

**Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson: The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes. Sage: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, 2012. 181 pages.**

O the practices, they are a-changin<sup>1</sup>

Driving a horse-drawn carriage in the 1950s in Berlin was still a common way of supplying, for instance, construction material such as cement and gravel; as means of transportation the “automobile” was still uncommon. Increasing motorisation and the invention of the hydraulic drive, applied as a hydraulic lift in civil engineering, changed the ways in which building materials were carried and supplied. From a historical perspective, one can see that the practice of driving has transformed in relation to the distinct settings it has been part of; obviously, driving a horse carriage when supplying various materials involves different competences, relies on distinct understandings and a somewhat different material infrastructure than driving an automobile. But how can we understand and conceptualise the different shapes in which the practice of driving occurs?

This is the major question the book by Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson addresses, or to put it in more general terms: How can social theory understand and conceptualise social change? Understanding change is a pervasive topic within social theory, but so far it has generated only broad narratives about concurrent processes of reproduction and transformation – how these processes develop is mostly left open. *The Dynamics of Social Practice* answers this question by investigating the emergence, stability and transformation of practices. In so

doing, it examines how activities change and, moreover, allows one to recognize the relevant elements taking part in these processes. Overall, it shows that theories of practice offer indeed an innovative approach towards understanding social change and stability.

Beginning with an introduction into theories of practice, the book develops in seven chapters a theoretical concept that is, in fact, the outline of an empirical research programme. Following this agenda, one has to subscribe to two main assumptions. First, practices consist of distinct elements that can be recognised: meanings, bodily competences and materialities. These elements are distributed and arranged in certain ways and thereby configure a practice (p. 24–5). Second, practices occur as immediate performances *and* as entities. Obviously, from a practice-theoretical perspective the social extends across different practices; “it is practices all the way down”, as William James has famously put it (paraphrased in Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011: 11). But the outlined concept goes one step further: while abstracting from the immediate performance of practices, it enables the identification of the relevant elements that configure a practice-as-entity. In this way, one may research the ‘life course’ of practices – how they emerge or terminate when elements are linked or broken, as well as their intersections and transformation over space and time.

Building on this theoretical outline, each chapter discusses a variety of

examples of what is actually involved in the transformation of practices. For instance, chapter three refers to the case of Nordic Walking and shows how it became associated with meanings of wellbeing and nature (p. 53–7). Moreover, reinforced concrete serves as an example to explore how knowledge and competences as part of practices circulate, and illuminates in a broader sense under which circumstances skills are transferable, or in contrast, bound (p. 48–53). Chapter four concentrates on how practices recruit their practitioners and thereby touches upon the pivotal idea of the book: perceiving change as promoted by practices treats people as “hosts” or “practitioners” instead of focussing on people’s behaviour and intentions (p. 65, see also 139–40). However, whereas chapter one to four serve as an introduction into the book’s theoretical framework, chapter five to seven go into greater detail exploring the implications for empirical research on practices. Therefore, the first part of the book is especially relevant to readers unfamiliar with theories of practice; the second part still holds new insights even for those already acquainted with the notion of practice. In particular, the final chapter entitled “Promoting transitions in practice” sheds light on the empirical research out of which this book actually emerged. By dealing with climate change and the question how policy guidelines may intervene in the promotion of sustainable practices, this chapter illuminates the theory’s relevance for future research and is in particular of value for policy analyses.

Overall, the book presents a novel approach to conceptualising practices. Theories of practice have so far tended to describe practices as somewhat persistent entities and have thereby emphasised the stability and continuity of practices (p. 8; cf. Reckwitz, 2003). The book does the reverse by analysing practices as constituted through elements. Moreover, it integrates

different approaches and theoretical traditions that inform an understanding and conceptualisation of practices. For instance, the differentiation between performances and entities of practices is already developed in the theoretical-abstract accounts of Schatzki (1996) as well as in Reckwitz’ outline of a theory of practice (2003), but in *The Dynamics of Social Practice* it is made available for empirical research. Moreover, by relying on insights gained in science and technology studies and actor-network-theory, the book similarly takes up and develops further debates within these disciplines – for instance the theorisation of artefacts and humans. In doing so, it offers a rethinking of these ideas by way of working with an explicit and conceptual understanding of practice.

Finally, the investigation of practices as presented here integrates a variety of research methods; for instance, it involves statistical data as well as interviews as a mode of tracing practices-as-entities. Moving beyond the methodological constraints of participant observation (and qualitative methodologies) as first-hand means of studying practices, the book extends the thus far dominant research framework within practice theory. Hence, the integration of statistical data might also be a way of attracting readers socialized into quantitative research traditions.

If there are any shortcomings of the book, it may concern the missing account on power and social change. While the authors refer to Foucault’s theory of discourse when discussing how meanings and understandings travel and possibly change (p. 53), they make little out of the fact that discourses are powerful and disciplining systems. Nevertheless, the discussion of the dynamic nature of practices invites researching why some practices override others – that is, why certain meanings, competences or infrastructures are

dominant – and conceptualising the potential of some practices to govern others.

Despite its novel and innovative approach towards understanding social change, the book presents a theoretical position that has yet to prove itself relevant in relation to empirical research. Although it is based on a variety of empirical examples, it is yet to be seen to what extent the suggested research programme will be part of and travel to different research areas, such as consumer and mobilities research and health politics, just to name a few where contemporary societies face challenges. No doubt, illuminating the different elements partaking in the configuration of a practice is not only of interest to historians of science and technology, but also for researchers aiming to compare and analyse different contemporary styles of a practice – in science and technology studies and beyond.

## References

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Schatzki, T.R. (1996) *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge University Press).

## Endnotes

1 Freely adapted from Bob Dylan

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