

# The Contamination of Practices: How Practice Theories Matter in Multiple Domains

Paolo Magaudda\*

Emanuela Mora†

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## Abstract


This introduction presents the genesis of *The Contamination of Practices: How Practice Theories Matter in Multiple Domains* Symposium. The Symposium is the outcome of a research network established to explore new ways to adopt, criticize and expand the approaches that fall under the definition of practice theory, in relation to different topics, and to answer multiple research questions. The shared foundation underlying the contributions is developed around the metaphor of “contamination”: while up to the present the efforts of scholars of major practice theory have been to sharpened to specify a common theoretical framework, we argue that practice theory is at the verge of entering a new stage of diffusion and contamination. Contamination is intended here in a double sense: on the one hand, practice theory is contaminating several fields and domains of social research; on the other hand, its conceptual framework is also being contaminated by other intellectual and theoretical traditions, as it is being innovatively adopted and adapted based on the different topics and questions it addresses. Each of the nine articles comprising the Symposium addresses this contamination in a specific way.

**Keywords:** Practice theory; contamination; sociology; Symposium; introduction.

## 1 The Contamination of Practices

This Symposium is the outcome of a research network established to explore new ways to adopt, criticize and expand the approaches that fall under the definition of *practice theory*, in relation to different topics, and to answer multiple research questions. The underlying basis of the contributions is the metaphor of “contamination”: while up to the present the effort of major practice theory scholars has sharpened and specified a common theoretical framework (Shove et. al., 2007; Shove et al., 2012; Couldry, 2012;

\* FISPPA Department, University of Padova (Italy); ✉ [paolo.magaudda@unipd.it](mailto:paolo.magaudda@unipd.it);  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0830-8299>

† University Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan (Italy);  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0906-9074>

Warde, 2017; Hui et al., 2017), we argue that practice theory will soon enter a new stage of diffusion and contamination.

Contamination is intended here in a double sense: on the one hand, practice theory is contaminating several fields and domains of social research; on the other hand, its conceptual framework is, at the same time, contaminated by other intellectual and theoretical traditions, as it is being innovatively adopted and adapted on the basis of different topics and questions addressed from time to time. Moreover, it is the very genesis of the set of theories labelled “theories of practice”, which suggests contamination as a strategy to develop a more comprehensive interpretative capacity. The theoretical roots of the theory of practice, indeed, bring back Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian’s emphasis on praxis over mental space, as reinterpreted by Theodore Schatzki (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki et al., 2001). At the same time, in the social sciences, efforts from scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1984) emphasise the need to find a new balance between structural constraints and individual agency to understand social behaviours. To achieve this aim, Bourdieu elaborated on the concept of “habitus” and popularized the notion of “practice”; Giddens emphasised the recursive interaction between structure and agency, employing his *structuration theory*.

At the beginning of the Noughties, this stream of philosophical and social theory was re-articulated by cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2002), through an operative definition of “practice” more suited for empirical research. In his view, the notion of “practice” is not the opposite of abstract and theoretical activities; it is instead a distinctive “configuration” consisting “of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the forms of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). On the basis of this definition, a more specific application of practice theory has been shaped by a group of scholars led by sociologist Elizabeth Shove (Shove et al., 2007 & 2012). Shove and colleagues define social practices as the dynamic outcomes of the interactions and linkages between three distinctive dimensions: *materials*, which include things, technologies and tangible physical entities; *competences*, which encompass skills and know-how implied in practice; and *meanings*, which include symbolic meanings and ideas (see Shove et al., 2012, p. 14). Thus, studying social reality from a practice theory perspective means first and foremost focussing on the way materials, competences and meanings emerge as stable and socially shared configurations, as has been done in recent years by analysing a variety of notable cases: from consumption (Warde, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007) and environmental issues (Gram-Hanssen, 2010; Spaargaren, 2011) to photography (Hand, 2012) and music (Magaudda, 2011).

In the last decade, Shove and colleagues have consolidated a body of research supported by the central axis of the theory of practices. Their most recent collective works indicate a refinement of the theoretical perspective, suggesting an expansion of the range of studied phenomena and of the theoretical traditions compatible with the central axis. For instance, the volume *The Nexus of Practices* (Hui et al., 2017) addresses some criticisms raised against this approach, such as viewing practice theory as missing an analysis of vast and expansive phenomena or as undermining individuals. More recently, the collection *Infrastructures in Practice* (Shove & Trentmann, 2019) explored the crucial nexus between practices and the different kinds of networks that deliver services like heating and electricity to people, outlining the fundamental mutual dependence between infrastructure as materially organised systems and the organisation of everyday patterns and routines of consumption.

## 2 Patterns and Directions in Practice Theory

Alongside this mainstream trend, other parallel paths have continued to develop the approach of practice theory in different directions in a more or less coherent way. Among these paths, Gert Spaargaren and colleagues have contributed to practice theory by accounting for long-term and broad processes of change in societies. With their contribution, they try to overcome the “supposed incommensurability of transition theory and practice theories” (Spaargaren et al., 2016, p. 14). Transition studies are an interdisciplinary field of recent institutionalization focussed on the analysis of social transformations that can encourage change towards greater environmental and social sustainability of production and consumption models (Marquard et al., 2012). Positioned within innovation studies, transition studies

are focussed on understanding how contemporary socio-technical systems must face the environmental, economic, and social challenges originating from the dominant development models. Spargaaren and his co-authors propose an integration of transition theory and practice theory. They empirically analyse the changes that affect the local contexts of production and consumption of energy, food and fuels, among other resources, over time (Spaargaren et al., 2013; Spaargaren et al., 2012; Spaargaren & Mol, 2013; Naus et al., 2014). In this way, they aim to gain an understanding of the systemic process of transition towards new sustainable organisational models, as a result of the actors' agency, embedded as practitioners in the practices of daily life (Spargaaren et al., 2016). By proposing the integration of these two theoretical bodies, the scholars explicitly discuss some crucial issues for the ongoing goal of practice theory to account for phenomena the latter has been criticized as neglecting, such as large-scale phenomena, power effects, and the multifaceted emotional and experiential dimensions of practices. A crucial meeting ground for both theoretical approaches is the attention paid to understanding social change as the product of transformations taking place over time and affecting the practices and phenomena under study.

At least apparently, the ontological assumptions underlying the two sets of theories seem hardly compatible: a flat ontology for practice theory and a multi-level perspective for transition theory. According to flat ontology, the 'social' consists of a plenum of connected and/or overlapping practices that leaves no room for entities of a different nature (Schatzki, 2016; Schatzki, 2002). Transition theory, on the other hand, believes that the "social" is made up of three different kinds of social change dynamics (macro, meso, micro) that imply different forms of agency from diverse types of subjects. However, in their effort to show the coherence between the two theoretical-analytical frameworks, Spaargaren and colleagues find promising common ground between the two approaches to this issue. Referring explicitly to the seminal essay by Randall Collins (1981) *On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology*, they argue that the difference between micro and macro practice is a matter of scale, a case of extensiveness across time and space (Lamers et al., 2016, p. 234).

Another area in which practice theory has been explored is media studies, where this perspective has been adopted especially to disentangle the increasingly complex relationship between media consumption and digital technologies. Nick Couldry, who made a crucial contribution by intersecting media research and a distinctive form of practice-based perspective, has led this stream of research (Couldry, 2004 & 2012). Departing directly from Wittgenstein, Couldry outlined an approach to media that "frames its questions by reference, not to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses of perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act" (Couldry 2012, p. 35). On the basis of this work, other scholars embraced the study of media practices in different directions and in relation to a wide array of media sectors, including newspapers, gaming and ICT (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010), political media activism (Mattoni & Treré, 2014), forms of media resistance (Woodstook, 2014), and the revival of retro and vintage media (Magaudda & Minniti, 2019).

While these approaches are a more or less direct derivation of the work of Schatzky and Reckwitz, we can also address the existence of other traditions distinctively characterised by the notion of practice that, in some ways, are parallel to the practice theory approach developed by Shove and colleagues. Without any presumption of completeness, we can identify at least three major streams of research in which the notion of practice has played an important role and whose evolution has been in some way independent from the main genealogy previously addressed.

A first notable tradition is science and technology studies (STS), in which the notion of practice has been, without question, a core departure of the whole field since the early 1980s, especially at the beginning of "laboratory studies" (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981). In the evolution of the STS field, the role of technoscience has in particular been addressed by looking at the crucial role of social and material practices, up to the point that, as John Law (2017, p. 31) argued, the primary standpoint for understanding the field is that "STS attends to practices". However, quite paradoxically, while there has been wide convergence on the study of situated practices connected to science and technology, the notion of practice has only sporadically been put explicitly at the centre of the theoretical frames adopted. There is generally the case, with few exceptions, including the work of Andrew Pickering (1992 & 1995) or Annamarie Mol, who departed from a philosophical standpoint for which "ontology is not given in the order of things, but that, instead, *ontologies* are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither

away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices” (Mol, 2002, p. 6).

Another relevant field in which practice-based studies have been adopted as a crucial topic is organisation and work. As outlined by Corradi et al. (2010) and then further elaborated by Nicolini (2012), in this sector, the notion of practice has been extensively used both directly and indirectly. Among the more focussed traditions, it is possible to distinguish between several streams, which include the study of learning phenomena as situated practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gherardi, 2000; Bruni et al., 2004), the study of technology as practice (Orlikowski, 1992 & 2007; Suchman et al., 1999), and the study of strategy as practice (Whittington, 1996).

Finally, another stream is represented by the Bourdieusian use of the notion of practice. Bourdieu’s theory about practice (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) has made a crucial contribution to opening up the debate on practice. As noted by Warde (2004), however, in Bourdieu’s work the notion of being proactive has remained quite underdeveloped compared with those of habitus and field. Nonetheless, the emergence of a practice theory favoured a revival of the use of the notion of practice among more orthodox Bourdieusian scholars.

“Practice” is used to define systems of activity, such as martial arts (Gaudin, 2009) or “*musique d’harmonie*” (Dubois et al., 2010), which exist as a product of practitioners’ doings and sayings. It is also used to recognize the role of the doings of different types of actors (institutional, public, private, individual and collective) operating within socio-technical systems built around complex material infrastructures, such as urban water systems (Lorrain & Poupeau, 2014). Familiarity, most of the time implicit, with the central strand of the theory of practice is evident. Above all, the overlaps concern the importance attributed to the bodily components of the agents’ actions as well as to the routine character of the forms of action, predictable and reproducible, that make the practices exist (de Fornel & Ogien, 2011). However, what distinguishes Bourdieusian studies is the still close connection with the French scholar’s theory of habitus and field. As illustrated in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977), the practice exists as a predictable system of actions, resulting from the agents’ habitus more than from their deliberations. The agency that informs the practice is inscribed in the field’s material conditions in which the latter takes place.

Compared to the most recent strand of the theory of practice, those who move within the Bourdieusian approach are more sensitive to recording the role played by socio-structural variables, such as the social class to which the agents belong, the geographical and social contexts of life, and the objectified structure of social relations between social actors. From an analytical point of view, the advantage of this approach is that the reduced space for individual deliberation (*ibidem*) is the product of the pragmatic impact of material and bodily components and of the objectified social relationships between agents, with the acknowledgment of the consequent effects of stratification in terms of both status and power.

### 3 The Articles Composing the Symposium

The multiple contaminations that this Symposium traces are placed on this composite background. Each Symposium’s essay offers a specific perspective on practice theories by focusing on a distinctive conceptual dimension and by articulating these conceptual advances in relation to specific empirical fields. More specifically, the Symposium starts with two articles that open innovative patterns of contamination of practice theory and deal with two topics that have been rarely addressed through practice theories: the world of fashion and youth subcultures.

The opening article by Paolo Volonté (2019) adopts a practice-based approach to study fashion modelling. More specifically, the author considers two particular cases related to fashion modelling — the embodiment of the thin ideal by models and their peculiar style of walking on the runway — empirically relying on existing research from fashion studies. In relation to the thin ideal’s embodiment, Volonté highlights that models’ thinness is somewhat related to the elements of the practices inherent in the fashion system. In relation to models’ walking, his articulation of practice theory outlines that this activity directly concerns how fashion’s constraints are embodied in a bodily practice. By presenting these two cases related to fashion, Volonté shows that the fashion world can be fruitfully understood under the lens of practice by looking at issues related to professional skills, the materiality of catwalking, and the shared meanings attributed to individual performances in the fashion world.

The second article of the Symposium, by Simone Tosoni (2019), explores another quite unusual topic for practice theories, namely youth subcultures. While subcultural studies regularly focus on cultural practices, in this field most scholars adopt the notion of “practices” without any solid work on conceptualization, thus assuming practices as a taken-for-granted notion. An example of this is the use of the notion of “signifying practice” adopted in the seminal work on subcultures by Dick Hebdige (1979). Hence, Tosoni considers the case of a distinctive subculture in Milan in the 1980s, the goth (also defined as “dark”) subculture, adopting in his analysis a practice-based approach mixed with the notion of *enactment* elaborated by STS scholar John Law. Departing from this theoretical milieu, the author addresses the logics of variation within the dark subculture based on different recurring sets of practices and outlines three distinctive ways in which the goth subculture is enacted: the “activist” enactment, the “music club” enactment and the “loner” enactment. In this way, Tosoni also contributes to the debate on subcultures, presenting an innovative methodological strategy to address the plurality of identities that can be included in the same subculture.

The subsequent three articles open up the contamination of practice theories not only in thematic terms but also through a distinctive focus on novel theoretical connections that practice theories could establish with other theoretical approaches. The article by Magaudda and Piccioni (2019) further develops a theoretical contamination already addressed in Shove et al. (2019), that involving *infrastructure studies*, adding novel insights on the intersection between practices and infrastructure in relation to both the topic addressed and the literature considered. Indeed, the authors consider the use of digital media technologies and, more specifically, practices related to smartphones. Theoretically, Magaudda and Piccioni further explore the connection between practice theory and the way infrastructure studies have been adopted in a distinctive way by media scholars (e.g., Parks & Starosielski, 2015); on an empirical ground, the authors present a qualitative research on young smartphone users, introducing the notion of *infrastructural disclosure* as a methodological strategy to make visible the infrastructural implications characterising smartphone practices. More specifically, Magaudda and Piccioni address five main infrastructural dimensions of smartphone use, namely electricity, radio signal, data, operative systems and platforms, hence outlining how a focus on these infrastructural issues could foster our understanding of people’s relationship with these digital devices.

The article by Mora, Noia and Turrini (2019) discloses a previously unexplored theoretical path of the interconnection of practice theories, linking them to the *circuit of culture* elaborated in the field of cultural studies in the late 1990s by Du Guy and colleagues (1997). Assuming that practice theory and the circuit of culture are pertinent to different theoretical traditions, the paper presents an early attempt to compare these two frameworks and outline the ways in which they are compatible as well as the distinctive benefits each could bring to help gain an understanding of specific phenomena related to material culture. To complete this comparison and integration, the authors adopt the strategy of applying both frameworks to two case studies: the first is related to the development of a new technological artefact, a haptic interface, and the second concerns a specific kind of agricultural cultivation. The resulting comparison gives Mora, Noia and Turrini the opportunity to highlight the advantages of the two approaches and to discuss the point up to which these two frameworks can be integrated.

The article by Mattozzi (2019) engages in an epistemological and methodological reflection to probe the view of practices as cycles of disposition and unfoldings that the author considers synonymous with virtualities and actualizations, and to show how such a view allows not only the consideration of artefacts but also accounting for their contribution to the unfolding of practices.

A specific practice explored as the empirical ground for exemplification is related to squeezing oranges in a sink using Juicy Salif, the squeezer designed by Philip Stark and criticized for its malfunction. On the one hand, the article investigates the role of dispositions–virtualities in past and present approaches to practices. On the other, it recovers the disused Actor-Network Theory’s notion of “script” as a way to describe–analyse artefacts’ dispositions or virtualities and thus account for their contribution to practices. Finally, Mattozzi outlines the advantages provided by studying practices under the lens of a “distributed structuralism”, as done with the Actor-Network Theory.

The successive four articles develop other patterns of contamination of practice theories in the direction of other fields, objects and issues. An article by Stefano Crabu (2019) focuses on professional practices in the field of medicine. The aim of the paper is to enlarge the focus of practice-based studies



in the direction of learning processes, drawing on broad ethnographic research carried out within two major Italian organisations operating in cancer care and research. In doing this, the author advances a distinctive contamination between practice theory, organisational studies, and the study of biomedical and health sciences. More specifically, Crabu's work considers an often-neglected issue, namely how practitioners negotiate their role to be able to act as competent agents within a complex context. In sum, the article contributes to the broader topic of the Symposium by showing how a practice-based approach to learning may offer new strategies for understanding biomedicine and for addressing how expert knowledge is produced and shared among diverse professional settings.

Moving to a completely different subject, Lorenzo Domaneschi's article (2019) deals with a common topic among practice theory practitioners, namely practices related to the preparation of food. More specifically, the paper outlines the evolution of a so-called "practice turn" in contemporary food studies by means of a comprehensive critical review of research on food culture that has taken on a practice-based approach. In doing so, Domaneschi highlights the relevance of the integration of a more robust practice-based perspective to the social sciences of food. To clarify his point more effectively, the author presents an analysis of professional cooking practices, outlining the role of improvisation in the structure of cooking practices. Thus, he adopts a practice theory perspective to unfold the performative nature of practices commonly considered ordinary and repetitive.

Mario de Benedittis's article (2019) is focused on the same subject and explores the sector of wine tasting using the theoretical framework of theories of practice to examine expert wine tasting practices. Relying on empirical research concerning the production, distribution and commercialization of wine in Italy, de Benedittis addresses the constructing of expert tasting practices, connecting them with the Bourdeusian notion of *field*, thus considering how tasting practices are in some way related to potential field effects (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Hence, among the author's contributions is the consideration that it is important to consider practitioners' habitus and, more generally, the social trajectories characterising their relationship to the practice of wine tasting.

Last but not least, the article by Paolo Giardullo (2019) considers a crucial dimension for contemporary social change, represented by the relationship between practices and the environmental crisis. The author takes advantage of the path already opened by the focus on practices previously advanced in environmental sociology and sustainable consumption. By adopting a layered methodology that includes content analysis of media releases and field-notes from a self-ethnography, Giardullo focuses on a reverse vending machine, which is a machine aimed at managing a reward system for recycling plastic bottles. He thus looks to the reconfigurative power of this system to transform practices related to domestic waste management. With his analyses, the author outlines how a technical system can actively promote a change in ordinary practices connected with the practice of recycling.

In short, this Symposium argues that there is the potential for further expansion and contamination of practice theory, both in terms of the topics addressed and connections with different theoretical approaches. Taken together, we hope that the many contaminations based on practice theory will open up new avenues to think creatively in relation to different realms of social life.

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**Paolo Magaudda:** FISPPA Department, University of Padova (Italy)

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0830-8299>

✉ [paolo.magaudda@unipd.it](mailto:paolo.magaudda@unipd.it); 🌐 <http://www.paomag.net>

Paolo Magaudda is Assistant Professor in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the FISPPA Department, University of Padova (Italy), where he is member of the PaSTIS Research Unit (Padova Science Technology & Innovation Studies). The main focus of his work is on the relationship between culture, technology and society, with a specific attention to digital media, consumer culture and music. His most recent books are *A History of Digital Media. An Intermedia and Global Perspective* (with G. Balbi, Routledge, 2018) and *Vite Interconnesse. Pratiche Digitali attraverso Smartphone, App e Piattaforme* (in Italian, with M. Driusian and M. Scarcelli, Meltemi, 2019). He is co-editor-in-chief of the journals *Tecnoscienza. Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies* (STS Italia) and *Studi Culturali* (Il Mulino).

**Emanuela Mora:** University Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan (Italy)

📄 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0906-9074>

Emanuela Mora is Professor of Culture and Communication Sociology at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. She is director of ModaCult (Centre for the study of fashion and cultural production), and director of the PhD School in Sociology at the same University. She is Co-editor in chief of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. Since 2004 she has worked on the theme of sustainable fashion and consumption, both in Italy and abroad. Among her books: *Fare Moda. Esperienze di Produzione e Consumo* (Bruno Mondadori, 2009); *Fashion Tales. Feeding the Imaginary* (with M. Pedroni as eds., Springer, 2017).