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Accounting for practice in an age of theory: Charles Taylor's theory of social imaginaries

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Introduction

The 'practice turn' is a label Schatzki (2001a) uses to describe a shift across several social scientific disciplines to viewing practices as 'the primary generic social thing' (2001a, p. 10). Theorists whose research can be characterised in this way include Marx, Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. According to Schatzki, 'practice approaches promulgate a distinct social ontology: the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organised around shared practical understandings.' He adds that,

> This conception contrasts with accounts that privilege individuals, (inter)actions, language, signifying systems, the life world, institutions/roles, structures, or systems in defining the social. These phenomena, say practice theorists, can only be analyzed via the field of practices. Actions, for instance, are embedded in practices, just as individuals are constituted within them. Language, moreover, is a type of activity (discursive) and hence a practice phenomenon, whereas institutions and structures are effects of them. Needless to say, practice theorists have different understandings of these matters. (2001a, p. 12)

One of the differences is in the way practice theorists understand the role of theory in the social world. Since Marx, pure theory has been regarded with suspicion by researchers aligned with the practice approach. 'Idealism' is a common term for the view that ideas have an autonomous and constitutive role in shaping practice. From at least Plato (c. 5th Century BC), theory has been considered the primary reference point for understanding human life and society. On this view, ideas are independent of practice, while the practical realm generally represents the degradation and confusion of ideas. Modern social theory, including practice theory, challenges this ontology. As Schatzki points out, 'practices at once underlie subjects and objects, highlight non-propositional knowledge, and illuminate the conditions of intelligibility' (2001a, p. 10). In other words, practices enable theory but are not constituted by it. Practices contain their own conditions of intelligibility (they cannot be explained with reference to external ideas) and they generate ideas and are the ultimate reference point of them. An example of this anti-idealism is provided by Marx (1977) who argues that the practices of the capitalist classes produce ideas and these ideas underpin theoretical claims on behalf of *all* practices and classes. He uses the term 'ideology' to refer to theoretical productions of practice and 'idealism' to highlight the over-blown claims of theory to account for the social world. For the critical project of Marx, therefore, practice is the primary focus

for understanding society and idealism is fundamentally erroneous although it serves the interests of some groups. Practice theory can be interpreted as a contemporary form of social analysis that underwrites the anti-idealist cause.

Drawing on the work of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, Taylor's theory of practice takes a different line on the theory-practice relationship. As a practice theorist, Taylor subscribes to the anti-idealism characteristic of the approach. That is, he rejects the notion that theory is the autonomous locus of intelligibility vis-à-vis practices in history and society. However, Taylor's research uncovers a problematic that challenges this standard form of anti-idealism. Standard anti-idealism—originating in Marx's writings and present in nuanced form in Foucault's and Bourdieu's practice theories—has it that theories make pretensions to account for practice but that such claims are always illusory at base. In this form of anti-idealism, other mechanisms account for the intelligibility of practices. For Marx the material conditions of production furnish the rationale, while for Foucault it is disciplinary or governmental techniques that articulate knowledge and power. On these explanations, ideas as such have no prior or special claim to explain the world. But for Taylor, while it is true that ideas do not possess the autonomy and priority granted by idealism, the modern world—the empirical focus of much of his research—is marked by prevalence of, and deference to theory. He declares that 'Ours is an inescapably theoretical civilization' (1985b, p. 106). Taylor describes the efficacy of theory on the social world, including the potency of flawed social theory (Taylor 1985b) and the impact of ideas on modernity itself (Taylor 2002a). For Taylor, then, a challenge for practice theory is how to account for social practices in a theory-laden age wherein the efficacy of theory can be demonstrated. How, in other words, can the anti-idealism of practice theory be maintained in the face of the prevalence and apparent power of theory in our world?

In this chapter we examine Taylor's theory of practice and his strategies for avoiding idealism in the context of a theoretical civilization. We begin with an overview of Taylor's claim that we live in a 'theoretical civilization' (1985b, p. 106) and introduce his examples of the influence and efficacy of theory that demonstrate the pervasiveness of theory in contemporary practices. Taylor's strategies for avoiding idealism are examined next. Here, the case for the efficacy of flawed theory investigated in his 1985 work is considered as well as the large-scale phenomenon of the influence of theory analysed in his post-2000 studies. The final section returns to the concept of social practices and reviews Taylor's account of practice in the broader context of theory and the transformation of modern social imaginaries.

The pervasiveness and efficacy of theory

Charles Taylor (b. 1931) has written on a range of seemingly disparate topics including multiculturalism, human rights, modern identity and political philosophy. Throughout much of this work there is a unifying concern with philosophical anthropology—the features that he views are essential to human agency in the modern age—and the historical development of ideas and social phenomena. As such, a theory of practice is not Taylor's main focus with little of his writings directly concerned with practice per se. This would appear to make Taylor a curious choice for this topic. But there is a sense in which Taylor is clearly a practice theorist, earning him the attention of Schatzki (2001a, 2001b).

Taylor's theory of practice differs from mainstream practice theory in its insistence on the need to account for the influence of theory at an empirical level. For Taylor, the

contemporary social context of practices is marked by the pervasiveness of theory. He explains that,

> Ours is a very theoretical civilization. We see this both in the fact that certain understandings formulated in modern theories have become incorporated in the common understandings by which political society operates in the West, and also in that, however simplified and vulgarized these theories may become in attaining general currency, an important part of their prestige and credibility reposes on their being believed to be correct theories, truly validated as knowledge, as this is understood in a scientific age. (1985b, p. 105)

This is to say that, contrary to the standard, dismissive view of theory associated with practice theory, any analysis of social practices must acknowledge the influence of theory. Taylor asserts that theories have become 'incorporated' into the way Westerners understand their political society. He stresses that these theories must be translated—'simplified and vulgarized'—to become effective in practice, but more importantly that they owe their effectiveness to their being accepted as valid knowledge, according to the norms of our scientific age.

Taylor (1985b) illustrates the influence of theory on practice with reference to the theory of behaviourism. Early on in his career, Taylor (1965) published a critique of behaviourism in which he exposed the fallacies upon which the behaviourist account of human action is built. This theory of behaviour is familiar to researchers in the social sciences as the now-discredited explanation of learning that methodologically avoids consideration of consciousness, intentions, meaning and purposiveness. Behaviourism arrives at its conclusions by reducing the rich phenomena of human being and society to simpler constituents from which it seeks to build up theory. Taylor's voice joined the chorus of powerful criticism of behaviourism. In his mind at least, the limitations and distortions of behaviourism were clear for all to see and its influence on theory and practice could only wane.

Two decades later, in the opening discussion of Volume 2 of his *Philosophical Papers*, Taylor (1985b) reveals his perplexity in the face of the persistence of the theory of behaviourism and related reductive theories that he loosely terms 'naturalism', and their continued influence on social theory and practices. Naturalistic theories, Taylor argues, are united by 'a certain metaphysical motivation' (1985b, p. 2) and aspire to replicate the methods and epistemologies of the natural science. In particular, this 'family' of theories is characterised by the assumption that humans 'can be seen as a part of nature … [which] is to be understood according to the canons which emerged in the seventeenth-century revolution in natural science' (1985b, p. 2). Subsequently, analysis of the social world 'must avoid anthropocentric properties … and give an account of things in absolute terms' (1985b, p. 2). For Taylor, these approaches are unsatisfactory for a number of reasons including that they are reductive in their attempt to 'know' social life in terms of a neutral, scientific language. Scientific approaches to understanding human life, Taylor insists, cannot capture the self-interpretations and background of distinctions of worth that are essential to full human agency.[i] Taylor's concept of 'background' is influenced by the work of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty (Taylor 2006). These thinkers were critical of naturalistic accounts of human being that assume an objective standpoint can be adopted for the study of human being. We will elaborate on the significance of the 'background' later, but for the moment it is sufficient to emphasise Taylor's argument that the epistemologies of the natural

sciences are not suitable for the social sciences. Further, Taylor argues that these accounts of human being have been shown to rest on implausible and inadequate epistemologies that are themselves non-scientific and are inconsistent with their own epistemological commitments (1985b). Despite this criticism (which is not unique to Taylor, but has a long history in philosophy, the sociology of knowledge and related disciplines), the natural science model remains dominant.

In later studies, Taylor (2002a, 2004, 2007) introduces another example of the pervasiveness and influence of theory that emerges in the context of his extended analyses of 'modernity'. According to Taylor (2002a, p. 91), modernity is the 'number one problem of modern social science'. By modernity, Taylor means,

> that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution). (2002a, p. 91)

For Taylor, the key to comprehending this 'unprecedented amalgam' is that a new conception of the 'moral order' of society is at play. He says the concept of a moral order of society first took shape in the minds of theorists such as Hugo Grotius and John Locke. In Grotius it is the idea that human beings are 'rational, sociable agents who are meant to collaborate in peace to their mutual benefit' (Taylor 2002a, p. 92). Grotius' theory was originally constructed to describe and explain the nature of political society in a time of upheaval. But as Taylor explains, theories of this kind promulgate a normative account of how we should behave toward each other. In other words, social theories such as those of Grotius and Locke have both descriptive and prescriptive dimensions. They seek to account for the social world and also convey a sense of how we ought to behave toward each other. For Taylor, theories with this dual character have the potential to expand beyond their initial setting in the thought, conversation and machinations of elite groups and permeate society more broadly. In the case of the theory of the moral order elaborated by Grotius and Locke, Taylor says it entered on a trajectory that saw it undergo a double expansion, so that more and more people lived according to it, and secondly it intensified, making more differentiated and stronger demands on society.

With this explanation of the character of modernity and its origins, Taylor (2002a) magnifies the problem of the social efficacy of theory well beyond its purview in the 1985 papers. In his earlier work, the problem was confined to the inroads of naturalistic assumptions into social theory and practice. It was a problem there because the theories in question were inherently flawed as accounts of social practices but meet with broad acceptance. In Taylor's later analysis of modernity, however, the problem of the efficacy of theory assumes larger proportions and greater moral ambiguity. The concern is that the modern moral order, which functions ontologically at level of the background of distinctions of worth and associated images posited in the 1985 papers, is itself largely determined by theory. And it is theory that can be attributed to authorship of individual actors and enjoys pure development and internal coherence in the context of discursive practices. The problem of the efficacy of theory identified in Taylor's 1985 writings is thus transposed to a new and wider arena of application in his later work wherein 'high' theory created by famous scholars transforms the very background of society. This account of modernity leaves Taylor with a substantial

challenge. The efficacy of theory implied by his account of modernity clearly smacks of idealism.

Banishing the spectre of idealism

Taylor (2004) is well aware that any attempt to explain practices in terms of the influence or efficacy of theory invites the charge of idealism. Practice theory is hostile to social theory that prioritises theory and theorists or positions practices as shaped or formed by theory. For instance, Bourdieu (1990, p. 380) criticises what he calls 'the scholastic point of view' that is adopted by intellectuals who believe they operate outside and free of the imperatives of practice and create context-free and therefore 'true' statements about the social world. Foucault's researches present another example. His *archeological* approach, for instance, rejects any attempt to position a theory or theorist as the originator of discourses that are the source of the intelligibility of practices (Gutting 1989). But Taylor's researches reveal a society that is permeated by and even celebrates theory and the theorists who create it, and he analyses cases that demonstrate the efficacy of theory on practices. Taylor therefore faces a special challenge as a practice theorist: how to maintain an anti-idealist stance while giving ideas a substantial role in shaping society. Taylor devotes considerable effort to reconciling the claims of traditional, mainstream practice theory with his observations of contemporary social practices that demonstrate the infiltration of theory. In this section of the chapter, we spell out Taylor's strategies for avoiding the charge of idealism. We begin with the strategy he offers to account for the efficacy of the flawed naturalistic social theory and then move to his strategy for dealing with the larger problem posed by his analysis of modernity.

The first of Taylor's anti-idealist strategies for accounting for the efficacy of theory is elaborated to explain the influence of flawed social theory. As described above, Taylor's (1985b) hermeneutic picture of the human rules out the application of natural scientific theory to human being. But lack of theoretical coherence does not interfere with the spread and acceptance of naturalistic theory. The question then is: How, given the withering critiques of his and others of these theories, could theory and practice continue to be so influenced? Naturalism, in Taylor's estimation, must owe its continued appeal to something other than theoretical cogency. 'If the scientific and epistemological arguments are so poor', asks Taylor (1985b, p. 6), 'what gives them their strength?' In general terms, Taylor argues that naturalism maintains its dominance due to 'very strong preconceptions' (1985b, p. 5) that result in its 'moral motivation' overriding its own epistemological basis (1995b, p. 7). Taylor's critique goes beyond acknowledging the limitations of the language of naturalistic paradigms to argue that such approaches have significant implications for how we understand human agency. He continues:

> I believe that they derive their force from the *underlying image of the self*, and that this exercises its hold on us because of the *ideal of disengagement and the images of freedom, dignity and power which attach to it.* More specifically, the claim is that the more we are led to interpret ourselves in the light of the disengaged picture, to define our identity by this, *the more the connected epistemology of naturalism will seem right and proper to us*. Or otherwise put, a commitment to this identity generates powerful resistances against any challenges to the naturalist outlook. In short, its epistemological weaknesses are more than made up for by its moral appeal. (1985b, pp. 5–6; emphasis added)

To explain these implications Taylor turns to the 'image' of human agency held by 'modern' humans that has 'great moral appeal' (1985b, p. 6), explaining that

> behind and supporting the impetus to naturalism … viz. the understandable prestige of the natural science model, stands an attachment to a *certain picture of the agent*. This picture is deeply attractive to moderns, both *flattering and inspiring*. It shows us as capable of achieving a kind of disengagement from our world by objectifying it. (1985b, p. 4; emphasis added)

The key to the appeal of this image is the 'ideal of disengagement' he says is definitive of modern culture. It is to the power of this image of ourselves that Taylor attributes the resilience of naturalistic theories. He explains that 'behind and supporting' naturalistic accounts of humans such as behaviourism is the picture and ideal of the disengaged human. He says 'this image of agency ... *offers crucial support* to the naturalist world-view' (1985, p. 5; emphasis added).

Taylor associates these images with the 'background' introduced earlier in this chapter. Naturalistic accounts of human being are appealing to the extent that they reinforce the image of ourselves as a disengaged agent. For a theory to be effective in this sense—to have a powerful influence over practice—it needs to reinforce, resonate, and cohere with 'a background of distinctions of worth' (1985b, p. 4). Taylor's argument here is that as self-interpreting beings, humans draw on an underlying system of values. He explains that,

> our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called 'strong evaluation'. I mean by that a background of distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth ... (1985a, p. 3)

These backgrounds partly constitute self-understandings—the ways in which humans interpret their social worlds and understand their place in it—that are an 'essential or primary property of [human] existence' (Abbey 2000, p. 154). But despite being so central, these self-understandings can be regarded as wrong, incoherent or misleading, and can demonstrate the influence of a flawed theory, such as the image of the disengaged agent that emanates from naturalism.

From Taylor's explanation of the efficacy of naturalistic social theory we are able to discern his anti-idealistic argument. Theories can appear to present adequate explanations of social practices, and furthermore, through this appearance of adequacy may actually shape social practices. However, the presuppositions of theories may conflict with the ontology of social practices. In the case of naturalistic social theory, humans and their practices are assumed to conform to a stable underlying structure, much like natural objects in their diversity exhibit the stable characteristics of the substances that compose them. However, ontologically humans are self-interpreting which means that there is no stable matrix of expressions of human being and social practices. Naturalistic social theory therefore makes invalid assumptions about the nature of human being. This theory is incoherent as theory. Its efficacy is not attributable to its own validity, and therefore must refer to something else: the prevailing image of the disengaged agents, which Taylor associates with another structure, the background of distinctions of worth.

Taylor's second anti-idealist strategy for explaining the efficacy of theory emerges in the context of his analyses of modernity. In these researches, Taylor (2002a, 2004, 2007) argues that modernity is decisively influenced by theory while acknowledging that his argument seems haunted by the *spectre of idealism*. His answer to this concern involves two conceptual innovations. On the one hand he reconceptualises the background of distinctions of worth (with its associated images) in terms of *social imaginaries*. The problem of the efficacy of theory in the context of Taylor's analysis of modernity becomes the problem of how theory affects the social imaginary. The second innovation is a new account of the efficacy of theory itself. In this revised account, theory is always associated or 'packaged' with practices, but theories and practices are able to separate and recombine in the context of social-historical processes.

The way Taylor uses the term 'imaginary' is influenced by debates in social theory that assume a non-individualistic reading of the concept of imagination. This approach is part of a wider move in social theory to establish a collective basis for imagination opposed to the classical, romantic and psychological notions of imagination that give it a distinctively individual basis (Bottici & Challand 2011). Writers such as Anderson (1991), Castoriades (2010) and Appadurai (1996) have found use for the concept in their analyses of social phenomena, positing in different ways a collective interpretation of imagination. Anderson's (1991) theory of *imagined communities* is often cited as a seminal contribution, and Taylor (2004) explicitly acknowledges his debt to Anderson. Anderson uses the idea to help make sense of the problem of modern nationhood, a notion that he located in a common imaginary, thus paving the way for a social reading of the imagination concept. Taylor (2002a) appropriates this collectivist account of imagination and uses it to articulate that part of his social ontology that had previously been described and analysed in terms of the concepts of 'background' and 'images' in his 1985 works. These concepts are consistently associated, but it is not made clear in the 1985 papers whether the background is to be taken as a fundamental category with images somehow serving to articulate aspects of it, or whether the two ideas are to be taken as complementary translations of the same thing. However, with the theory of social imaginaries, Taylor (2002a) overcomes such difficulties by identifying a fundamental social-hermeneutic feature of human being that could serve as a background with both moral and imagistic dimensions.

In Taylor's revised social ontology, an 'immediate background understanding' is introduced that people draw on to make sense of 'particular practices' (2004, p. 25). Practices are thus comprised of activities in which we engage on the basis of immediate norms and understandings that give us a sense of how this practice should go and why. Beyond these immediate understandings and norms enabling practice is the social imaginary:

> What I'm calling the social imaginary extends beyond the immediate background understanding that makes sense of our particular practices. This is not an arbitrary extension of the concept, because just as practice without the understanding wouldn't make sense for us and thus wouldn't be possible, so this understanding supposes, if it is to make sense, a wider grasp of our whole predicament: how we stand to each other, how we got to where we are, how we relate to other groups, and so on. (2004, p. 25)

Taylor's social ontology thus posits a double-hermeneutic process whereby the social imaginary underwrites immediate understandings, which in turn underwrite the meaning of particular practices. Practices are enabled by two levels of background—primarily by the

immediate background understanding, and secondarily by the social imaginary presupposed by the immediate understanding. The social imaginary also serves as the wider background of the norms of particular practices. In this case it is the fact that the social imaginary harbours images of moral order that supports the norms of a practice.

The social imaginary is thus a heterogeneous social formation that informs the immediate understanding and norms of particular practices. Taylor (2004, p. 23) stresses that the social imaginary is *not* a social theory. This declaration may be read as an assertion that the social imaginary is not a garbled or distorted theory, and cannot be reduced to theoretical propositions. It is this assertion that announces the anti-idealism of Taylor's post-2000s account of the efficacy of theory. What gives sense to our practices is not any kind of 'pre-theory', not a tacit theory inherently open to idealisation, but is rather evident in 'images, stories, and legends' (2004, p. 23).

At the same time as Taylor draws a sharp distinction between social theory and the social imaginary as the basis of sense-making in practice, he has to account for his own far-reaching claim that theories authored by individuals such as Grotius can affect the social imaginary. In his analysis of the trajectory of early modernist social theory into the social imaginary, Taylor explains that individuals such as Grotius who engaged in the 'discursive practice of theorists' (2004, p. 33) were reacting to social upheavals of their time. This part of Taylor's analysis is murkier than usual, for here he seems to be saying that (discursive) practice is the source of the theory that transformed the social imaginary which proves to be requisite for any practice. However, Taylor does not believe a linear account of the relationship between theory and practices is possible. He says that 'Because human practices are the kind of thing that makes sense, certain ideas are internal to them; one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question Which causes which?' (2004, p. 32). The relationship between theories, practices and imaginaries can be understood, rather, on the pattern of the 'hermeneutic circle'. There is no sense in which one of them causes others, but that they are always co-implicated. If anything, Taylor (2004) locates social imaginaries and practices as chronologically prior to theory, but in modernity it clearly makes no sense to relate these terms in a linear fashion.

The theories that emerge from the discursive practices of theorists appear not to have any predetermined trajectory, but it is a prerequisite that if they are to 'infiltrate' the social imaginary, theories need to have both descriptive *and* normative aspects. Presumably, any theory with this character is a candidate for penetrating the social imaginary. Taylor (2004) argues that historically these theories circulate and are on hand, particularly to elite groups and perhaps as a consequence of the latter having the leisure to study and debate ideas. In this process, first, elite groups appropriate ideas to make sense of practices of concern to themselves under new conditions such as those produced by social upheaval. There can be new practices constructed for new conditions or existing practices that need to be understood in new ways in changing social contexts. Either way, practices and ideas are 'repackaged' so that practices under new conditions bear along with them new ideas. The work of elite groups—such as scholars—to rationalise practices in times of change contributes to the social imaginary of these groups. These groups are concerned to make sense of practices and conditions and in the process transform their own imaginary. For example, the nobility at the end of the feudal era in Britain and France transformed from a class of warrior chieftains to educated and centralised courtiers engaged in advising the crown. In Britain the process was smoother, in France less so, but in each case the practices of elites are transformed and it is the theories of the moral order that are appropriated to furnish the meaning of these changes.

At least in the context of the spread of the modern ideas of the moral order, elite groups engage in constructing and reconceptualising practices that eventually become widespread. The dissemination of these ideas was facilitated by revolutions in America and France. Taylor (2004) explains that in America the spread was eased by the existence of state assemblies in which voting was used to make decisions. These practices—constituted under different conditions according to different understandings—were 'made over' to the new ideas, creating popular assemblies with mechanisms for combining individual decisions to reach a collective decision. In contrast, in France the process was fraught since no existing practices were available and had to be constructed in bloody struggle. For Taylor, it is crucial that the theories of Grotius and Locke were on hand to give sense to these existing and new practices engaged under new conditions. Members of elite classes formalise and explain the practices following the lights of their own social imaginary. By this process old practices are repackaged with new ideas and these packages are adopted more and more widely. Taylor explains that

> The modern theory of moral order gradually infiltrates and transforms our social imaginary. In this process, what is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones but ones often transformed by the contact. This is crucial to … the extension of the understanding of the moral order. It couldn't have become the dominant view in our culture without this penetration/transformation of our imaginary. (2004, pp. 28–29)

The infiltration of the theories of moral order into the social imaginary is accompanied by the emergence of new forms of self-understanding and social practices underpinned by the sense of moral order that underwrites the assumption that it is legitimate to combine individual decisions in a certain way to arrive at a binding collective decision. The modern theory of moral order becomes packaged with democratic practices understood as mutually beneficial and an expression of collective agency.

Modern social practices

Social practices play a pivotal role in Taylor's accounts of the efficacy of theory and his anti-idealistic strategies in relation to theory. In this concluding section we review the features of practice in Taylor's social ontology and clarify their role with respect to theory and social imaginaries. Theory-led transformation of the social imaginary of the modern world can occur when practices facilitate the penetration of theory. Taylor (2004) suggests that practices promote the extension and intensification of theory, through which the social imaginary is gradually infiltrated and changed. This occurs when new and/or existing practices under new historical conditions (such as the end of the religious wars) are explained in terms of certain kinds of theory (i.e. theory with both explanatory and normative potential). Governing elites, whose own class imaginary has been infiltrated by the theory, contrive or re-conceptualise practices initially. They are groups that have a strong interest in the promotion of a particular kind of order and who happen to be close to the discursive practices of theorists. Explaining how the theory extends beyond the contrivances and imagination of elite groups and into society more broadly, Taylor says,

> For the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into the new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices.

> Hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. (2004, p. 29)

The 'outlook' identified here by Taylor is something 'articulated' by the theory. It suggests a summary or digest of the theory. Presumably, the outlook is elaborated when elites advocate and debate certain explanations of conditions. From the discursive practices of theorists to the rhetorical and administrative practices of governing classes, it is understandable that considerable didactic work is done with what may be abstruse theory to make it comprehensible within and beyond the elite class. It is clear that people one way or another adjust to the new or reconceptualised practices and accept the outlook articulated by governing actors.

Taylor's articulation here of the role of intellectual elites in shaping practice is both an extension and a deviation from his 1985 works. His earlier arguments insisted that high social theory proper—such as that developed by political theorists—has the potential either to strengthen, reinforce and legitimise existing practice, or to undermine them by making explicit the incoherence of the pre-theoretical understandings implicit in them. That is, social theories 'do not just make our constitutive self-understandings explicit, but extend, or criticize or even challenge them' (1985b, p. 94). Taylor argues that, in certain circumstances, such theories can prompt changes in practice because:

> The disruptive consequences of the theory flow from the nature of the practice, in that one of its constitutive props has been knocked away. This is because the practice requires certain descriptions to make sense, and it is these that the theory undermines. (1985b, p. 98)

In these circumstances, '[t]heory in this domain transforms its own object' (1985b, p. 101). In this earlier incarnation, Taylor is less specific about how this transformation occurs and how an externally derived theory can percolate through self-understandings, background distinctions of worth, and eventually practice. Taylor's later work is more instructive in how social theory can do this with reference to the immediate background and the social imaginary.

Taylor discerns a second way social practices interact with theory. With reference to his claims about the use of theory to make sense of new practices, he says,

> this process isn't just one-sided, a theory making over a social imaginary. In coming to make sense of the action the theory is glossed, as it were, given a particular shape as the context of these practices. Rather like Kant's notion of an abstract category becoming "schematized" when it is applied to reality in time and space, the theory is schematized in the dense sphere of common practice. (2004, pp. 29–30)

Here, Taylor describes the essential process of the extension of theory and with it the penetration of theory into the social imaginary. To make sense of particular social practices, the theory/outlook has to be modified. Social practices are complex, and creative work is required to see how the generalities of an outlook connect with particular activities, practice roles and the relationships between them. The theory is 'glossed' or re-articulated to produce a closer fit to the intricacies of practices. It is 'schematised' or transformed creating unique configurations of theory dictated by the imperatives and structures of different practices.

Taylor draws on the work of Kant (1929) who argued that the intellect contains pure concepts that relate to the empirical world via schemata that contain a blend of pure and sensory characteristics. Taylor explains that practices react back on infiltrating theories creating local variants the theory that can in turn affect the original theory.

A third way practices and theory relate is when established, long-standing practices give rise to theory: practice-led transformation. In Taylor's (2004) analysis of modernity he contrasts the process by which theory of the modern moral order transforms the social imaginary with the process by which the 'economy' emerges as a distinctive modern social formation. His analysis suggests that the transformation of the social imaginary in relation to the economy was practice-led. Taylor's analysis here brings to light another pervasive idea that complements that of the modern moral order in shaping the social imaginary, the idea of objectification. This concept played an important role in Taylor's (1985) analysis of the appeal of naturalistic scientific theory such as behaviourism. He argued then that objectification is a key feature of the modern disengaged self who, through the perspective opened up by objectification, could view itself as both free of authority and free to control. The analysis of the emergence of the formation of the market economy as an element in the modern social imaginary offers an explanation of the emergence of the idea of objectification. In this case, pre-existing commercial practices contained within them understandings associated with the role of the merchant as surveyor and controller of resources.

The idealisation to emerge from these pre-existing practices was articulated by theorists such as Locke and Adam Smith. Taylor (2004) highlights that the peculiar form of self-understanding associated with the idea of economy is that of an order that goes on 'behind the back' (2004, p. 77) of agents. Smith's 'invisible hand' (in Taylor 2004, p. 76) is an image of this sort of order that arises from the very nature of atomistic individuals engaged in commercial activity with regard only to their own interests. For Taylor, this is an alternative, 'objectifying' image of social life that both enters into conflict with images central to the public sphere and democratic self-rule, and facilitates the development of objective theories of society that draw on assumptions that society can be approached as a natural phenomenon amenable to scientific analysis. These two sets of images—one linked with an objective stance on society and another with collective agency—constitute what Taylor calls the 'modern bifocal' (2004, p. 77). He indicates that there is a range of intermediate positions and that tensions emerge between the objectifying and collectivist extremes. There are also attempts to merge the two ideas such as we witness in neoliberalism, where proponents endow objectifying images such as the invisible hand of the market with moral overtones. This kind of effort confuses distinct forms of modern self-understanding.

Reviewing these three, intertwined variations on the relationship between practice and theory it becomes clear how practices impact on the social imaginary. Because the imaginary, like the immediate understandings and norms, is always carried by practices, interactions between theory and practice must have repercussions for the imaginary. According to Taylor's analysis of the infiltration of theories of the moral order, practices react in different ways to theory and these reactions are reflected in the imaginary. Practices can be made sense of in terms of a new outlook, and they schematise the theory, producing localised variants. But as we have seen, practices can transform the social imaginary in their own right as Taylor's analysis of economic objectification suggests. In this case, practices connected with commercial activity give rise to both modifications to the imaginary and new forms of theory.

Taylor's theory of the social imaginary and its modes of transformation is an important contribution to practice theory. We have argued that the theory of social imaginaries is part of Taylor's strategy for maintaining the anti-idealistic stance of practice theory. The need to buttress the anti-idealism of practice theory has not been as high a priority in work of other practice theorists. But for Taylor, the pervasiveness and efficacy of theory that characterises modernity poses a challenge to practice theory that cannot be met by the dismissive anti-idealism that has long been associated with the practice approach. Taylor's painstaking analyses of social and historical processes present accounts of the influence of theory, from flawed naturalistic social theory (e.g., behaviourism) to theories of the modern moral order of Grotius and Locke circulated at the beginning of the modern era. The pervasiveness and influence of theory on social practices is a feature of our civilization that cannot be denied, and the standard anti-idealism of practice theory cannot account for it. Taylor's theory allows practices to remain a unit of analysis for social research yet accommodates what is surely an overarching feature of contemporary society.

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[i] This has been an ongoing issue for Taylor. For his later critiques of the use of natural science models in the human sciences, see Taylor 1995 (especially chapter 1) and 2002b. See also chapter 9 of Fopp (2008).