

Please Note: The following working paper was presented at the workshop "Demanding ideas: where theories of practice might go next" held 18-20 June 2014 in Windermere, UK. The purpose of the event was to identify issues and topics that constitute 'unfinished business' for people interested in social theories of practice and in the relevance of such ideas for the DEMAND Research Centre. This working paper should not be quoted without first asking the author's permission.

DEMANDING ideas

Working Paper 15: Harro van Lente, *Commentary on DEMANDING ideas* (H.vanLente@uu.nl)
August 2014

Note: Harro was invited to comment on the mini-manifestos produced by Janine Morley, Elizabeth Shove, Stanley Blue, Lenneke Kuijer and Nicola Spurling.

First of all, thanks a lot for accepting me in the circle. I am afraid my notes will not be in time to circulate. Therefore, a few sketches and questions. I am sure, the rest will come in discussions. Inspired by the mini-manifestos, I would like to highlight four basic tensions.

Tension 1: Ontology and dynamics

The ambition of the DEMAND project is to deepen and enrich practice theory, in order to cope with intricate questions of energy use and reduction. In response to this ambition, quite a few mini-manifestos stress the need for further clarification of terms and their relationships. This can be read as a quest for ontological reflections. In the meantime, questions about how things change are then less visible. How to understand changes in practices? What kinds of patterns and forces can be seen/expected to play a role? How to modulate such patterns in better directions?

Tension 2: Analytical and empirical questions

In general, a researcher can raise analytical and empirical questions. Or, as Kant introduced them, analytical and synthetic questions. The former can be answered by referring to logic and by sorting out conceptual issues, the other by referring to observations: logically it could have been otherwise, but it is this. It seems to me that the emerging and joint research agenda does not contain enough empirical questions. Elisabeth raises a few. How energy becomes embedded in different social practices; is there "a cross-practice trend towards increasing resource/energy intensity and if so, how and why might this be the case?" (p.35). I would like to see more of these: what kinds of *specific* questions are to be addressed. Of course, empirical questions presuppose conceptual work, but there needs to be a balance.

Tension 3: Problems and solutions

Nicola's concern is about the way theories can be meaningful for policymaking. This, indeed, is a question on its own, but it seems important for the DEMAND project, which carries promises of providing clues to change energy use. The mini-manifestos stress the intricacy of the problem. What about ideas of solutions. When, how, why do they occur. What kinds of solutions are to be imagined, in the first place?

Tension 4: Demands and Needs

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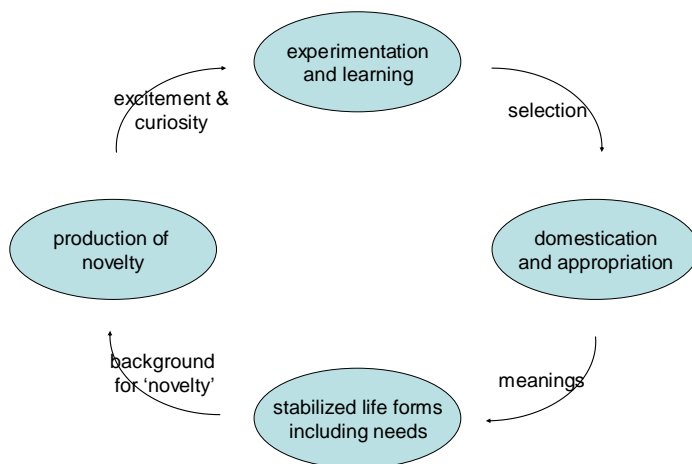
While 'demand' is in the title of the project(s), the very notion of 'demand' is less problematized. I have worked on the issue of needs, and studied how needs have been defined. I find it intriguing that needs change. Given the central position of 'needs' in the understanding of sustainability, I think this is a central issue. Depending on time and occasion, I could expand a bit on this. For now, I add an abstract and two figures that summarize my thoughts.

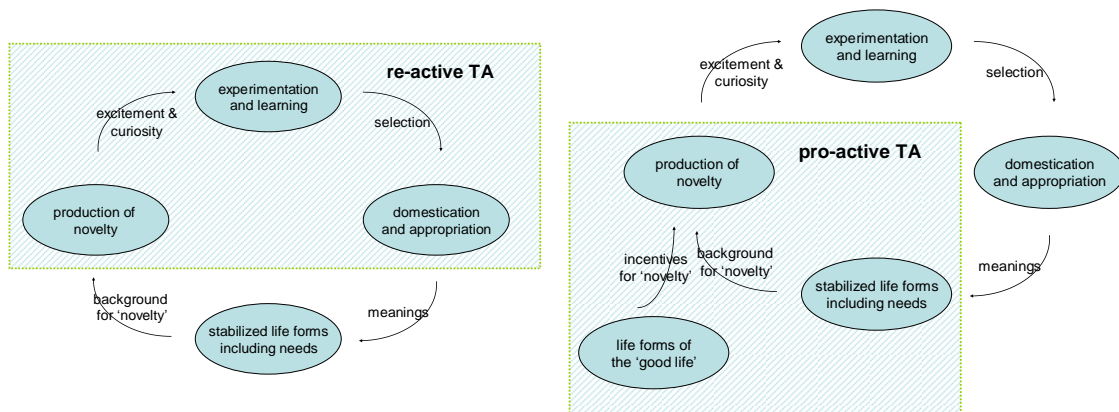
"When technologies are promised, developed and used, many things change in the same movement. One of the ambitions of anticipating such changes is to improve the embedding of technology in society and to do 'better' the next time. A change that often is overlooked is the change in 'needs'. According to the old wisdom, need is the mother of invention. When an innovation is successful, the argument goes, there must have been a need for this, albeit 'latent'. On the other hand, history suggests that technological change will incite new needs. This raises the intriguing question how novelty and needs are co-produced. When needs are not pre-given, but dependent upon socio-technical configurations, and, in fact, both cause and effect of technological change, a range of philosophical, sociological and design questions come to the fore.

In this paper I will address the central question by following two lines. First, the various uses of the concept of 'need' in technical change are studied and categorized. Here I explore various strands of innovation literature as well as technological and cultural criticism. A recurrent theme is whether and how what is conceived of as needs depends on the historical period and the locality. Central here is the institutional definition of needs by experts or markets. Second, I will review a few cases to reconstruct how needs are part of the co-evolutionary process of technical change and provides new suggestions how to anticipate science and technology in society.

The pattern that appears is that novelties are turned into needs and, subsequently, into rights. I conclude that the distinction between 'real' or 'genuine' needs on the one hand, and artificial needs on the other is misleading. Therefore, the question whether needs are real or artificial is not very helpful. The relevant and sensible question is which needs we can afford."

production of needs





Postscript: Three questions for practice theory – notes from a Windermere session
(Harro provided these notes after the workshop)

We had an amazing time in Windermere, socially and intellectually. The format of mini-manifestos incited programmatic and forward looking discussions (in contrast to paper presentations which tend to lead to justifying and backward looking defenses. Many issues were discussed. For me the following stand out, which I thus offer as a summary of the discussions and collective thinking. Practice theory stresses local specificities. The starting point is that social life is not a homogeneous affair but differs per site, each with its own rules, language and logics. This raises questions about how practices are interlinked, since it is hard to imagine that practices are just sitting next to each other. Practices are not solipsistic worlds that thrive in perfect isolation. First of all, practices will overlap: one activity may contribute to multiple practices at the same time. Second, practices are informed and constrained by generic, overlapping norms and ideologies. Third, practices can only exist with infrastructures, which may be material and/or institutional. While such overarching conditions are not explicitly denied by practice theory, they not taken up systematically either. What is the status and importance of 'supra' practice phenomena, such as

- infrastructure (tangible, institutional);
- cultural repertoires and ideologies;
- knowledge.

The second question that deserves more attention is how practices change. Again, the starting point of practice theory is the remarkable consistency of social life: we don't take decisions on a day to day basis, but tend to behave repetitiously and predictably. The starting point is the amazing lack of change. Yet, also practices occur and many studies have addressed this. Yet, a systematic comparison and the theorizing of change is still work to be done. This requires the adoption of concepts of dynamics: patterns, trajectories, phases, etc..

A third issue we discussed was not theoretical but practical: which audiences are (to be) addressed with practice theory research. Who is to be convinced of what? What is to be contributed to whom? This may vary with the funding of the research and the setting (teaching, interviews), but may be interesting to be less ad-hoc here and to consider a strategic positioning.

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