

What Can Practice Theory Achieve? Anthropological Perspectives

Workshop

University of Cologne, 22 to 23 January 2015

Wahn Castle, Gartensaal

Burgallee 2, 51147 Cologne (Porz-Wahn)

Organizers:

Jun-Prof. Dr. Martin Zillinger (Cologne)

Prof. Dr. Christian Meyer (Essen)

Thirty years ago, Sherry Ortner predicted a bright future for practice theory in social and cultural anthropology. Has she been proven right? Since the discipline's inception, research on *practices* has been at the center of anthropological research programs. In recent years it has also become a common methodological focus in sociology and the social sciences. However, this contributes little to describing or accomplishing the *program of practice theory*, as discussions of its theoretical principles in all pertaining disciplines tend to demonstrate. Research on practices and theoretical programs outlining a non-metaphysical practice theory have been continually pursued since Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. However, these studies and programs do not concur. Practice theory proves its merit in its ability to give primacy to practice before all other theoretical paradigms. Otherwise, practice research merely serves to augment other theoretical programs.

The primacy of practice seems to be always already a given in anthropology. However—or perhaps precisely due to this fact—it has in the past only indirectly been formulated as a theoretical program: descriptions of concrete practices have served to reconstruct, translate or rehabilitate the theories, worldviews and cosmologies of the people studied. Exceptions like Marcel Mauss's application of Durkheim's sociology of religion notwithstanding, this disposition of anthropology only partially evolved via systematic implementations of a theoretical position. In most cases, it was legitimized by a focus on specific practices (particularly through the analysis of religious phenomena in terms of ritual theory and legal anthropology), as well as by articulating anthropology's own research methods (particularly participant observation). Is an anthropological practice theory possible at all, or has the task been reduced to unoriginal social-scientific theorizing these days? Anthropology and ethnography have always served as models and points of reference for practice-theoretical explanations (e.g., in the works of Bourdieu and Garfinkel), and a discipline that is known internationally as “anthropology” should be more capable than others to “find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” and to answer the question posed by Marx, how and “whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking.”

In methodological terms also, we should distinguish between methods of research on practices and the practice-theoretical substantiation of research methods and epistemic goals. In anthropological research on practices the central question remains: What are the implications of participant observation, in which research practice blends with the practice of the respective field? How (should or do) anthropological practices relate to the practices that are being researched? How can “unfamiliar practices,” non-predicative knowledge and habitualized forms of action be accommodated in theorizing? What are the theoretical consequences of “participant observation”—a fundamental concept in anthropology—with its emphasis on the intersection between the practices of research and the object of research? Which modifications apply to this intersection between familiar, everyday processes and unfamiliar, extraordinary processes? The second issue addresses the consequences of a practice-theoretical position for the anthropological process of discovery, particularly the question whether or not we can capture an object that defines itself as an “ongoing accomplishment” with methods that negate their own “ongoing accomplishment.” How can we grasp and deal with scientific representation as a practice without ultimately externalizing the object of investigation? What are the practical consequences of the representation debates of recent decades, and what has become of their practice-theoretical interventions? Is scientifically sound knowledge of the modes in which structures, actions and intentions are practically constituted limited to micro-studies? Or are they the key to generalization?

Theoretically, the question remains how practice-theoretical debates can benefit from the elements that anthropology has adopted from the social-scientific “practice turn”—e.g. a focus on places and situations in research, a sensitivity for temporal sequencing, materiality and the collective production of social action and its reflexivity. Culture, social structure and symbolic schemes, actions and actors with their intentions and identities continue to be used in the mainstream of anthropological theorizing to *explain* practices, and hence are for the most part rather sweepingly extrapolated as their *consequences* and *effects*. We have overcome the collectivist and holistic obsessions of old-school anthropology, but in this process gave way to action theories in the everyday practice of anthropology that are often more reminiscent of Weber than of Mauss and Durkheim. Research on the agency of human and non-human beings developed in Melanesian, African, South American and Siberian ethnographies appear to have heralded the last genuinely anthropological practice-theoretical debate in the humanities and social sciences. This debate also has an impact in fields such as Science and Technology Studies and newer “ontological” developments within cultural studies. At least this reception implies that under the ashes of the anthropological theoretical tradition there remains a core of practice-theoretical embers that may be reignited.

With the planned workshop, we invite participants to discuss practice theory as a central theoretical and epistemological orientation of anthropology and ethnographic social research.