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Elites, elements and events: Practice theory and scale

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Abstract

Practice theory appears to be a flat ontology in conventional renderings, but it is unclear why this is so. In attempting to scale socio-technical systems practice theory finds itself needing to think about new possible strategies to both compete with other ontologies and rebrand itself as capable of mapping the world outside of everyday life, the domestic and the home. In pursuit of this goal three unfamiliar new terrains are explored: elites, elements and events. In this paper a method for practice theory to broach scale while retaining its current value is articulated through ideas about the synchronization of elements and through paying closer attention to elites and events in the ways practices are practised.

Highlights

► The article reviews recent perspectives in practice theory through a case study of Gandhi's Swadeshi movement. ► The notion of scale is discussed in reference to ontological flatness and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP). ► The article reviews practice theory's strengths, weaknesses and potential. ► Citing the three e's (elites, elements and events) pathways are explored for potential 'bottom-up' action to climate change. ► The article links the Swadeshi movement to a possible transition to a cycling transport system.

Keywords

- Practices;
- Mobilities;
- Systems;
- Transition;
- India;
- Gandhi

1. Introduction

Practice theory is a mature ontology in sociology (Reckwitz, 2002a), consumption studies (Halkier and Jensen, 2011) and organization studies (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). The practice approach has only recently been applied to sustainability-related travel contexts (Watson this issue) and its most keen impact has been felt in environmental debates on socio-technical transitions (Walker and Shove, 2007) and sustainable consumption (Spaargaren, 2011). Practice theory backlash suggests that practice theory is a 'platitude' and a 'bandwagon' and that it is unclear where it is heading (Corradi et al., 2010). Yet, practice theory, in policy contexts, has been sensitive in recent times to finding its own intellectual space, distinct from the ABC (Attitude, Behaviour and Choice) (Shove, 2010 and Whitmarsh et al., 2010). This commentary examines practice theory's purported problem with scale through a brief analysis of a successful past systemic transition—India's severance from the British Empire—partly invoked by a consensus motivated by charismatic leadership to adopt some key 'sustainable' suites of practices and technologies: producing salt from collected brine and spinning homegrown cotton clothing.

Social practices are the nuanced performances of everyday life and through consensus become what is normal. From crafting, cooking and cleaning to cycling, some of these acts might seem insignificant in isolation, but when combined with material objects and ideologies across societies, they 'scale up' to be the full gamut of convention and normality. But not all practices are born equal as Matt Watson shows in his contribution to this special issue. Many dominating practices, which policymakers often target through campaigns (speeding, junk-food, littering), have direct impacts on alternative practices

(cycling, cooking, recycling). Practices deemed normal by consensus are simply 'done' without forethought by many people, but at a cost to those who do not share in the consensus. The formation of a practice-consensus occurs regardless of potentially negative impacts on others' practices. When normality sets in, consensus becomes difficult to countermand from a policymaking perspective. There are many new insights that the practice theory approach can productively yield and it is the intention of this article to discuss some key ones that might inform debates on sustainable transitions, in the conciliatory spirit of this special issue that brings together a number of different ontologies in one collection. Part of this commentary's task, in support of more indepth appraisals in relation to velomobility and dominant systems of automobility (Watson this issue), is to provide a roadmap for how system change might be brought about against a dominating practice-consensus. Indeed, the case study presented here is nowhere more relevant than in the Indian context where low-income commuters who rely on bicycles and walking are disadvantaged by the popular adoption of motorized automobiles and scooters leading to significant numbers of fatalities and congestion (Srinivasan and Rogers, 2004). The goal of this commentary then is to assert that practice theory demands an equal standing to analyse large-scale socio-technical systems and transitions and that its ontology is not as flat as it might at first appear, despite its popular focus on the domestic and the routine.

Practice theory's encounters with socio-technical systems and transitions management represent the current state of play and this is a marked, but not unrelated shift, from its early roots in theory on social change. 'Socio-technical' refers to blends of human and non-human through common interaction: the assembly line, where the movements of the worker are finely tuned to the technological system, is a case example (Blauner, 1964). Practice theory can be broadly defined as a "general theory of the production of social subjects through practice in the world, and of the production of the world itself through practice" (Ortner, 2006: 16). When thinking about practice theory it is important to keep in mind that 'practice' and 'practise' have distinct meanings, referring to noun and verb forms, and in turn represent 'doing' words and 'naming' words.¹ Thus practices can affect practising and practising in turn constitutes practices (Hargreaves, 2011). Practices must be learned and taught by practising in daily life that draws on norms and ethics established in childhood (Gram-Hanssen, 2008). People do not adapt well to new practices due to the pursuit of competencies and this raises a governance challenge for inspiring sustainable transitions as practices can become entrenched (Røpke, 2009). Routines are part and parcel of practising; however, alternative, new 'suites' (Shove, 2003b) of material 'artefacts' (Reckwitz, 2002b) are often the cause for change, disrupting routines, and defying the inertia of stable practices.

Practice theory, unlike structuralist techniques in the social sciences, is sensitive to the fact that the real world lacks the integrity of a jigsaw (Harland, 1987). Therefore, drawing on what is loosely termed post-structural techniques, practice theory seeks to introduce notions of power and the self into the mix (Shove et al., 2007). Scale can be thought about in many ways including micro, meso and macro; base, middle, top; individual, community and society; niche, regime and landscape. Some theorists in human geography have attempted to flatten scale out of existence (Marston et al., 2005) a project that others who are 'pro scale' have resisted (Jonas, 2006). Yet, scale in a temporal and spatial sense has considerable appeal in mapping how transitions manifest and in this regard practice theory could also benefit from being less flat. From a practice theory perspective scale is not only conceivable through a "nested, hierarchical multi-level model as the only model in town" and practice theory has much ontological ambition in also mapping scale (Shove and Walker, 2007: 8).

Despite this ambition, there remains a great uncertainty about how scale might be best articulated in practice theory. Practice theory is argued to be stand-alone and not modular, broad in scope and purpose (Shove and Walker, 2010). As vanguard 'practice practitioners' claim, practice theory holds in common with other mesosocial science perspectives the potential to analyse more than individual behaviours, habits and preferences, but also the systemic affects of individual practices (Cohen et al., 2010). Many recent practice approaches to socio-technical issues seem to emulate in form other schemes like the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) (Smith and Grin, 2010) and thus the question is raised: what new areas unique to practice theory are developing that project a sense of scale? Chiefly, this paper argues that there need not be too much ontological stretching (or flattening) to have both a commitment to local practices as well as attention to scale.

In order to conceptualize how a sense of scale might be further progressed in practice theory, a combination of three areas is reviewed in this trim commentary. In the context of transitions

management alternative practices and normalized conventions depend upon common suites of technologies and products configured in different ways of living. First, alternative synchronizations of elements are championed by exemplars or elites whose success is often underpinned by the authenticity of their convictions, the physical performance of their alternative conventions and the feasibility of their transition management strategies. Secondly, it is very unusual for innovations to rely completely on elements that are entirely new and unheralded. Instead, elements that are common are compared, reconfigured or 'synchronized' through "synchronized system change" (Urry, 2011: 123). Such elements can include lost, neglected, obsolete and eccentric 'fossils'. These include materials, ideas and also types of know-how. Fossils currently earn much less attention than innovations presumed to be brand new (Shove and Pantzar, 2006). Thirdly, exemplary practitioners utilize and draw others to specific events; to protest, demonstrate and advocate transition. Such alternatives can go 'viral' through sharing, mimicry and exemplars impressing upon others their importance and efficacy.

The normalization of conventions of comfort and convenience, gas and electric domestic and commercial freezer technologies, ubiquitous automobiles and road infrastructures, suburban living and development, out-of-town supermarkets and globalized food supply chains in the US and UK represents a textbook account of scale from the perspective of practice theory and socio-technical systems (Hand and Shove, 2007, Hubers et al., 2011 and Shove and Southerton, 2000). Nevertheless further progress can be made in understanding how transitions from unsustainable mobility systems to more sustainable alternatives might be achieved through interventions in everyday practices that pan out into systemic change.

In transport systems an everyday 'normal' travel practice-consensus, such as driving children to school, involves complex systems of elements outside and separate from the transportation vehicle itself (Tranter and Whitelegg, 1994 and McDonald, 2008). It is important to look outside of the car to the formations of elements that impact on other people's practices: walking, cycling and public transport. In trying to transition to a different practice-consensus a 'new normal' is needed, a consensus shift, and this involves the support and lobbying of elites who exercise leadership. Elites pull together new practices from often disparate elements and influence others through events where they attempt to establish a new consensus. Leaders champion practices and seek to allay people's anxieties about adopting them (Jackson and Everts, 2010).

Elites have long sought to engage people through championing social practices around specific material elements themselves in order to initiate a system-wide transition. For instance in the 1970s US President Jimmy Carter, trying to influence energy conservation, entreated people to put on a cardigan sweater—and indeed took up the practice himself—instead of relying on home heating (Blumstein et al., 2000). As well elites have utilized popular events to promote alternative social practices. In Moscow on 24 July 1959 Premier Nikita Khrushchev and American Vice President Richard Nixon toured the 'typical American home' of the General Electric model kitchen, which formed the centrepiece of the American National Exhibition event in Moscow (Oldenziel and Zachmann, 2011). By highlighting in this key event the apparently better living standards that the American kitchen afforded households, Nixon in effect championed the emerging shopping practices (weekly trips to out-of-town supermarkets) and suites of technologies and products (freezers, packaging and automobiles) that arose from the combination of elements available to the post-war US consumer.

In the same way that Barnes (2001) draws on the recurring example of a cavalry charge to embellish an account of 'practice as collective action', periodic examples drawn from the local practices put to action systemically in the Indian political elite Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's Swadeshi movement furnish the main points in this commentary. Towards the goal of mapping this remarkable example of transition management in India, the three e's are discussed here: elites, elements and events. These points act to signpost practice theory's potential and dispute suggestions that the approach is unable to analyse scales beyond "local practices and everyday lifeworlds ... mechanisms such as improvisation, tinkering, bricolage, and repair work" (Geels, 2010: 502). In fact, local practices in everyday contexts can invoke transitions on a more broad scale and in the case of contemporary India this is demonstrated by the adoption of the local sustainable transport practice of *jugaad* as an empowering leadership value for elites (Birtchnell, 2011). In the time leading up to India's independence Gandhi's awareness of this potential for systemic change in local social practices marks the importance of practice theory to socio-technical systems of global scale.

2. Elites

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries global systems of transportation, finance, governance, law and trade revolved around India as a producer of two major resources: salt and cotton. The technologies of extraction, transportation and provision were managed under the hegemony of the British Empire. The British control over salt and cotton, vital resources in the majority of Britain's and India's household practices, were strategically targeted by the University College London-educated lawyer and politician Gandhi in his protest movement against British colonial hegemony. In his autobiography *The Story of My Experiment with Truth* (1940) Gandhi was candid about his understanding of satyagraha 'truth-force', or practising according to the values one espouses, in the achievement of Swadeshi 'self-sufficiency'. Gandhi understood that adopting and championing symbolic and freely available local, indigenous, household everyday practices to trigger collective transitions would be instrumental in undermining Britain's global transport, trade and governance systems in salt and cotton. He was convinced of the functional power of these local practices to not only disrupt elite rule in India at the top of the pyramid, but also to transition the British-introduced everyday practices at the base of the pyramid, which he saw as the root cause of famine, poverty and profound inequality for millions of India's people.

"Satyagraha, on the other hand, is an absolutely non-violent weapon. I regard it as my duty to explain its practice and its limitations. I have no doubt that the British Government is a powerful Government, but I have no doubt also that Satyagraha is a sovereign remedy" (Gandhi, 1940: 201). Recent attention to governance in practice theory is a promising new area of inquiry (Shove and Walker, 2010 and Spaargaren, 2011). While power is normally conceived in a top-down sense, as political intervention managed by political, corporate and scientific elites; in the context of practice theory it takes on a different meaning of an 'everyday politics' (Shove and Walker, 2007). Elites that use practices themselves to implement transitions stand distinct from those who enact governance, but often do not 'practise what they preach'. To "talk of practices is to talk of powers" and "to engage in a practice is to exercise a power" (Barnes, 2001: 28). In this notion of power bodies are 'fashioned' by disciplinary practices, and practising, and are shared within mutual, delineated spaces filled with symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989, Foucault, 1977 and Schatzki, 2001). Gandhi sought to invoke change through inspiring others to follow his own practices. In practice theory there is some reflection on this 'dribble down' effect. The global acceptance of the business suit, a perfect example of what was initially an elite fashion, contributes covertly to energy waste in encouraging air conditioning in offices (Shove, 2003b). Plumbing, necessary for showering, was initially a convenience for an elite market and bathing began as an 'affectation' of the elite (Shove, 2003a). Thus "what start off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society" (Taylor, 2004: 24). Elites that initiate transitions through physical implementation of their practices are drawn from a more diverse palate of candidates in practice theory based on exemplars of certain ways of living that have the potential to affect system change through charisma and practice-action. In the context of sustainable transitions, charismatic leaders are recognized as 'positive communicators' of information (Moser, 2007); however, this does not take into account conflicts between elites' public activities and their private, everyday lives. Incumbent institutional and celebrity elites confirm common notions of the achievement of success through meritocratic pathways and as "only a few are willing to alter their lives in any significant way" their activities appear as "gestural politics—grandiose-sounding plans largely empty of content" (Giddens, 2009: 2). Status is tied to belief systems about the 'good life' and commonly held understandings of wealth, privilege and consumption (Sioshansi, 2011). The 'celebritization' of issues such as climate change, where social elites act as role models and spokespeople for transitions to sustainable practices, runs up against the meritocratic vestedness of elites in 'entitlements' to unsustainable standards of mobility and consumption and entrenchment in commodity cultures that demand the ongoing pursuit of status (Boykoff and Goodman, 2009). Recent policy recommendations by the Department for Transport (2011) of decentralized power and the championing of sustainable practices by civic and local leadership run up against this 'vestedness' of elites in status and reward, as the media exposes elites giving with one hand and taking with the other (Millington, 2009). Practices that privilege the attainment of status through substantial investments of capital, knowledge and labour are vested in meritocratic systems that generally undermine sustainable objectives that call for transitions to prudence, restraint and self-regulation (Biggart and Beamish, 2003). That most elites are institutionally embedded means they are at the top of the pyramid in such

meritocratic systems and thus are symbolically opposed to transition, something that Gandhi realized and sought to correct in his own activities at the base of the pyramid and his severance from British governance, educational and elite networks. What this section shows is that Gandhi, by becoming an exemplary practitioner, demonstrates that his alternative practice-consensus has 'truth'. Swadeshi had demonstrable scope to be conventional and its mass-adoption by supporters represents a protest against dominating systems of practices.

3. Elements

Gandhi saw swaraj as a project not just for India to "emancipate man from the meshes he has woven around him, free him from the organizations of national selfishness" (Rolland, 1924: 155). Gandhi targeted in his campaign for Swadeshi the elements he saw were contained in these 'meshes': vast, global socio-technical systems synchronized under the British Empire to everyday household practices around salt and cotton. Despite India's massive resources of quality brine and rock (mined) salt the British wanted to ensure that India remained a market for British exports, despite being of much poorer quality (Multhauf, 1996). A uniform salt tax made possession and production of salt illegal unless purchased from government suppliers rendering it unaffordable to much of the population who suffered from disease and famine due to being unable to preserve food or add salt to their diet. Similarly at this time cotton had become included as an element in global supply chains that created path dependencies around the production of clothing. Gandhi himself succinctly summarized this system:

You English buy Indian cotton in the field, picked by Indian labor at seven cents a day, through an optional monopoly. This cotton is shipped ... a three weeks journey ... to London ... The cotton is turned into cloth in Lancashire. You pay shilling wages instead of Indian pennies to your workers ... The finished product is sent back to India at European shipping rates, once again on British ships ... The cloth is finally sold back to the kings and landlords of India who got the money to buy this expensive cloth out of the poor peasants of India who worked at seven cents a day.

(Fisher and Fletcher, 1932: 154–156)

In imports of salt globally India had stood third in 1870, second in 1890 and in 1914 India stood first, with 60% of imports coming from Britain (Dasgupta, 1996: 83). Part of the British strategy in forcing India to become the main importer of salt and textiles had also been to alter Indian conventions of comfort, convenience and cleanliness through evangelical religious conversion that indirectly motivated consumption practices. These religious efforts made much of the British concern with correcting the 'indolence' thought to stem from the Indian 'character' and Hindu belief system (Birtchnell, 2009). As Gandhi wrote about British missionary campaigns in rural India: "they would like to make us like you, better buyers of your goods and unable to do without your cars and luxuries" (Dasgupta, 1996: 75). In order to unravel the British global textile supply chains Gandhi imagined that villagers would grow all the cotton they need and manufacture their own cloth right up to the stage of stitching garments in their own homes and towards this end took up the practice of ginning and looming, even wearing the products he produced himself through his labours (Dasgupta, 1996).

Towards the goal of practising his theories of self-sufficiency Gandhi started the Satyagraha Ashram in May 1915 at Kochrab to attract like-minded followers of swaraj. Having described the cotton spinning wheel in his booklet *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 the ashram was an opportunity to develop further the weaving of khadi (cloth) through home charkhas (spinning wheels). While many of the traditional charkhas had been burnt or neglected, Gandhi worried that "this beautiful art—and yet so simple—is in danger of being lost" but found in the Punjab that women "had not lost the cunning of their fingers. High or low they know the art ... our forefathers were able to clothe themselves with little effort and with perfect comfort without having to buy from the foreign markets" (Tendulkar, 1969a: 275).

In Gandhi's transition management strategies the synchronized elements in the complex systems of Britain's global supply chains were disrupted through the 'endowing' of value into indigenous 'fossils' (Shove et al., 2005). Two practices the British had phased out were invoked by Gandhi to demonstrate alternative, sustainable household suites of technologies and practices: solar evaporation, or open pan brine-boiling to make salt, and spinning khadi from charkhas, the small portable hand cranked looms producing the homespun cloth from within the home. By focusing on these elements he drew attention

to the wider combinations that underpinned colonial hegemonic systems. In making visible the various elements that the British had 'synced' in the socio-technical systems formed in the colonial encounter the inegalitarian, but normalized, aspects were exposed and opened to critique. By demonstrating the unsustainable elements that were taken for granted in everyday household practices Gandhi imagined new methods of textile production, food preparation and preserving that would synchronize different, more locally sustainable, elements. In turn, he challenged the global transport, finance and governmental systems that had formed around salt and cotton. What this example shows is that practice theory can open a window onto how the mastery of alternative synchronizations of elements combining sustainable local practices with much further reaching ideologies can prove to be a powerful force for system change when adopted by elites in their own practices.

4. Events

In many ways practice theory demands a twin 'event theory'. In local contexts power plays out in how certain practices dominate others, are aggregated and given visibility, merit and institutional blessing. Events such as 'race days' are places where practices are celebrated and intertwine "practices of race watching, betting, conviviality, people watching, entertainment, race track management, supervision, race preparation and horse grooming ... and so on" (Schatzki, 2009: 45). As in the examples of salt and cotton, practices around these resources were altered and reconfigured by British colonial interests and therefore became unfashionable and incompatible in India with the British way of living. Gandhi used key events to illustrate and champion his alternative practices and synchronize them with the political cause of India's independence from Britain, everyday life and morality and key indigenous technologies that evinced family and household life.

On 6 March 1930, Gandhi and his followers embarked on a march of 241 miles from Sabarmati to Dandi. On arriving in Surat he addressed 80,000 people and admonished them to break the salt monopoly of the British calling for mass civil disobedience and observance of non-violence at salt collecting and producing events across the country. Braving arrest Gandhi went for a swim in the sea and, before his followers, bent down and picked up a lump of natural salt, thereby symbolically breaking the salt law. Directly afterwards he issued the statement: "Now that the technical or ceremonial breach of the salt law has been committed, it is now open to any one who would take the risk of prosecution under the salt law to manufacture salt ... my advice is that the workers should everywhere manufacture salt ... and instruct the villagers likewise" (Tendulkar, 1969b: 31).

As with his events around salt-collecting and production practices, Gandhi's interest in alternative practices in cotton spinning was advocated in events across the country. Gandhi's campaign against the import of British textiles was celebrated at key events where in some cases non-Indian cloth was burned. A huge bonfire of foreign cloth at a public meeting in Bombay led Gandhi to call the day 'sacred' and Gandhi claimed that the Indians were only burning their taste for foreign fineries which they did not need and that therefore the motive was to punish themselves, not the foreigners: "The idea of burning springs not from hate but from repentance of our past sins" (Hick and Hempel, 1989: 32). The Congress session in December 1921 at Ahmedabad was similarly used by Gandhi to promote the 'swaraj flag', which became a political weapon and a unifying symbol of independence. The flag was made from khadi and featured prominently in the middle four charkhas (Virmani, 2008). The flag became a prominent symbol at events around the country leading up to Partition and attests to the importance Gandhi attributed to local practices in disrupting the global systems of British colonialism. Events such as this become key moments in the historical record and by looking carefully at their strategic importance in setting up a consensus practice theory can more effectively examine scale.

5. Conclusion

"Just as Gandhi saw India producing its own cloth as a way to free itself from British domination, the bicycle could free urban centers from an over-reliance on cars" (Mapes, 2009: 37). By looking at Gandhi's achievements through a practice theory lens this commentary has sought to unpick how other low-carbon mobility systems could be brought about by an alternative practice-consensus, such as that of cycling and urban transport (Watson this issue). It is now virtually unanimous in the policies of many countries in reference to sustainability that change needs to occur, but that top-down interventions are inappropriate. Shifting attention to the area of self-led socio-technical transitions from the bottom-up represents an alternative, but welcome perspective in policy and planning. These alternative, yet

increasingly common, perspectives come up against a major brick wall that practice theory, in its appreciation of the scaling of local practices in socio-technical systems, can contribute to significantly. Elements composed of all sorts of different practices and suites of technologies and products are reconfigured and synchronized by elites and significant events play an important part in this process. In this commentary three areas of growth in practice theory have been put forward for the ontology to better achieve a sense of scale. Many of these areas are already being thought about in the current state of play of practice theory. While it is important to keep the unit of analysis as practices “rather than individuals, citizens, societies, social groups or even socio-technical systems” there also needs to be more detail about elites, events and elements in relation to practices (Shove and Walker, 2010: 471). Attention needs to be directed to how certain types of elites take on practices in action as well as rhetoric, including Gandhi and those he influenced directly such as Martin Luther King Jr. (Kilgore, 1989). Principally, what are the processes by which some practices and suites they enable are championed by exemplary practitioners and become practices of mass appeal, cascading into wider use or disrupting existing synchronized systems? Therefore a key point in this paper is that more work needs to be done in practice theory on how elements, elites and events together relate to social-technical transitions.

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