invoked to denote the absence of mediation, direct and intense, rather than filtered through, interpreted, skewed, and ultimately diluted. A variation of this understanding manifests itself in the recent turn to “affect”, when it stands for “intensity” (cf. Massumi 2002, 27), the bodily engagement and activation that cognition, meaning-making, and understanding ostensibly lack, or from which is can ostensibly be analytically or heuristically distinguished. The contributions assembled here, however, demonstrate on many levels just how mediated ‘immediate’ experience is, and just how cognized and socially embedded ‘affect’ must be to count as experience.

As Schmitt argues, the wilderness can provide a sense of “*unfiltered* experience” only because it has been “explicitly groomed and maintained by human actions” (p. 130). That is to say, a cultural expectation or desire for ‘intensity’ or ‘immediate’ experience – itself the product of a historical development and conditioning of bodies – is made to happen by a specific arrangement of bodies, spaces, sensory inputs, and objects either put together by people (a shrine, for example) or if not, then into which people put themselves (like an open field or a mountaintop) or get put into by others (say, under water). Experience is inextricably intertwined with doings and sayings.

For some proponents of practice theory, shifting the focus of analysis away from cognitive contents, meanings, and narrations seems to lead quite logically to a shift away from humans as the center of cultural analysis. Interactions take place not primarily between minds (creating intersubjective reality) but between bodies, things, and spaces (and is therefore ‘interobjective’, see Reckwitz 2012). Bruno Latour’s re-assembly of the social (2005) appears in this line of thinking to be the logical next step, which I find somewhat puzzling, considering that Latour’s work frames itself as a break from Bourdieu and builds instead on Deleuzian concepts. In this regard I found Schmitt’s use of ‘folklore without folk’ to be very helpful in making clear how a practice-theory approach can indeed facilitate a perspective on culture which de-centers the mind as the seat of subjectivity without erasing the human altogether. Not only do human bodies interact in specifically human ways with objects (such as walking sticks) and spaces (such as forest trails), but these objects and spaces mediate these interactions to other human bodies, for instance, in the future. In other words, things are social actors, i.e. actors *for* humans, because they are animated by humans and/or bear the marks of previous human interaction with them. This is not to say that the Berlin key is merely a symbol after all, that it only stands for something, but that its efficacy as a social actor emerges through its mediation of human relations toward it in the past. Or as Schmitt puts it: “actions taken by others guide, encourage, and constrain actions taken by the individual” (p. 136) and both of these are mediated through objects, which are animated by those human actions.

What this issue does particularly well is to explore in several arenas the ways that ‘classical’ practice theory will have to be expanded to include digital and virtual spaces of interaction. Buccitelli does this in a straightforward manner, first presenting the ‘classic’ thinker de Certeau and then confronting him with case studies from the area of digital culture. His examples demonstrate an interesting point that González-Martin also brings up, which is often taken for granted in approaches based on practice theory: how transmission takes place. In a strict Bourdieuan model, it is assumed that practices are acquired primarily via mimesis, that the habitus is ‘absorbed’ more or less tacitly (except for the occasional admonition to stand up straight or hold your knife properly, as Bourdieu famously mentions, e.g. 1990, 69). But if ‘communities of practice’ extend beyond the face-to-face into virtual communities online, the transmission will have to be much more explicit and rely heavily on words or text. I will not follow my friends, or (if we compare Buccitelli’s example with Schmitt’s) simply the ‘beaten path’, through the park; I will ask my friends on Facebook to explain the path to me and why they prefer it

and weigh alternatives. How does this affect our conceptualization of 'practice'? How did practice theorists envision the role of print media in the entrainment of habitus, such as etiquette manuals and self-help guides do, of which internet forums now represent the most vibrant version? These questions remind us that, although Bourdieu was keen to emphasize the unconscious, unspoken, mimetic forms of acquiring habitus in an effort to counter the cognitive, rational-choice bias of social theory, practice theory was never meant to completely ignore the role of explicitly transmitted knowledge and verbally articulated pedagogies. Greg Noble and Megan Watkins offer a useful concept, 'agentic reflection' (2003, 530), which captures the ways in which subjects acquire practices, a practical sense, a 'feel for the game' and ultimately, habitus shifts, through explicit and verbal communication, including magazines, videos, and books, as well as by consciously 'mentally rehearsing', imagining, or visualizing oneself with a future habitus (531-2). This approach offers a way to integrate ways of learning into cultural analysis done on the basis of practice theory that do not require bodily co-presence. Likewise, Berger and del Negro utilize manuals with written instructions for members of organizations to explore the interplay of practice and social structure. The irony of studying "policy texts to make a practice theory argument" (p. 157) is not lost on them, yet they encourage us to look closely at the relationship between texts and practices, suggesting that texts represent the "potentials for social action" or perhaps something like the script for a particular performance of practice (*ibid.*), not unlike the scripts that quince-girls are asking for from the online community. The relationship between the individual performer and the collective cache of knowledge contributing to, constraining, and circumscribing the actualization of a particular practice, is a version of the agency-structure duality that practice theory grapples with, as Berger and del Negro elaborate in their article. This duality also lies at the heart of Chatterji's discussion of comic book creations, adapting the agency-structure question to one of artistic agency and the structure of artisanal tradition. Here again is an example of how it is possible to subsume performance under a broader notion of practice, since many of the same issues inhere in both approaches.

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