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Placing power in practice theory

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Practice theory must be able to account for power. This imperative has two sides, one intellectual and the other pragmatic. The intellectual side of the imperative comes from the ubiquity of power as a part of social relations. For practice theory, all social relations are constituted and reproduced through practices. As Schatzki states, 'both social order and individuality… result from practices' (1996: 13). Therefore, practice theory must be able to account for how power works. The pragmatic side of the imperative may be less compelling, as it relies on a conviction that social theory should, in part, be valued for its capacity to make a positive difference in the world. For practice theory to meaningfully inform future change (or to convincingly account for past change), it must be able to account for power.

Power is a fundamental concern of social theory and I am writing about it for two reasons, the first being the difficulty of analytically grasping what we take for power in a way that is consistent with the ontological commitments of practices. The second is that the bulk of what comprises contemporary work identifying with practice theory, particularly in empirical application, is typically conservative in terms of its practical implications. Generally, applications of practice theory that seek to be relevant result in arguments against the technical or behavioural preoccupations of policy approaches. This is despite the intellectual radicalism of practice theory, which posits an understanding of the social and of human subjectivity which embody a fundamental critique of the implicit theoretical foundations of dominant ways of conceiving and doing governing.

My ambition, then, is to work through ways in which power is already present in how practice theory has been developed and used and then to engage cognate fields of theory to look for an account of power which is coherent with practice theory. The chapter does not start from a premise that practice theory must have something distinctive to say about power and much less that practice theory is the best means of understanding power as an aspect of the social. Rather, it starts from a conviction that, to fulfil its potential, practice theory needs to be able to speak of power and so it is worth seeking a compatible account of power. I also aim to establish some grounds for thinking about whether practice theory may have something distinctive to say about power and consider to what good this might be put.

In all of this, there are many possible foundations to build on within the practice theory literature. For Barnes, to 'engage in a practice is to exercise a power' (2001: 28). For Nicolini, one of the five distinctive features of practice theory common across the full range of its expression by different scholars is that they 'foreground the centrality of interest in all human matters and therefore put emphasis on the importance of power, conflict, and politics as constitutive elements of the social reality we experience' (2012: 6). Key thinkers who have shaped contemporary understandings of power are also included in articulations of the intellectual heritage of contemporary practice theory, including Bourdieu and Foucault (Reckwitz, 2002b) and Marx (Nicolini, 2012). Along with this, current contributions have increasingly articulated concepts which promise to enable practice theory to move beyond the

localism of a focus on performances of practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2015a), opening up the means to engage with the sorts of social phenomena such as those of government or commerce that are commonly identified with the exercise of power.

There are then grounds for thinking that practice theory can meaningfully engage with questions of power and some foundations on which to build a discussion of that potential. The chapter moves towards this goal by framing the discussion with reference to fundamentally different understandings of power. It is impossible here to fully plumb the complexities of how power has been thought about and deployed in social theory (Lukes, 2005). It is nonetheless useful to scope out the relatively obvious poles of meaning and to outline the path taken through the relations between power and practice in the discussion that follows.

A first key distinction is between understanding power as an object or as an effect. In common sense usage power is an object, generally understood as a capacity of a person, institution or other social actor. Within such a framing, it is how both power and the effects of its exercise are profoundly unevenly distributed which motivates both deliberate political action and critical theoretical engagement. Understood as object, power still has different meanings. It can refer simply to the capacity to act with effect (essentially making power synonymous with agency, as that is conventionally understood). More distinctively, power can refer to the capacity to direct or purposively influence the actions of others. In this meaning, power can be identified as a property of an individual – say a monarch or corporate CEO – or collective social actor like the state. It is hard to escape understandings of power as object or capacity. The distinctions it brings with it – between the capacity to act with effect and capacity to shape the actions of others – also prove useful in organising the following discussion.

However, over the course of the chapter this discussion moves towards a position which repudiates understandings of power as an object or property. At least since Foucault, it has been increasingly normal for people meddling with social theory to understand power as itself an effect. It is this way of thinking about power which is implicit within practice theory. Indeed, to be consistent with the ontological commitments of practice theory, power must be understood as an effect of performances of practices, not as something external to them. Power only has reality in so far as it is effected, and made manifest, in moments of human action and doing. This position has pleasing ontological consistency, but seems unlikely to enable practice theory to move from the political impotence which I claim above as impetus for this chapter. If power only has meaningful existence in moments of human action and interaction, how do we account for the apparent reality of enduringly powerful social agents such as corporations or governments?

In addressing this question, I engage with existing ways of thinking power and consider how current formulations and applications of practice theory articulate with them. This provides a basis for exploring the complementarity of current expressions of practice theory with Foucauldian analytics of power relations and of governing. Bringing these together with aspects of other complementary intellectual traditions provides the basis for a concluding discussion of how power can be meaningfully engaged with and conceptualised through practice theory and for some reflection on what that means.

Is practice theory all about power?

If power is understood at the most basic level as acting with effect, then practice theory can be understood as essentially being all about power. Indeed, all of the relations comprising the social are constituted and reproduced through the actions of humans (amidst the many nonhuman entities also involved in those actions). All sorts of human action have effect in this way, whether in how the repetitive timing of eating reproduces fundamental shared social rhythms (Southerton, 2009) or in how the consequences of day traders' routinised actions (Schatzki, 2010b) cumulatively reshape financial markets. In accounting for both social change and the reproduction of social stability as the result of human action, practice theory is inherently about power, if power is seen as capacity to act with effect.

Of course, emphasising the power inherent in the actions of individual humans is only part of the story. Practice theory is perhaps best understood for its emphasis on the shaping of human action by relations and phenomena external to the person performing any such action. This is so to the extent that practice theory is sometimes cast as denying human agency or problematising the possibility of social change. While such claims reflect a profound misrepresentation on both points, they highlight the extent to which practice theory is centrally about the shaping as well as possibility of action.

With a focus on the shaping of action, we move closer to the second basic understanding associated with seeing power as object, that is, an interpretation of power as the capacity to direct or influence the actions of others. Understanding that action is always an effect of diverse relationships implies the shaping of action from elsewhere. This starting point for approaching the shaping of action remains rather one-sided, attending to the heterogeneous phenomena that share in how action is shaped, rather than how power is wielded to shape it. However, leaving aside the question of how to identify who or what wields influence, practice theory is replete with resources for understanding the shaping of (the possibilities for) human action. This is perhaps clearest in relation to the roles of rules.

An emphasis on the role of rules in the shaping of human action represents one of the most significant points of commonality between the range of scholars identified as key protagonists in the intellectual history of practice theory, reflecting shared roots in Wittgenstein's work. However, just what is encompassed by the concept of the rule varies. For Schatzki, rules are 'explicit formulations, principles, precepts and instructions that enjoin, direct or remonstrate people to perform specific actions' (Schatzki, 2010b: 79). Meanwhile for Giddens, what Schatzki refers to here as rules are *formulated* rules, 'codified interpretations of rules rather than rules themselves' (1984: 21). Rules – or more broadly the normativity of practices, however understood – are both the grounds for and limits upon the possibility of meaningful and practicable action by practitioners.

Amongst the ways in which the shaping of individual action is conceptualised, rules are easiest to grasp. Particularly in formalised or codified form, rules can look like means of exercising power in a conventional sense: after all, laws are prime examples of codified rules. Indeed, for Schatzki, rules "are formulations interjected into social life for the purpose of orienting and determining the course of activity, typically by those with the authority to enforce them" (2010b: 79). However, rules as apparent means of power are situated amidst a great range of other ways in which action is constituted and influenced. In Reckwitz's (2002b) 'ideal type' practice theory, it is the conventionalised assembly of the diverse elements and their interconnections which constitute the pattern reproduced in the

performance of a practice and in the action of individual practitioners. The routes through which power might be considered to be exercised are still more obscure in Shove, Pantzar and Watson's model of practices as composed by the relations between meanings, competences and materials, even if rules and other means of normativity run through accounts of how practitioners integrate these elements in moments of performance (2012). This model has provided the basis for attempts to reconceptualise possible targets for intervention (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012: 152–163), but it has little to say about the means through which power operates.

At first sight, other theorists' work appears more amenable to developing analyses framed in terms of power relations. Within Giddens' theory of structuration (1984), practices are the medium through which recursive relations between moments of human action and social structures constitute one another. Giddens invokes a vocabulary of power that is absent in more recent articulations of practice theory. For example, starting from his analysis of action, he identifies the role of allocative resources (capabilities) and authoritative resources ('types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors' [Giddens, 1984: 33]) leading to consideration of the structural dimensions of social systems, in signification, domination and legitimation.

While Giddens' work offered routes for articulating practices with the workings of power, Bourdieu (1984) provides the most compelling account of the systematic reproduction of unequal distributions in relation to practice, through the concepts of habitus, capital and field. The meanings of these concepts, their relations to each other and the relations of each and all of them to practice, are somewhat unfixed over Bourdieu's work. Moreover, the concepts – particularly that of habitus – cover aspects of what other theorists would consider part of practices, representing the socialised norms and tendencies of conduct guiding actions and dispositions, along with the ways in which social relations become embodied to persons in capacities, dispositions and ways of thinking. However, the concept of habitus enables an appreciation of social difference, which a focus on practices as the principal unit of analysis obscures, and it does so without resorting to individualism. While Bourdieu might be considered to hollow out the concept of practice and to omit relations which others take to be central to an understanding of practice, he draws out concepts which facilitate the conceptualisation of the production and reproduction of unequal distributions, including of those things which constitute the capacity to act. These differences and the processes through which they come about and are maintained, constitute the grounds of systematic social differences, as reified into concepts of class, for example.

So, it is clear that practice theory can indeed be understood as being all about power. Practice theory demonstrably offers an understanding of how capacities to act with effect are constituted through its account of the relational, and profoundly social, grounds for action – understood as the performance of practice. However, it has not yet been shown to account for the ways in which some practices and practitioners are able to deliberately affect the conduct of practices and practitioners elsewhere. Yet, in enabling one to grasp the different phenomena and relations which shape and influence patterns of action, practice theory should be able to account for means of executing power which involve shaping or directing the action of 'others'. Practice theory must be in a position to cast distinctive light on, say, how inequality results from uneven distributions of the capacities to act, as explored by Walker (2013). However, it is harder to grasp how power is executed in the directing of another's action, in authority over others, or in the core of what it takes to understand and tackle the effects of power in the world.

This is unsurprising. The above discussion treads a line through various articulations of practice theory guided by a heuristic understanding of power as object. This understanding is in tension with the fundamental ontological commitments of practice theory. An account of action which shows it to be both enabled and shaped by a distributed and heterogeneous range of phenomena and relations has little or no space for recognising specific instruments of power which direct action. In its basic expression in action, power is rendered a relational, socially constituted effect. Yet, observable phenomena in the social world – powerful institutions, patterns of domination, the reproduction of social elites and of hegemonic ideologies – demand some means of understanding, if practice theory is indeed an account of the social. Developing such a position depends on looking for different ways of understanding power, as effect rather than object. In attempting to grapple with power while understanding it as an effect, the next step is to turn to Foucault.

Power as effect

Turning to Foucault to help theorise power is not an unusual move, but it is somewhat ironic. He disavowed both the analysis of the phenomenon of power and elaboration of the foundations of such analysis as the goal of his work (Foucault, 1982: 777). Fully comprehended as effect rather than object, power escapes analysis. What can be analysed are power relations, which are always agonistic. Some people and institutions are systematically advantaged by their position amidst these power relations and can use those relations to pursue their own ends, which can include shifting their location amidst power relations to further enhance relative advantage. But ultimately, no one person or entity has control of those relations. To understand those relations, we need to '[trace them] down to their actual material functioning' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 186).

Questions of how institutions such as states or markets structure fields of action across space and time, far beyond the immediate reach of practitioners (including the situations that look most like the exercise of power conventionally understood), can be approached through the framing of *governmentality*. Foucault's own working through of governmentality is as an analytic representation of specific historical processes. In his 1978 lectures (Foucault, 1991), the concept is developed while accounting for the shift in governing he identifies in sixteenth-century Europe, from defining the purpose of rule to be the retention of territory to the emergence of the governing of population. Governmentality is initially an account of this specific process, of 'the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and its essential technical means apparatuses of security' (Foucault, 1991: 101). This characterises the rise and spread of government as the purpose of the state: a process of governmentalisation (Foucault, 1991: 101). However, numerous scholars have further developed Foucault's underlying ideas under a burgeoning field of governmentality studies (Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991; Dean, 2009).

This vein of work has done much to unpick the means – the rationalities, techniques and apparatuses – through which conduct is conducted (Gordon, 1991). But how is the conduct of conduct effected? That is, what is *distinctive* (rather than the same) about the practices of governing or of corporate influence? What characterises those practices which have influence over the performance of other practices?

How is the conduct of conduct practiced?

If Foucault enables us to consider 'the conduct of conduct' in ways that are consistent with practice theory's ontological commitments, there could be a route for taking practice theory's engagement with power beyond accounting for capacities to act and the distributed range of relations which converge in shaping those capacities. Can we also understand how certain practices are distinctively capable of orchestrating, disciplining and shaping practices conducted elsewhere?

'Basically power is… a question of government' (Foucault, 1982: 789). The potential of Foucault's account of how conduct is conducted here may seem limited given that his focus is not on power but on governing. Clearly, power operates in, on and through practices in many ways other than through the actions of government as formally understood. However, for Foucault, the term government is not restricted to formal institutions of state, but is used in a more general sense to mean shaping the conduct of others, to 'structure the possible field of action of others' (1982: 790). All scales of social phenomena are governed, from the self to the national and beyond. Governing can be understood as those actions and means through which the conduct of other people is more or less deliberately conducted, throughout social situations. With governing so understood, an account of how it is practiced promises to fill out an account of power using resources already identified within practice theory literature.

However, for present purposes it makes sense to focus upon the power relations that act over space and time with the involvement of identifiable formal institutions – such as those of the state – that are in a position of relative dominance. Foucault himself acknowledges the value of such institutions as an empirical focus for an analytics of power relations, recognising that they 'constitute a privileged point of observation' (1982: 791). Institutions are sometimes considered something of a stretch for practice theory thanks to the putative difficulty it has in dealing with social phenomena which can be understood as large-scale. However, the flat ontology of practice theory does not mean denying the scale of institutions or other large social phenomena. Rather, it entails recognition that such scale is produced and reproduced through practices. As Schatzki explains, 'all social phenomena… are slices or sets of features of the plenum of practices and arrangements, differing simply in the continuity, density and spatial-temporal spread and form of the practices, arrangements and relations that compose them. It follows that all social phenomena – large or small, fleeting or persistent, micro or macro – have the same basic ingredients and constitution' (2015b).

The observation that social phenomena have the same basic ingredients and constitution in whatever realm of the social or whatever apparent scale of social phenomena, means that the practices of ministerial offices, cabinet rooms and corporate board rooms mostly have the same characteristics as the practices of domestic life or leisure pursuits. They too are comprised of meanings, rules, competences, embodied knowledges, materials, spaces and more, brought together through largely routinised and mundane patterns of action. Increasingly, the lines of practice theory discussed above are being brought to bear upon institutional situations and into articulation with approaches which are well established in analyses of such settings.

Indeed, some lines of inquiry associated with practice theory, broadly defined, have been developed by authors who focus upon institutions and organisations. Much of this work is concerned with conceptualising learning and knowing as processes that are situated, ongoing and generally collective in character, even in work places that are thought to be highly

rationalised. For example, questions about how someone becomes competent as a member of a profession or work place have been addressed with reference to concepts of shared engagement, enterprise, repertoires and histories of learning (Wenger, 1998). More broadly, the notion of a community of practice, associated with Lave and Wenger (1991), has been used to represent and influence the workings of more or less identifiable organisations and institutions such as schools or hospitals.

Orlikowski (2002) follows Lave (1988) and Suchman (1987) in understanding people comprising organisations as 'purposive and reflexive, continually and routinely monitoring the ongoing flow of action' (Orlikowski, 2002: 249). Whereas practice-based studies of organisations typically concentrate on particular individuals or spatially proximal work groups, Orlikowski writes about globalised processes of product development as necessarily collective arrangements distributed across geographically separated situations and moments of practices: in short, she focuses on 'organisational knowing' rather than individuals' knowledge.

She identifies practices that are part of belonging to and sustaining the group – of sharing identity and interaction, but also of the doing of the work, in spatially and temporally distributed locales, to common purpose. Orlikowski consequently develops an account of a corporate organisation's capacity to act as that is constituted through the widely distributed, ongoing and situated practices of people comprising the organisation. In accounts like these, institutions are shown to take form as distinctive social phenomena through shared, collective, predominantly tacit ways of shaping, enabling, disciplining and aligning a multitude of largely mundane practices.

While Foucault acknowledges the value of an empirical focus on institutions, he goes on to identify certain problems with such a method. These are problems which are typically associated with practice theory-informed studies of institutions, such as those discussed above. Key here is the risk that an analysis of the practices comprising institutions will focus upon practices which are essentially reproductive of that institution. While fundamental to understanding the phenomenon of an institution, reproductive practices – such as informal social interaction, bodily engagement with technologies and so on – often lack any direct relation to the ways in which institutions act external to themselves. That the practices comprising work, even in spaces of state or corporate power, are of essentially the same emergent, relational character as practices in more obviously 'everyday' situations, is another important corrective to conventional rationalist accounts of the workings of state or economy. However, whilst an understanding of the ways in which institutions reproduce themselves is clearly pertinent to an understanding of how institutions operate, stressing the sameness of the practices involved fails to account for how power is *done*.

Foucault's means of avoiding the problem of focusing too exclusively on the reproductive functions of institutions is to approach them from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa (1982: 791). Rather than being distracted by the mass of institutional activity that is common to social life in institutions and elsewhere, his method is to follow the technologies and apparatuses of governing. These are the mechanisms – administrative, institutional and physical – which enable the exercise of power. This approach has been used to good effect. For example, Dean (2009) examines the distinctive 'technologies of performance' characterising neoliberal governance – the targets, audits and indicators through which the actions of agencies are shaped and policed. These complement parallel

‘technologies of agency’, which are the means through which responsibility is shifted from central government to increasingly fragmented and diverse agencies of governing.

However, in the context of this discussion, research that focuses on the technologies of governing is often limited in that it does not connect to an understanding of practices within institutions or show how these articulate with, constitute and operate relevant technologies and apparatuses. It therefore fails to characterise the practices which enable the conduct of conduct and the accumulation of the necessary resources to act in such ways. Governing over space, as is the case with institutions identified with the nation state or a multinational corporation, is only possible through the marshalling, coordination and harnessing of countless practices, which provide financial resources (e.g., through the multitude of practices that generate and gather taxes or profits), information (e.g., through census) or threat of force (e.g., through the armed forces and police).

This is because the embodied action at the core of all performances of practices can only be spatially and temporally immediate. As a result, the extension and amplification of action can only happen through intermediation. Such intermediation can rarely, if ever, be accomplished without depending on other practices as well as on technologies and more. Appreciating the ability of some practices to orchestrate and align others makes it possible to account for the appearance of institutional hierarchy and scale and for differential capacities to act, while retaining a flat ontology. Clearly, governing technologies must articulate with the practices of governing which rely upon them as means of influence and as means of shaping the conditions of possibility and thus the actions of others. It is this conjunction which is important and which helps specify what is distinctive about the practices of governing.

The sociology of translation provides further resources and means of developing connections between Foucauldian approaches to governmentality and practice theory-informed understandings of institutions. In recent years, a number of authors coming from different starting points but often inspired by the work of Bruno Latour, have sought to conceptualise practices and the properties of large organisations. Rose and Miller recognise the need, in investigating the problematics of government, to ‘study the humble and mundane mechanisms by which authorities seek to instantiate government’ (2010: 183) from techniques of calculation and computation and devices like surveys and means of data presentation, to aspects of professions and details of buildings. While principally dealing with Foucauldian governmentality, Rose and Miller turn to Latour’s account of power in pursuing this project. Latour (1987; 1984) sees power as an effect of the composition and alignment of heterogeneous relations, rather than seeing it as an explanation of an actor’s successful composition of that network of relations. The power of a given social actor is an effect of its location in networks of relations through which that actor can shape the actions and calculations of others. In working with the sociology of translation as a means of interrogating modes of neoliberal governing, Rose and Miller (2010) focus on *inscription devices* as means of making stable, mobile, comparable and combinable vast ranges of data involved in governing; and the ways that modes of representation so achieved work in enabling *centres of calculation* – the nodes of networks which aggregate and re-represent the flows of inscriptions so produced, as a means of acting over distance.

In writing about action over distance, Nicolini (2012: 179) also introduces Latour’s work, doing so as a means of overcoming the limits he identifies within practice theory – particularly the work of Schatzki. Whilst recognising fundamental differences between Schatzki and Latour, Nicolini nevertheless sees the potential for linking the two approaches.

Indeed, Schatzki (2015b) has himself engaged with Latour's work in the cause of better understanding the constitution of large social phenomena. While restating points of difference with Actor-Network Theory (ANT) – whereas ANT sees the social as comprised only by associations, Schatzki sees it as comprised of practices and arrangements – Schatzki recognises commonalities in the flat ontologies underlying both ANT and practice theory. Based upon such commonalities, he appropriates concepts from ANT to help illuminate how large social phenomena like governments, corporations or universities can emerge from the plenum of practices and arrangements.

The attraction of Latour's work and ANT more broadly, both for Rose and Miller (2010) coming from a governmentality tradition and in part for Schatzki (2015b) and Nicolini (2012), is ANT's capacity to account for large phenomena and action over distance without recourse to explanation at any level other than that defined by actions. Concepts like centres of calculation help move governmentality-oriented understandings of the technologies of neoliberal governance towards the practices comprising it. For Nicolini and Schatzki, such concepts offer ways of accounting for how practices have effect over time and space.

While Latour's ontology has no place for practices as viewed as the basic stuff of the social, it is not difficult to see how practice-based accounts of the activity comprising institutions mesh with accounts of particular forms of association that appear to be crucial in enabling action in one locale to shape action over distance in another (or in many) locales. Inscriptions are outcomes of particular, normalised practices – practices of inscription. Similarly, the forms of calculation that characterise centres of calculation depend upon routinised and standardised processes of data storage and manipulation, which are performed and reproduced through more or less institutionalised practices of filing, archiving, etc. As Schatzki (2015b) indicates, it is not difficult to recast sites of association and alignment (as seen within ANT) as 'bundles' of practices. In turn, and as Rose and Miller (2010) discuss, particular modes of inscription and calculation are the stuff of technologies of governing in a Foucauldian sense. Latour's work consequently promises a means of developing connections between a focus on practices of governing and an understanding of the technologies and apparatuses through which governing is enacted.

In their engagements with Latour, neither Nicolini nor Schatzki directly address power. Indeed, Schatzki quickly moves to reduce any sense that one site has determinative influence, given that 'the progression of social affairs is thoroughly contingent' (Schatzki, 2015b: 8). Accepting this, there is nevertheless the problem that some sites, some organisations and some people are clearly situated in systematically advantageous positions amidst the associations, arrangements and alignments comprising social life, such that they have distinctive capacity to act purposively in ways which shape action over distance and across locales of action. The challenge is to develop concepts and methods that can help grasp how arrangements and associations of practices and the heterogeneous flows they are bound with are produced through, and reproduce, systematic inequities in capacities to act, including to act in ways which shape others' capacities to act.

One possibility is to consider the ways in which Latourian sites, such as centres of calculation, relate to the properties of organisations and institutions of governing. Such institutions comprise the ordering and stability necessary for the complex orchestration of practice that provides both the means and purpose of governing. They do so through aligning and disciplining the performance of key practices through other practices such as objective setting, managing, disciplining and incentivising. But perhaps more distinctively, such

institutions are characterised by the extent to which capacities to accomplish governing are solidified and sedimented into relatively durable properties of the institution. Means and functions of practice are delegated to technologies and more or less codified procedures. Buildings, information infrastructures, divisions of labour and hierarchical institutional relationships between people and more are means of effectively aggregating the means of and the means to power. As Rose and Miller put it: ‘powers are stabilised in lasting networks only to the extent that the mechanisms of enrolment are materialised in various more or less persistent forms – machines, architecture, inscriptions, school curricula, books, obligations, techniques for documenting and calculating and so forth’ (2010: 183–4). Such materialised features of institutionalisation are part of the means through which practices are ordered and aligned, enabling those institutions to have effect, however constrained by the inescapable contingency of social life. These features also underpin an institution’s capacity to accumulate the means of extending the capacity to act, for example, in the form of money or information. At the same time, those features also underlie the obduracy of the practices of governing.

In sum, the conduct of conduct happens through practices which, while made of the same stuff as other practices, have distinctive characteristics not least resulting from the ways in which they are aligned over time. Concepts from both governmentality and ANT help to draw those working with practice theory towards a recognition that not all practices are ‘the same’ and that only some enable the aggregation and alignment of the resources necessary to assemble, maintain and exert some degree of control via technologies of governing. Practice theory is well equipped to describe and specify practices which have this potential and in so doing, address the missing links in understanding the processes of governing as constituted, reproduced and enacted through practices all of the way through.

Placing power in practice theory?

This chapter has not argued that practice theory provides the best or only way of understanding power. Much of power is performed through immediate interpersonal interaction, in the details of speech, bodily conduct and human interaction. Practice theory clearly can have things to say here, but power relations at this level are probably more amenable to analysis in terms of conversation analysis or through an ethno-methodological approach, with or without an underpinning in practice theory. The chapter has been more concerned with relating practice theoretical concepts to apparently powerful large scale phenomena, like corporations and governments. Practice theorists have repeatedly shown that such large phenomena are comprised through practices and the arrangements they produce and reproduce. But questions about the ability of a corporation to shape actions and accumulate resources or about the ways in which international tax laws shape trade are often better approached through other means. For better or worse, economic theory, or theories of political economy could not do the work they do if they refused to reify power relations and if power relations were always analysed through the multiple practices from which they are an effect.

Like any other approach, practice theory is not going to be able to give an all-encompassing account of power. However, the discussion above has demonstrated that it has distinctive contributions to make as part of a range of related strategies that shed light on how power exists as an effect of collective activity and its consequences. Ultimately, power relations and their consequences only exist through connections between moments of the performance of practices. Showing how this works out with reference to the reality of large phenomena like

companies, economies, states and ideologies calls for a wide range of conceptual tools. In identifying affinities between practice theory, Foucauldian governmentality and Latourian ANT, this chapter highlights what appear to be especially promising options.

But what does practice theory stand to gain in pursuing an understanding of power? To return to the imperatives noted at the start of this chapter, if practice theory can account for all aspects of the social, it should be able to account for power as a pervasive aspect of the social. Second, if practice theory is to make a difference, it must be able to provide an account of power with which it is consistent. Change is likely to entail and come through changes in power relations and purposive change will involve engaging in and with existing dominant power relations. In addition, engaging with questions of power provides a means of developing and advancing practice theory.

In summary, practice theory has within it a largely unspoken account of power. It is unspoken because within practice theory, power is ubiquitous. A practice (as entity) shapes human action (as performance). While the practice as entity is only the effect of performances, any one performance is substantially shaped by the practice as entity. Human action is therefore always influenced from elsewhere: it is the effect of relationships which are arguably always power relations (relations shaping action and the capacity to act), however diffused and distanciated. In turn, power relations are always and only the effect of the performance of practices, in concert with their arrangements. Further, power relations never result only from distinct, specifiable, moments of practice, but are effects of the ordering and the churn of innumerable moments of practices. This explains why practice theory does not tend to focus on power as a separate or distinct property of the social. As Barnes said: ‘talk of practices is talk of powers’ (2001: 28).

However, not much is gained by noticing that power is ubiquitous to practice. The more significant challenge is to understand power as integral to and an effect of distributed practices, whilst also accounting for distinct social phenomena which can be meaningfully understood as powerful. It is clearly relevant to point out that the practices taking place in a multinational’s global HQ are shaped by embodied knowledge and tacit routine, just as much as the practices of a domestic kitchen or amateur sports club. But the further ambition is to be able to account for the qualities of the corporate HQ that make it distinct from those other sites of practice and for how these arise, while recognising that practices are made of the same basic stuff. The answers lie in understanding how practices are related to each other across different sites – hence the importance of conceptualising the connections and nature of relationships between practices (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2015b). Tangling with questions about connections between practices takes on a sharper edge when the problem is that of explaining how some actors and sites come to be loci of a disproportionate capacity for shaping action elsewhere.

Existing thinking in cognate fields is of value in responding to this challenge. In most respects, an account of power that is compatible with practice theory can be fully encompassed by Foucault’s account of governing and of power relations. Concepts from his work, not least in relation to governmentality, provide a means of ordering an analysis of practices in relation to the doing of governing (and being governed) which is sensitive to what it is in the flow of practices that is pertinent in understanding particular power relations. However, Foucault’s own work and the work comprising more recent governmentality studies does not develop an account of how practices and their performance relate to and are anchored in the action of technologies and apparatuses of governing. In seeking to address

this question, I turned to concepts from Latourian ANT that have already been used in describing how practices connect and act upon one another over distance (Nicolini, 2012). The processes of alignment and aggregation that characterise classic Latourian concepts like inscriptions, mobiles and centres of calculation come close to bridging between analyses of technologies and apparatuses of governing and accounts of practice. Working through these affinities and identifying tensions and gaps between practice theory and related approaches helps specify methods of revealing and showing how certain practices act upon others.

A practice theoretically compatible approach to power relations casts new light on the processes underpinning and effecting them. As outlined above, the challenge is in essence one of explaining exactly what flows between moments of performance, of revealing the dynamics within and between those flows and of showing how they are distinctively aggregated and aligned to serve distinct purposes. In taking up this challenge, practice theory can make a distinctive contribution to understanding the existence and operation of power in the social and can do so by focusing on how practices relate to and align with each other so as to enable and perpetuate the capacity to act and to act at distance to shape conduct in other spaces and times.

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