



# Reflecting on Practices

New Directions for Spatial Theories

Edited by Friederike Landau-Donnelly,  
Hanna Carlsson and Arnoud Lagendijk



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FRIEDERIKE LANDAU-DONNELLY, HANNA CARLSSON  
AND ARNOUD LAGENDIJK

**agenda**  
publishing

© 2024 Friederike Landau-Donnelly, Hanna Carlsson and Arnoud Lagendijk;  
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## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

*Hanna Carlsson, Arnoud Lagendijk  
and Friederike Landau-Donnelly*

Clickclickclick  
Clocking everyday life  
Clogging everyday life  
Why do we cross the street at a green light?  
Normative colours  
Routinized walking  
Routines watermarked  
At what point do droplets start forming a sea?  
At what point does practice tip into  
... this?

Friederike Landau-Donnelly

Resulting from years of active debates among the contributors, and constructive dialogues with reviewers and the publisher, this book presents a bundle of essays advancing practice theory through doing it empirically, reflecting on it theoretically and engaging with it more poetically. Our dialogue was prompted, in particular, by our search for what practice theory could mean for our critical and often activist engagement with geography and planning. All chapters thus yield a message for practice theory, albeit with much diversity and intensity. Here, we present our problematization and synthesis.

In the past few decades, practice theory has garnered increased academic attention in disciplines such as organization studies (Whittington 2011; Nicolini 2012, 2016; Tsoukas 2017), anthropology/sociology (Rouse 2007), educational sciences (Kemmis *et al.* 2013), international relations (Cornut 2015) and the philosophy of science (Soler *et al.* 2014). In the discipline of geography, scholars such as Simonsen (2016), Everts, Lahr-Kurten and Watson (2011) and Jones and Murphy (2011) have productively engaged with practice theory. However, taken as a whole, the “practice turn” (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny 2001) is yet to take hold in

human geography and planning. Scholars working from relational and flat ontologies have more often found inspiration in the “gathering” (i.e. co-constitutive) perspective of assemblage theory and actor–network theory (ANT) (McFarlane 2011; Latour 2005) than in the “conjunctive” perspective of practice theory (Tsoukas 2017; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2019). In particular, the consideration of how circulating and transforming entities come together and differentiate within spatial phenomena has been influential in the “translocal” perspective that has undergirded much relational and flat thinking in geography (Cumbers, Routledge & Nativel 2008; McFarlane 2009). Although there is no scope for a detailed review and analysis in this chapter, we as the editors speculate that an important reason why this occurs is that former approaches are more attuned to questions of (spatial) inequality and difference.

Endowing practice approaches with a sensitivity for difference and inequality presents a key challenge. As pointed out by Schapendonk (Chapter 6 in this volume), practice approaches sometimes carry the unspoken assumption that activities such as cycling or boxing (Carlsson, Chapter 2 in this volume) are simply shared by those enrolled in it. However, as Schapendonk’s example of cycling together with his friend in the university town of Nijmegen in the Netherlands highlights, such a view does not do justice to the differences in power and rights that people sharing the same space and the same activity can be subject to. Whereas cycling in the wrong direction down a one-way street for Schapendonk, a white Dutch citizen, merely entailed a small chance to get fined, for his friend Maggi, an asylum seeker of colour without papers, this offence could be a “one-way ticket to the migrant detention centre”. Small differences in time, place and actors’ positionality and embodiment may make a huge difference to how a practice unfolds and impacts (Tsoukas 2017).

Many of the chapters in this volume have resulted from exchanges in our departmental reading group on practice theories since 2019. This group brought together those of us already working with practice theories and those who were more sceptical of its usefulness, or new to the framework altogether. During our conversations, we have thus taken the opportunity to discuss what a turn to practice(s) has to offer geography and its related disciplines of urban studies and spatial planning. Although some of us still are sceptical, this book departs from the assumption that practice theories – to be considered in their conceptual, epistemological and practical polysemy – offer novel possibilities for engaged and societally relevant spatial theory and practice. The editors’ and authors’ disciplinary and theoretical backgrounds differ, including political scientists, sociologists, human geographers and planners. Against this background of scholarly diversity, the

collection of chapters is an itemization of what practice theories *can* “be”. As such, the chapters in this book unpack diverse and potentially dissonant understandings of the scope and value of the term “practices”. We give space to those tensions that might arise from different degrees of attunement to, or affiliations with, longer-standing traditions gathered under the term “practice theory”.

What unites many of the chapters is a concern with the spatio-temporal dimensions of practices: the (re)making of past, current and future urban places and home spaces and the translocality and transnationality of university hierarchies, world sports, international development and the treatment of refugees. Other chapters raise the question of how to conduct research from epistemological and ontological perspectives that do these dimensions justice. In our approach to practices, we are careful not to reify them, and to ontologize them only with hesitance and care. In addition, although we acknowledge different strands of practice thinking, we do not consider them as schools or in opposition. Instead, we are committed to considering how practices – variably interpreted – articulate, in particular, political, social and spatial differences (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, [Chapter 5](#) in this volume; Landau, Pohl & Roskamm 2021). This allows us to provide novel insights into what practices mean, and how they emerge, institutionalize and thus structure socio-spatial life. From a critical perspective, we question how practices become challenged, unhinged and rebooted, thereby dislocating relationships between people and places.

To introduce the book, we first sketch the landscape of practice thinking. Thereafter, we discuss how the concept of practices thus far has been applied by selected geographers. We signal an overly instrumental way of conceptualizing practice, in which practices merely present circulating elements in the translocal “gathering” of spatial phenomena (McFarlane 2011). We suggest that instead a practice-ontological approach can bring new insights on place-making and the social ordering of space. Having discussed how the discipline of geography can benefit from a deeper engagement with practice approaches, we turn to the question of how practice approaches can benefit from an engagement with spatial theory. In this section, we point to a number of blind spots in practice approaches when it comes to the heterogeneity of place and how these matter for the situatedness, emergence and development of a “nexus of practices”. We argue that spatial theory, particularly insight from relational geography, can help practice theorists to better grasp large phenomena and questions regarding inequality and power relations. Against this background, we first call for further dialogue between practice approaches and relational spatial theories, then introduce the individual chapters in that light.

## GRASPING PRACTICE APPROACHES

The term “practice” has played an important role in academic thought and theory-building since Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger overhauled the Cartesian understanding of the world based on essentialized and separate notions of objects, forces and properties. As indicated, this book delves into a wide range of practices, including drinking wine in Zoom sessions, boxing in the Olympics, reforming university career paths, development aid and deportation activism. However, before doing so it is necessary to define what we consider practice approaches to “be”.

In brief, practice approaches stand for a view, theory and method, in which the world is shaped through what entities *do* (with or to) each other in complex time/space constellations. That is, subjects and/or objects are mutually drawn into practices to form ways of doing and living, and where these forms gain a certain ontological autonomy (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2019; de Haan, Chapter 8 in this volume). This means that there is no essence to objects or practices other than their relational constitution and performance in the context of practice. For example, as shown by Landau-Donnelly and Pohl in this volume, offices, cafés and public squares reproduce urban life only insofar as they are part of everyday practices. Landau-Donnelly and Pohl discuss how practices in these sites were dislocated when the pandemic hit and restrictions on mobility were enforced, so that cities “no longer worked”. In addition to this non-essentialist view on the world, practice approaches assume that it is in the fusing and gathering implied in such practices that objects are shaped and evolve. Objects thus gain capacities within the context of certain practices, which may then carry over to other contexts, practices and objects of different kinds. Such transitions and transformations are portrayed by de Haan (this volume), for example, regarding how navigation skills moved from bodies to GPS and accounting practices become inscribed in spreadsheets. Altogether, these assumptions amount to a processual perspective on the socio-spatial construction of reality, in which, fundamentally, nothing comes before practice. In Kirsten Simonsen’s (2007: 168) words: “Nothing in the social world is prior to human practice: not consciousness, ideas or meaning; not structures or mechanisms; and not discourses, assemblages or networks.”

In sum, practices – including skills, practical knowledge, capacities, embodied movements, gestures and behaviours – shape the world with their myriad of different objects and subjects. A practice view thus gives rise to multiplicity. There is no *one* world, no meta-practice and no overarching spatial imperative (see Landau, Pohl & Roskamm 2021). Rather, practices present worlds on their own (Law 2015). From an epistemological perspective, whatever one considers to be this “world” can be meaningfully interpreted only by becoming part of it, by co-practising *this* version of “world”.



As a result, many practice theorists advocate that researchers make practices their central conceptual unit of enquiry and that the methodology applied be appropriate to capture the accomplishment of the practice in question (Shove 2017; Nicolini 2012).

Although practice theorists often begin their enquiry by uncovering the world of a specific practice (Nicolini 2012), they face practised worlds that are extending without end. As Kramsch discusses (Chapter 7 in this volume), there are only practical limits to practice research. Practices' limitless nature is illustrated by Wittgenstein's example of playing the flute (Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow 2016). The constitution of objects and subjects involved in the practice of flute-playing builds on and draws in aspects of other worlds, such as the gravity involved in toolmaking and the physical and chemical characteristics of air and bodies in the construction of musical instruments. When entities mesh and evolve together in forming a practice, there are all kinds of concrete relations (or "nexuses") between practices through which worlds emerge, connect and temporarily solidify. For example, through the embodied act of playing the flute, the flute itself becomes a part of making music, just as the flute-playing body establishes the practice of music-making with the instrument. Although flute-playing comprises a world in itself, which can only ever be fully understood from within its own world (if that is even possible), it can exist only in connection to other practice worlds. This idea is captured by the practice-specific "site ontology" (Schatzki 2001). Site ontology provides a lens on reality by distinguishing sites (where practices are enacted), spaces (where practices are materially enabled and constituted) and landscapes (where connections, circulations and "nexuses" evolve fueling spaces and sites; see Carlsson [2022]).

## GEOGRAPHY'S INSTRUMENTAL AND GENERIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF PRACTICE

As our overview shows, practice approaches emphasize materiality in a concrete sense, and thereby underline the impact of place, space and the emplaced nature of social life. As Jonathan Everts (2016: 50) puts it: "[O]ne of the central tenets of practice theory is that social practices are always situated practices; they do not transpire in a void but are situated in time and space." In theory, the centrality of materiality, time and space chimes well with the focus in human geography on how places are constituted, experienced, sensed and contested. Arguably, the idiographic tradition in geography, with a keen interest in the development of tangible places and differentiated spaces, has pursued practice thinking before convention. Much geographical work on cities, regions and states has focused on how concrete activities

have been shaping local places and vice versa, in unique yet interconnected ways. Empirically, this has yielded an impressive amount of practical knowledge about places and their situatedness all over the world. Conceptually, this has contributed to a heterogeneous body of theory that discusses place and space based on processualism and relationality. Doreen Massey (2005), in her landmark publication *For Space*, explains how such a radical, processual understanding of space provides us with a contingent, political perspective on space as a sphere of possibilities and negotiation. The latter, in Massey's view, stems from worlds in which multiple "trajectories" come together in places, forming a "throwntogetherness" that gives rise to new developments and rearrangements in and of space.

This opens different pathways: on the one hand, an emphasis on contingency and possibility can interlink practice theories with a flat ontological outlook on the world (Schatzki 2016). On the other hand, the lack of essence to practices may draw on so-called negative ontologies, revolving around antagonism, the lack of foundations or grounds (Landau, Pohl & Roskamm 2021). Despite tensions between these ontological positions, what can be summarized along the lines of relational thought about practice and space is the theoretical rejection of "natural" forces of space- or place-making. Similar to practice approaches, relational geographies thus emphasize the radical contingency and potentiality of situated socio-spatial life. Moreover, the emphasis on practices' malleability is grounded and encountered in a practical, phenomenological understanding of the "world", which helps to consider the concrete and practical implications that practices have on everyday life and space.

As we have shown, practice approaches and geographical theory and research, particularly of the relational kind, have many common denominators. However, thus far, geographers are yet to develop a comprehensive theorization of how practices are relationally constituted and come to matter in geographical settings (Carlsson 2022). In geographical scholarship, the notion of practice tends to be used either in an instrumental way (i.e. as a circulating entity impacting a discreet place) or as a more generic, loosely defined term (i.e. informing a theoretical framework). The more instrumental use can be observed in geographical research on globalization/localization and in "translocal" approaches. For instance, in his work on globalization and place in Colombia, Arturo Escobar (2001) found that local groups were highly involved in shaping transnational development aid. Escobar (2001: 155), argues that researchers should therefore make "visible the dynamic encounter of practices originating in many cultural and temporal matrices". Although Escobar mentions practices, he did not take a practice-ontological view. Rather, he sees practices as one ingredient in the place-making of local groups, in addition to "constructing identities" and "social

relations". Colin McFarlane's translocal perspective also tends towards an instrumental use of practice – that is, as one element in translocal assemblages. The latter are defined as "composites of place-based social movements exchanging ideas, knowledge, practices, materials and resources across sites" (McFarlane 2009: 562). A similarly instrumental view can be seen in the tracing of mobile practices in trajectories shaping "relational places" (Anderson 2012) and contributions to "articulation" (Featherstone 2011) and work on place-based framing and development (Pierce, Martin & Murphy 2011).

What these works show, nevertheless, is that many geographical studies consider practices as constitutive of place-making. This rhymes with Massey's relational theorization of space. Massey (2005: 9) argues that space is a "product of relations-between: relations that are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out". However, the understanding of practices applied is often instrumental and generic. One sees practices as "just" another element of place-making, alongside affect, knowledge, ideas and identities. In conceiving practices in this way, geographers do not truly make use of a practice ontology. In such an ontology, practices, rather than mobile entities, constitute the mode through which worlds/places are made and experienced.

Together with Everts, Lahr-Kurten and Watson (2011), we argue that the forgoing of a practice ontology is a missed opportunity, for various reasons. First, a geographically attuned practice theory helps to unravel practices to be co-constitutive of skills, meanings and materialities. This can shed light not only on what is happening in places but also on the generation of certain effects, such as social inequality, injustice and polarization. Second, a more geographically minded practice theory helps to nuance the site-ontological focus on "material arrangements", which helps us understand the temporal fixation of organization, as well as political and social order across space. Third, as Lamers, Van der Duim and Spaargaren (2017) point out, practice theory can contribute to a better understanding of the spatial embeddedness and trajectories of practices, which also requires an interest in the role of emotions and collective feelings.

Hence, in its search for a critical, political understanding of the world, we argue that geographers and other spatial scholars should delve more methodically into the question of how practices have come to perform, and continue to perform, as ensembles of skills, understandings, meanings, engagements, and so on in diverse and connected socio-material settings. Changing places and studying what changes happen within and between them in return means changing the understanding of how practices shape places and their activities. What we need to remember, indeed, is that practices do not take shape solely as entities that travel and land into places. Crucially, practices shape places, including their relations to other places. Practices, in short, are

utterly spatial, and thus political, too. In the next section, we discuss how practice approaches may benefit from taking the spatial and political dimensions of practices better into account if they are to further the enquiry into socio-spatial transformation, emancipation and equity.

## THE POTENTIAL OF COMBINING SPATIAL THEORIES WITH PRACTICE APPROACHES

Our argument here is that geographers and other spatial scholars have much to gain from using practice theory. As spatial scholars ourselves, we are convinced that practice approaches will benefit from a deeper engagement with geographical understandings of place and space. Until recently, many practice scholars have been predominantly invested in conceptualizations of the socially internal composition of practices (or the insides of practices). The occupation with elements of practice is not surprising. If practices are the basic “unit of inquiry” (Nicolini 2012), the question of what practices are made of is an important one to answer. A focus on practices conceptualized as “scripted” and routinized through combinations of, for instance, meanings, materialities and competences has generated important insights into how patterns of consumption change (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012), how technological innovations take hold in medicine and how public health policies can change behaviour more effectively by taking better account of the meaning of a practice such as smoking (Blue *et al.* 2016). However, the focus on specific practices has also led to the critique that practice approaches are unable to account for large phenomena, such as climate change, border regimes and international systems of trade.

In the last few years, practice theorists have responded to this critique by expanding their conceptual and methodological frameworks. Theodore Schatzki’s development of the notion of a site ontology, based on “sites of practice”, “spaces” and “ecologies”, with an emphasis on the key aspect of “socio-material arrangements” in shaping connections and order, is one example of such theoretical developments (Schatzki 2005). The notions of “suffusing” and “threading through” (Hui, Schatzki & Shove 2017) constitute another set of theoretical advances aimed at understanding the interconnection and dynamics between (constellations of) practices. In terms of methodology, Davide Nicolini (2012) has elaborated a reflexive lens of “zooming in” and “zooming out”. Zooming in aims to unravel the local accomplishments of practices, examining the precise workings of all contributing elements and their connection to other, more distant activities (Nicolini 2012: 219). The goal of zooming out is to trail connections and sketch the nexus of which local practice bundles are part. Through an iterative process of zooming in

and out, the researcher becomes able to identify how that which is local contributes to the generation of broader effects (Nicolini 2012: 219).

These advances do allow practice theorists to gain a better grasp on large phenomena. However, as argued by Geiselhart, Runkel, Schäfer and Schmid (Chapter 9) and Ernste (Chapter 11) in this volume, practice approaches still lack attention to the spatio-temporal dimensions of practices and the places that they shape and are shaped by multiple practices. Site ontology has clearly added useful connectivity and interactivity to the understanding of (bundles of) practices. However, this largely holds on to a compositional scope, adding an external dimension to the internal one. What remains underexposed, hence, is the fundamentally ungrounded aspect of practices – that is, the “conjunctive” shaping of unique worlds that defy theoretical and methodological universality (Tsoukas 2017).

Put more concretely, by applying site ontology in this way, practice approaches may fail to account for the conflictual and heterogeneous situated processes through which practices are made and developed (see Carlsson [Chapter 2], and Munas and Smith [Chapter 4], in this volume). From a geographical perspective, such gathering is articulated from co-presence, encounters, clashes and differences (e.g. Valentine 2008; McFarlane 2011; Wilson 2017). As Massey (2005) explains so well in *For Space*, these gatherings build material, political and ethical connectivities and interdependences from “local” to “global” levels. “Smooth” practices come with spatio-temporal dimensions evened out, linearized, domesticated, with sparks of othering and clashing flickering from the beyond. To summarize, the nexus that Hui, Schatzki and Shove (2017) refer to emerges through *geographically situated* sites, spaces, landscapes and their interconnections. The spatio-temporal conjunctions of practice warrant more attention if we are to understand the power dynamics and the social and spatial inequalities that occur through and within the nexus of practice; these are the questions that come to form when studying large phenomena.

## A GEOGRAPHICAL-PROCESSUAL APPROACH TO PRACTICE

How, then, does one better grasp the geographical – that is, spatio-temporal – dimension of practices? We suggest that practice theorists make site ontology more concrete, as a way to trace conjunctions within and across worlds of practices, hence more in spatio-temporal terms. We label this as a geographical-processual approach to practice. In such a view, practice is neither a circulating entity nor a spaceless ontological starting point. The credo “There is nothing beyond practice” comes with the acknowledgement that, within practice, we find spatio-temporality, connectivity and agency always/

already emerging through practice. By approaching practice in this way, one can better understand the struggles towards, and rhythms of, stabilization and routinization (see Schapendonk, Kramsch and Munas and Smith, this volume) as well as the breaking, unmaking and changing of practices (see Carlsson and Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, this volume).

To exemplify what a geographical-processual approach to practice entails, we draw on our own work on aged care, museums and cycling practices. If one takes site ontology as the starting point, one begins with the site as the first unit of enquiry.<sup>1</sup> This is because the enactment of practices stems from the socio-material composition of entities gathered in one location (Lagendijk & Ploegmakers 2022). Crucial is the entanglement of human and non-human elements and how this constitutes social agency. For example, Carlsson's (2022) work on aged care provision shows how, in care provision, there is a joining of bodies, designed interiors, medicines, toiletries, etc., which together constitute a specific care, or caring, site (Carlsson, Pijpers & Van Melik 2022). Such gatherings of objects and subjects produce a socio-material "throwtogetherness". This entanglement induces various effects and possibilities, which can be experienced only on site.

Subsequently, at the "site" level, the bundling of practices depends on who influences and is influenced by the situatedness of a space, its functionality and its identity. Landau-Donnelly and Sethi's work on conflict-attuned museums foregrounds how spatio-temporal absence is constitutive of forging new relations of temporary presence (or emptiness) in space (Landau-Donnelly & Sethi 2022). Here, we may be reminded of Massey's notion of power as "stories-so-far", and places carrying layers of past, present and open futures within themselves. Spaces and place present, in Massey's words, "stories-so-far", a notion that can inspire practice theorists' attention for meaning, materialities and competences (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012) and teleo-affectivity and discourse (Schatzki 2019). "Stories-so-far" help us express and comprehend the significance of places as being shaped by, as well as shaping, worlds of practices in unique yet deeply connected ways. In one way or another, all chapters here convey "stories-so-far" for their topic, cases and contexts. Some chapters also embark on future stories, by engaging with utopian thinking. We now turn to these chapters.

## CALLING FOR A MULTIALOGUE

We can summarize this introductory overview as follows: although geographers certainly cite practice scholars referring to the spread and circulation of practices, and practice literature occasionally refers to the conceptualizations

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1. This is similar to the methodological approach of zooming in and out (Nicolini 2012).

of space, a more substantive dialogue is lacking. More specifically, for geographers, practice theories often engage too little with concrete conceptualizations of place. Although practice theories do speak to the rootedness, situatedness or embeddedness of practices in social fabrics, or spatio-material arrangements (Schatzki 2019), and practice theories have highlighted how practices change through mobility as they travel (Shove & Pantzar 2005), the latter accounts have done little to theorize the history, the multiplicity or simply the placement and position of place in practices and their conjunctions. Relational geographies do highlight multiplicity, historicity and heterogeneity of place, but they may still be criticized for not paying enough attention or offering enough tools to understand how socio-material relations are made and come to matter in evolving worlds of practices (Carlsson 2022).

Our key message is that understanding and engaging with place from a perspective of change stands to benefit from more dialogue between relational geographies and practice theories in their respective plurality. On the one hand, relational geography has built much more on assemblage thinking than practice approaches. Put simply, this has fostered a notion of practice as a lens through which to understand how certain circulating entities help to shape places and spaces as spatial assemblages. On the other hand, practice theory has engaged relatively little with spatial theory and assemblage thinking. Turning practice theories towards more geographical-processual thinking, we argue, could help practice theories to broaden perspectives on practices, overcoming the pitfalls of essentializing and avoiding an instrumental view on site ontology that fails to account for conflict, heterogeneity, power difference and (spatial) inequality. Our plea for a geographical-processual practice perspective thus calls for a multilogue between practice theories, relational geographies and the other theoretical approaches of socio-spatiality mentioned so far, and beyond. We consider the subsequent chapters as the beginning of this multilogue.

The chapters are divided into three sections: change-oriented empirical studies; more conceptual accounts of everyday practices; and theorizing newness. The chapters in [Part I](#), “Struggling Empirically Towards Transformation”, apply and elaborate practice theory to shed light on the arrangements and struggles in which change of practice is sought. To begin with, **Hanna Carlsson** uses the case of women’s inclusion in the global sport of boxing to articulate a spatial practice theory of change towards inclusion. Describing change as horizontal, circulatory and accumulative, the chapter challenges a structuralist approach, which assumes that “bottom-up” social change occurs through a unidirectional and vertical trajectory. Seeing change as occurring horizontally, and thus often as a spatially uneven process, the chapter invites the readers to see struggles as evidence that change is ongoing. The fact that female boxers experience tension as they move between



different spaces in the boxing nexus does not mean that there has been no change. Rather, the tension highlights that women boxers are negotiating oppression, in and out with themselves, because emancipation has already begun to take place.

Thereafter, **Arnoud Legendijk and Mark Wiering** provide insight into the compelling initiative of “Recognition and Rewards” in Dutch academia (“Erkennen en Waarderen”), policies that set out to push back against the creeping neoliberalization, precarity and performance obsession in and of academic work. On the one hand, the authors point to the multiple faces of power articulating itself in episodic, dispositional, systemic ways, which reinforce why things do *not* change. On the other hand, they provide a hopeful outlook on how alternative measures of academic labour can (re)orient us towards practices of academia that are founded on intellectual curiosity, uniqueness and care.

The section is concluded with a chapter by **Mohamed Munas and Lothar Smith** on Sri Lankan diasporic communities’ multi-sited practices of engagement with postwar development, ranging from providing quasi-state aid to informal and partially intangible resources such as knowledge, ideas, human capital and hope. Considering the seeds of new, postwar socio-spatial orders, the authors explore transboundary and translocal practices in Sri Lanka that challenge the existing distribution of power and resources. Via a series of empirical vignettes, they discuss settings of relocation, resettlement and distribution of micro-funding for postwar development as trajectories towards practising transformation.

Taking on more conceptual challenges, [Part II](#), “Essays on Practising Contested Everyday Life”, gathers studies zooming in on how practice thinking can yield a more politicized account of concretely localized, everyday practices.

**Friederike Landau-Donnelly and Lucas Pohl** develop a post-foundational account of practices, and practice ontologies, derived from radical lack or negativity, as well as conflict and contingency. Based on the assumption that practice “is” nothing but its practised articulations, the chapter tackles how practices play out both in routinized complexes of power and “politics” and, more subtly, in everyday forms of “the political”. Their case entails everyday life and (lack of) encounter during the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapter, in short, exemplifies how practices not only contribute to the construction of hegemonic power but can also serve to unground the latter.

Next, **Joris Schapendonk** gives insight into his own embodied experience of shaping not just new practices of encounter among parents in his son’s school but also how to gather to develop a new practice of anti-deportation protest in the face of classmates being displaced. Although Schapendonk conceptualizes this newly emerging practice as social infrastructure or platform,



he also emphasizes the fragile and transitory nature of socially infrastructured practices. In sum, the chapter impressively shows that practices are neither always shared nor should they be assumed to be shared by very differently positioned and privileged bodies.

Then, **Olivier Thomas Kramsch** takes us on a tour of his pandemic two-room apartment, offering reflections into new practices of everyday life throughout a global pandemic. With a kaleidoscopic view on his multi- and translocal life, the chapter straddles memories of childhood joy, long-ago friendships, encounters and daily practices of keeping one's body grounded via routinized movements, gestures and thought. The chapter thus recounts how memory is practised through repetition, but also through heartfelt memories of friendship, connection and loss.

**Part III** of the book, "Theorizing New Phenomena and Practices", discusses novel terminologies and perspectives to grapple with the multiple positions of subjectivity, agency and imagination that unfold via practice-oriented research. In unique ways, the chapters critique practice theories for conceptual shortcomings, and offer different ways of investigating the unfolding of the unknowable. First, **Freek de Haan** provides an assemblage-theoretical account of privacy politics via a practice-theoretical lens. Underlining the ethical and political implications of practices of privacy protection and surveillance, respectively, de Haan advances practice theories as an analytical device to empirically confront and theoretically conceptualize the multiplicity of privacy. He proposes privacy as an *effect* of practices of surveillance and unpacks different modes of "veillance" that capture their individually internalized and socially (re-)enforced, normative-affective and political appearances.

Second, **Klaus Geiselhart, Simon Runkel, Susann Schäfer and Benedikt Schmid** develop their own practice research vocabulary, including the range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability of social phenomena as categories in the empirical analysis of practices. Offering a radically relational and non-essentialist view on the co-construction of space and social practices, the authors not only broaden Schatzki's reifying notion of "large social phenomena" towards smaller issues but also propose a toolkit of transformative empirical research approaches, which shift the focus on phenomena as contextual "matters of concern" rather than objective "matters of fact".

Third, **Peter Ache** contends with the unknowable novelty and radical openness of planning practices. With the help of vision-making, Ache nudges towards thinking about ways in which to practise spatial planning for, and of, the future. Using an outlook on past, present and intended futures, Ache discusses various cases in which the seeds of utopian planning practice might already have taken shape. In his conclusion, he encourages us to think – and

to dream – about how to practise utopia as a nexus of practices that gives room for heterogeneity and physical encounters to shape a political project with a socially transformative ambition.

Also engaging with utopian thinking, **Huib Ernste** challenges some of the basic underpinnings of practice theories, especially in the version that tries to align itself with critical posthumanism, and suggests that their own proclamations of criticality do not go far enough. With the ambition of rereading this critical posthumanist practice-theoretical conception of agency in favour of a more radical critical agency-centred approach, he draws on Helmuth Plessner's philosophical anthropology, which tries to avoid the renewed essentialization of the human agent in social practices. Following Plessner, he assumes that the human agent is inherently critical and self-critical and in search of its position within social practices. Ernste is of the opinion that hitherto critical posthumanistic practice-theoretical conceptualizations of the agent have not been far-reaching enough, thus leading him to advocate the conceptualization of a more critical human agent in these social practices.

Where do we wiggle from here?  
Your taste after defeat

Why is it then that we practise?  
Thrown together in practice  
Thrown into practiceness  
How not to practise?  
Thrown apart due to practice

Friederike Landau-Donnelly

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**PART I**

**STRUGGLING EMPIRICALLY TOWARDS  
TRANSFORMATION**



## CHAPTER 2

# SPORTS AND SPACE INVADERS: PRACTICE-THEORETICAL TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND CHANGE TOWARDS INCLUSION

*Hanna Carlsson*

I always liked the fact that I changed minds when I was in the ring boxing. I remember there was a coach when I boxed when I was younger and he would say: “I would never have females in my gym.” Then he saw me boxing, and he was like, “Wow, you’d beat some of my lads; I am going to let girls train in the gym now”, and it was just so, so nice to hear.

Olympic gold medallist Nicola Adams,  
*BBC Extra Time*, 28 April 2015

Women are now able to participate in spaces they used to be excluded from. The world of professional sports is one such example, where women are measuring their power against each other on football fields and rugby pitches and in boxing rings. Only a couple of decades ago female competition in these spaces was unthinkable, and in some cases even forbidden. In her seminal book titled *Space Invaders: Bodies, Gender and Race out of Place*, Nirmal Puwar argues that “the arrival of women and racialized minorities in spaces from which they have been historically or conceptually excluded is an illuminating paradox. It is illuminating because it sheds light on how spaces have been formed through what has been constructed out. And it is intriguing because it is a moment of change” (Puwar 2004: 1).

Puwar and other scholars with an interest in the dynamics of exclusion have shown that simply being *allowed* into a place does not mean that the place has become more inclusive in meaningful ways. Drawing on Massey (1994), Puwar makes the point that social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy (Puwar 2004: 8). Both bodies and spaces are socially and politically constructed, and have histories that influence what meaning is

attached to a particular body in a particular space. Even though the rules of a space change, the norms about which bodies fit into it may stay the same. As a result, those that do not fit the somatic norm are seen by others as “space invaders” and excluded, for example through both deliberate and unconscious acts of racism and sexism (Ahmed 2012; Puwar 2004; Tjønndal 2019).

In light of such evidence, the reader may ask themselves to what extent space invaders can be agents of change. As the aforementioned quote from the interview with boxer and Olympic gold medallist Nicola Adams suggests, they certainly can be. Adams, and many other boxers, have reported that seeing women box and/or spar with other women has “changed minds” by challenging stereotypes that boxing is a men’s sport (see, for example, Carlsson 2017 and Channon 2012). This has, in turn, opened gym spaces and arenas to women<sup>1</sup> as well as spaces they were traditionally unable to compete in, such as the Olympic Games.

The aim of this chapter is to present a theoretical framework that helps scholars to analyse how, and under which conditions, space invaders can become agents of change towards inclusion within a global “landscape of practices” (Carlsson 2022). In setting out this theoretical framework, I draw together insights from critical diversity scholars and relational geographers investigating the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in spaces (see, for example, Simonsen 2016 and Massey 2005) and practice theorists focused on inclusion (Janssens & Steyaert 2020; van Eck 2022) and social change (Schatzki 2019; Nicolini 2010; Watson 2017). I apply this framework to women’s boxing.

The reason I have chosen women’s boxing to develop this theory of social change is as personal as it is scholarly: I was a competitive boxer from 2010 to 2015, and thereafter engaged in the sport recreationally in three different countries (Scotland, Sweden and the Netherlands). This engagement means that I have built up a familiarity with the boxing world as an athlete, a fan and a friend of coaches and other athletes. As a scholar, I have also conducted a study on gender construction in the boxing gym using the auto-ethnographic method of apprenticeship (Carlsson 2017). Together with examples from newspaper articles and scholarly literature published between 2002 and 2022, these experiences underpin the analysis.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First I review the geographical and practice-theoretical literature on places and practices of inclusion and exclusion. In particular, I bring together insights from Doreen Massey’s (2005) relational approach to space, Theodore Schatzki’s (2001, 2019) site ontology, Maddy Janssens’s and Chris Steyart’s (2020) “sites of diversalizing” and Matt

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1. Exhibition bouts between elite women amateur boxers for the Olympic Committee was an integral part of the campaign to include women’s boxing in the 2012 Olympics.



Watson's (2017) practice-theoretical take on the sociology of translation to understand the spatial dynamics of practices of exclusion. Thereafter I briefly sketch how the sport of boxing has evolved in the twenty-first century relative to the inclusion of women. Having set the scene, I then apply a practice-theoretical lens to concrete events in boxing such as the Olympic Games.

I first describe how boxing gyms become "sites of diversalizing" (as defined by Janssens & Steyaert 2020). Then I show how women's acquirement of "pugilistic capital" (Wacquant 1995), the embodied abilities and tendencies to win boxing competitions, transforms socio-spatial relationships in the gym. Having analysed events in the gym, I move the focus to sites of competition and highlight how participation in such events allows women to become intermediaries of a new "somatic" norm (Puwar 2021). Using the notion of "centres of legitimization and distribution" and "bandwagons of change" (Nicolini 2010), I make the case that we best understand transformations towards equality, such as the ones in boxing, as an accumulative and circulatory process, which can begin in peripheries of a nexus of practices and become accelerated when it reaches its centre. Last, I highlight that, because of the horizontal nature of such transformation, the process of change is likely to be spatially and temporally uneven. The chapter concludes that the practice-theoretical framework presented can help us to take seriously the hard-won achievements of "space invaders", without resorting to the naivety of "happy diversity talk"<sup>2</sup> (Ahmed 2007; see also Lagendijk and Wiering, Chapter 3 in this volume).

## SITE ONTOLOGIES OF IN/EXCLUSION

Within the discipline of human geography, feminist geographers have theorized that places are not neutral but sites in which unequal gendered and racialized social orders are reproduced (Massey 1994). Through studies of hardcore body-building gyms (Johnston 1996), rugby clubs (van Campenhout & van Hoven 2014), karate clubs (Maclean 2019) and public spaces in general (Simonsen 2016; see also Schapendonk, Chapter 6 in this volume), geographers have uncovered the everyday practices through which places exclude some individuals while including others. This can occur through Othering in everyday practices such as eating in school cafeterias (Simonsen 2016), feminine and masculine coding of the material assemblage of the gym (Johnston

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2. The term "happy diversity talk" was coined by Ahmed (2007) and refers to instances when institutions choose to celebrate diversity as a way to avoid discussing differences in power, opportunity and social well-being between those who belong to the somatic norm and those who do not.

1996) and through men taking up space at the expense of women in the karate hall (Maclean 2019).

Inspired by the work of some of these feminist geographers, Puwar (2021) extends the argument of places being gendered and racialized by showing that places have “somatic norms”. Drawing on her research in the British parliament, Puwar (2004) finds that somatic norms stipulated which bodies were readily recognized as practitioners and therefore as belonging to the parliament. For example, although new white male parliamentarians were recognized as such, women and racialized minorities were often mistaken for secretaries or cleaners. Puwar posits that somatic norms that inform who is “in” or “out of place” become established over time and are derived from representations of historically well-respected practitioners, real and imagined, in statues, paintings, media and literature. These representations create “a historically constituted centrifugal figure” by which new practitioners are measured (Puwar 2021: 263). In the case of British parliamentary politics, the embodiment of that figure is white, male and upper/middle class (Puwar 2021). Drawing on insights from relational geography, Puwar (2021) further shows how the dynamics of exclusion in a place can be enforced through its socio-spatial relationships to other, different, kinds of places. In the case of the British parliament, such places include single-sex public schools and male member-only clubs, which, traditionally are the remit of affluent white men and boys. When current and potential parliamentarians pass through these sites they build connections with each other, further entrenching somatic norms in the parliament.

Puwar’s use of relational geography paints a somewhat bleak picture of the possibilities of achieving more inclusionary places. Yet relational geography also offers radical hope. If we assume that space is produced through interrelations, things can always be done differently (Massey 2005; see also Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, Chapter 5 in this volume). Like Landau-Donnelly and Pohl (this volume) and Legendijk and Wiering (this volume), I argue that practice theory is a useful way to further theorize exactly how such processes of change might occur. The work of Janssens and Steyaert (2020) and Dide van Eck (2022), and my work on landscapes of care (Carlsson 2022), support this proposition.

Janssens and Steyaert (2020) and van Eck (2022) studied processes of inclusion in the organizational spaces of a dance company and an airport security line, respectively. They shed light on how the material arrangement and doing of work can unsettle unequal relations between the sexes and among generations. According to Janssens and Steyaert (2020), inclusion can happen through three types of practices: mixing, inverting and affirming. Mixing refers to the “active combining of individuals with a different background through which routine and habitual norms and roles are left behind”

(Janssens & Steyaert 2020: 1150). Inverting is defined as “reversing stereotypical roles and assumptions as well as enlarging and valuing the differences through which multiple contrasting positions were accomplished” (1158). Affirming, lastly, is described as “constantly experimenting with and repeating the new different, unusual and contrasting positions” (1161). Altogether, the authors argue that the dance company becomes a “site of diversalising”, in which multiplicity is the norm through the intertwining of the aforementioned practices.

Van Eck (2022) zooms in further and highlights how elements of practices serve an important function in facilitating inclusion. She finds that the rule that stipulated that women were to be searched by women meant that hiring practices changed, leading to greater staff diversity in terms of gender. The material arrangements of the security line and the rules about how long one is allowed to do one task meant that the entire team were expected to do all tasks, leading to greater mixing of men and women. The teleo-affective ends of airport security work, which involves the shared responsibility of identifying security threats, creates a mutual vulnerability within the team and helps workers to create affective and egalitarian relationships across gender and racial differences. Van Eck thus shows how the rules, teleo-affective ends and material arrangements of a practice bundle can foster inclusion in itself even when inclusion is not the intended outcome of the practice.

If Janssens and Steyaert (2020) and van Eck (2022) analyse the conditions under which sites of practice can create inclusionary effects, Carlsson, Pijpers and Van Melik (2022) focus on how practitioners can use their bounded creativity to adapt a practice to make it more inclusive. The term “bounded creativity” refers to the fact that, although practitioners rely on shared meanings, materials and competences to perform a certain practice, their performances are not necessarily identical. Rather, the performance of practices are acts “of poiesis, creation, intervention, and improvisation ... Practices are literally reproduced on each novel occasion” (Nicolini 2012: 226). Because practices are always performed anew, in a specific situation, and therefore leave room for improvisation, there is space for practitioners to alter the practice by varying how it is performed.

In the study by Carlsson, Pijpers and Van Melik (2022), the authors find that care workers added religious activities and rituals to activities taking place at a daycare centre. These workers also brought in other types of furniture and adapted the meals and the music played to create an affective atmosphere, which aligned with the life world of the older people they sought to reach. These material changes in specific sites made the practice of daycare, which was foreign to many older migrants, more attractive to enrol in. Although the bounded creativity of managers and care workers created a more inclusionary site of practice, the transformation also led to tensions

within the wider practice bundle of municipal aged care provision. The choice to serve warm meals, for example, was contested by the municipal policy officers who contracted daycare, who asked for such choices to be legitimized within “Dutch care norms”, in which simple and cheaper meals, such as a cold sandwich, are standard lunch food. Transformation towards inclusion at one site triggered conflict and the need for negotiation and translation within the wider “practice arrangement bundle” (Schatzki 2011). Despite these issues, this example highlights that individual practitioners can create more inclusive spaces by enacting bounded creativity.

Insights from relational geography and practice theory are useful for understanding how places exclude certain people and how the very same places can become inclusionary. The examples put forward thus far limit their analysis to what occurs in a particular city or an organization. However, I argue that the combination of site ontology and relational geography may explain how change towards inclusion spreads beyond specific places and through a national, or even global, nexus of practice.

A basic assumption of both practice theories and relational geography is that of a flat ontology. From a practice theory perspective, complex phenomena such as gender inequality transpire through a “nexus” of practices. Nexuses are defined as wider complexes and constellations of a large number of practices (Hui, Schatzki & Shove 2017). From the assumption of a flat ontology it follows that large-scale social changes are theorized as a “series of connected changes that happen to the practices of the more extensive practice-arrangement bundles of which they are part” (Lamers & Spaargaren 2016: 236). This suggests that a change in one site always has the potential to drive change through its linkages to other sites of practice.

A critique of practice theory has been that the aforementioned conceptualization of change fails to account for power differences between and within groups of people and places. Whether or not all practices are ontologically the same, the practices in the boardroom of an energy supplier arguably have greater effects on the nexus of energy consumption than the practices of energy saving performed by climate activists in a co-housing community. To account for the fact that practices differ in their capacity to influence other practices, Watson (2017: 175) suggests that we consider certain practices to be “distinctively capable of orchestrating, disciplining and shaping practices conducted elsewhere”. If we assume, like Schatzki and Massey, that practices are enplaced, this means that certain *sites of practice* have such capacities. In the words of Bruno Latour (1987), some sites come to act like “centres of calculation”.

How do we locate such sites of practice? Centres of calculation have been described as “venues in which knowledge production builds upon the accumulation of resources through circulatory movements through

other places” (Heike 2011: 158). By the logic of Latour’s centres of calculation, we can assume that the practices in such sites distinguish themselves by a high degree of connectedness to other sites/bundles, through shared teleo-affective regimes and/or linked practitioners, activities or materials. Furthermore, the practices of such sites are probably focused on “aligning and disciplining key practices” in the nexus (Watson 2017). This may occur through “metrics” (de Haan, Chapter 8 in this volume) and through practices of management, incentivizing and rule-making (Watson 2017). As practices and their intermediaries travel in a circulatory and accumulatory manner from the centre of calculation to sites that are more peripheral (in the sense that they have fewer connections), certain orders are sedimented (see also Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, this volume). In this way, a nexus that is far-flung and long-lasting is formed.

If some sites of practice can act at a distance while others remain in the periphery of a given nexus, what does this mean for the assumption in relational geography that all sites have transformational capacities (see Introduction, by Carlsson, Lagendijk and Landau-Donnelly, Chapter 1 in this volume)? Carlsson, Pijpers and Van Melik (2022) and Janssens and Steyaert (2020) hint at the possibility of inclusion spreading from “sites of diversalizing” through processes of translation and negotiation. However, in these cases, transformation does not travel further geographically than the municipality and cultural houses in the area. To investigate how intermediaries of inclusion can travel through a nexus to create what Davide Nicolini (2010) terms a “bandwagon” of transformation, I have chosen to consider the example of women in boxing.

The reader should note that my analysis remains focused on positive developments towards female inclusion in the sport, primarily in terms of equal opportunities to participate and compete, and the role that women boxers have played in those developments. In foregrounding these aspects, other dimensions of the process have been relegated to the background. More precisely, I do not discuss the many examples of sexism that women in boxing experience, even though these have been part and parcel of the fight for inclusion. I also do not discuss the position of trans and non-binary athletes, a group that, by and large, remains excluded from the sport. Furthermore, I do not consider the influence that developments towards gender equality in other sports and professions may have had on boxing. This is not because such developments do not matter from a practice-theoretical perspective. Indeed, applying a relational ontology means that “no phenomenon can be taken to be independent of other phenomena” (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011: 1242). However, investigating the relationships between social change towards gender equality in different nexuses lies outside the scope of this chapter.

## A HISTORY OF WOMEN AND BOXING

The boxing gym has often been described as a space where hegemonic masculinity is not only celebrated but actively reproduced (Hargreaves 1997; Wacquant 1995). To be able to box, despite the norms and rules that forbade or actively discouraged it, women had to be “space invaders”; sometimes even disguising themselves as men to get inside the ring. A notable example of this is Katie Taylor. Today she is a famous Irish professional boxer and Olympic gold medallist, who, in 2022, was ranked the best female pound-for-pound boxer<sup>3</sup> in the world by BoxRec.<sup>4</sup> However, in the late 1990s, when she first started to train and spar in the gym, women were not allowed to compete as boxers in Ireland. To gain competition experience, Taylor, therefore, had to disguise herself to progress in the sport. With her long hair hidden in her headguard, she competed as a boy called Kay Taylor (Morse & Anderson 2019). Although Katie Taylor and many other famous boxers have told of their struggles to access boxing gyms and to find coaches who were willing to train them, the times when women were forbidden from entering many boxing gyms now seem to belong to the past. In 2001 a 15-year-old Taylor competed in the first sanctioned women’s boxing fight in Ireland. Eleven years later, in 2012, she would be one of the first female boxers to earn an Olympic gold medal. In the 2012 Olympics women could compete only in three weight categories, compared to ten categories for men. In the 2024 Olympics, both men and women will have access to a similar number of weight categories: seven categories for men and six for women.

The inclusion of women’s boxing in the Olympics has led to more opportunities and investment in elite women’s boxing, as well as increased attention in the media and public discourse (Woodward 2014; Godoy-Pressland 2015). For example, female professional boxers are now headlining televised fights in main venues such as Madison Square Garden. In May 2022 Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano fought each other for the World Championship belts and each made \$1 million. Writing for *Sports Illustrated*, journalist Chris Mannix concludes, “This wasn’t a significant women’s fight. This was a significant fight” (Mannix 2022). Alongside an increase in income, exposure and opportunities for top athletes, a growing number of women are boxing recreationally and competitively, including in countries known to have highly traditional gender norms (Schneider 2021).

Looking at recent progress in the sport, it is tempting to narrate the inclusion of women in boxing as a linear journey. However, a closer look at the

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3. Retrieved 1 December 2022 from BoxRec: <https://boxrec.com/en/ratings>.

4. BoxRec is a website dedicated to holding updated records of professional and amateur boxers, both male and female.



history of women's boxing reveals that the transformation towards inclusion has been slow, and with stops and starts. In the 1980s and 1990s athletes such as Christy Martin and Laila Ali fought for World Championship belts in professional competitions in the United States. At the time, they were described as the athletes who legitimized women's boxing, somewhat similar to how Olympic stars such as Katie Taylor and Nicola Adams are described in the 2010s and 2020s. That said, although women are formally allowed to train and compete, they still experience exclusion in ways that are similar to the parliamentarians in Puwar's (2004) study, and the female bodybuilders discussed by Johnston (1996). Studies in Norway and the United Kingdom reveal that women frequently lack support from elite coaches and officials, financial sponsorships and backing from family, friends and (potential) partners (Oftadeh-Moghadam *et al.* 2020; Tjørndal 2019). Women volunteers report having to repeatedly prove their knowledge and competence as coaches and judges just because of their sex. They are also found to carry out tasks such as cleaning and providing emotional support to boxers more often than their male counterparts (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury 2022).

Although the change towards inclusion is slow, and there are still signs of sex-based discrimination, the global sport of boxing has changed. From being barred from even entering boxing gyms, women are now placed centre stage in the Olympics and at iconic boxing sites such as Madison Square Garden. Women increasingly occupy roles on national boxing committees and work as judges, referees and boxing promoters. The space invasion, to borrow Puwar's (2004) term, of women has no doubt been a key driver of this transformation. It has allowed them to freely participate in individual boxing gyms to competitions, board rooms and boxing-related sites across the entire world. In the remainder of this chapter, I use the conceptual tools presented in the literature review to theorize how that transformation has occurred.

## BOXING AS A GLOBAL LANDSCAPE OF PRACTICE

Boxing can be considered a global landscape of practice: a nexus including constellations of practice bundles dispersed across many different countries. When thinking of boxing, the images that come to most people's minds are those of athletes training or competing. Boxers exchanging punches in the ring under the limelight or sweat while skipping, as in the iconic Rocky Balboa film series. The boxing gym is indeed the core "practice-arrangement bundle" (Schatzki 2011: 4) of the sport: it is the most numerous site of practice in the wider landscape.

Commonly, a boxing gym contains a roped square ring for practice contests, also called sparring. In addition, there are open spaces for warming up, doing

bodyweight exercises to increase one's fitness and for practising footwork and punch combinations, either individually in an exercise called shadow boxing or in pairs with other gym goers. Lastly, there are so-called heavy bags: sacks hanging from the ceiling on which to practise punches. In many boxing gyms, novices and more advanced boxers train together across age groups. Although ladies-only sessions are popular in many countries, general training tends to be mixed-sex. Training sessions are held by coaches who show the exercises and give participants feedback on their execution. The teleo-affective end in the boxing gym is to acquire pugilistic capital, defined as a "set of abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles and income streams" (Wacquant 1995: 65–7). Although "looking the part" is certainly of value (Paradis 2012), the primary capital remains the ability to box well and to "pay one's dues" (Wacquant 1995; Dortants & Knoppers 2016; Carlsson 2017). To valorize and gain pugilistic capital, one must spar and participate in boxing competitions.

Boxing competitions, like boxing gyms, are a common type of site in the landscape. All practices of boxing competitions have similarities. Boxing contests consist of rounds that are two or three minutes long, interspersed with one-minute-long breaks. During the break the opponents return to their corners to receive water and advice from their coaches and care from the "cut man", a person responsible for preventing and treating physical damage to their fighter. The contests are overseen by a referee, who can end the fight if they deem a contestant incapable of safely continuing or if a contestant chooses to resign or is disqualified. If the fight reaches the final round with both contestants still standing, the winner is decided by the judge's scorecards. Although the practices of competing are similar, there are two types of boxing competitions: amateur boxing and professional boxing. Amateur boxing has shorter and fewer rounds and competitors wear more protective gear. Amateur boxers can represent their countries in competitions such as the Olympics and the World Championships. Professional boxers compete for prize money and titles. This branch of the sport is less cohesively organized; boxers fight for titles given by different boxing associations and there are several World Championship belts. When one becomes a professional boxer, it is common and often beneficial for one's ranking to have had a (successful) amateur career. Although the competition sites differ in kind, they are thus connected through the athletes, through the audience and through the experience in one site enabling participation in another.

To become a legitimate boxer who is allowed to compete, one must have a boxing licence. Gaining a boxing licence requires a medical examination by a doctor. In the case of professional boxing, a heart scan and various neurological tests and blood work are often required. Boxing licences, as well as venue



licences to host competitions, are awarded and regulated by national boxing associations. The latter are also responsible for holding national competitions and for selecting and training the national team. In the case of professional boxing, competitions are set up by boxing promoters. These are agencies that identify and contract talented boxers, negotiate contests on their behalf and then promote the fight, including the selling of pay-per-view licences and tickets to attend the live event.

In addition to gyms, sports halls and arenas, boxing practices take place in board rooms, managers' offices, doctors' practices and television studios. In these respective sites practices such as officiating, medical examinations, reporting, managing and rule-making are performed. How do all these associated practices hang together? If we apply the concepts of Schatzki's (2001) site ontology and the associated theory of social change (Schatzki 2019), we can identify two key elements. The first element consists of shared rules and regulations regarding the competition. Despite some internal variations, these rules regulate training, judging and competing, including who is allowed to compete (sex and weight categories, licensure) and under which conditions (rules of the game). The second element is a shared teleo-affective end. As already pointed out, the main such end in a boxing gym is to acquire "pugilistic capital" (Wacquant 1995: 66–7). This teleo-affective end connects all sites and practices, because, to amass pugilistic capital, one must travel from the gym to sites of competition – or, in practice terms, circulate through the nexus. In the case of more famous boxers, the circulation of text and audiovisuals also adds to the pugilistic capital; fame is often instrumental in gaining access to title fights and their associated income streams. Although this description of boxing is not exhaustive, it serves to sketch the global "landscape of practices" (Carlsson 2022; see also Lagendijk and Wiering, this volume) that constitutes the sport.

### BOXING GYMS AS "SITES OF DIVERSALIZING"

To tell the story of how women managed to "invade" the landscape of boxing, we must begin in the most numerous of its sites: the boxing gym. Looking at boxing gyms through the lens of practice theories on inclusion shows that boxing gyms lend themselves well to becoming "sites of diversalizing". According to Janssens and Steyaert (2020), *diversalizing* occurs through the practices of mixing and inverting. In boxing gyms, people from different backgrounds, sexes and abilities are not only co-present in space but actively involved in embodied activities such as sparring and practising punch combinations. These are activities that require the entanglement of practitioners' bodies with each other. Because women have been, and in many cases still

are, the minority in boxing gyms, there is thus no way for women to participate in boxing training without “mixing” occurring. As shown by both Channon (2012) and Carlsson (2017), these interactions between men and women boxers often lead to “inversion” (Janssens & Steyaert 2020). In his doctoral thesis, Alex Channon describes how his first experience sparring with a woman forced him to reconsider his prior assumptions about women’s capabilities as fighters:

I remember the trepidation well: I was stepping into the unknown as I squared up to what suddenly felt like my first “real” fight with a girl. Without wanting to embellish all the details of what happened next, our sparring session ended following a hit to my head which sent me to the floor. She had caught me on the ear with a roundhouse kick, which had snapped my head to the side, causing my brain to bounce against the inside of my skull, dazing me. The hit to the ear had also momentarily affected my ability to balance and to hear. I remember feeling stunned as she checked me, knowing that I would be unable to continue. I had just been knocked out by a girl. The effects of this event are difficult to overstate. While it would be some time before I understood enough about feminist theory to adequately theorize my own situation, this forceful, direct, undeniable demonstration of female power had rocked my assumptions about the sexes and would remain with me for the rest of my training career.

(Channon 2012: 7–8)

Not all encounters are as forceful as the one described. Sometimes an inversion occurs over time, as explained by Sara, a participant in my research on gender construction in boxing (see Carlsson 2017): “Over time, they realize that you can take, you know, a punch like a guy can, so then you put them out of their comfort zone and they put you out of your comfort zone and then it’s quite good, competitive sparring.”

Although mixing and inversion occur in the gym, such practices are, in contrast to an intergenerational dance company in Janssens’ and Steyaert’s (2020) study, not intentional. Like van Eck’s study (2022), much of the inclusionary potential from the gym’s practice site stems from the unifying nature of the teleo-affective end there: acquiring pugilistic capital. The cooperation and vulnerability required to fulfil this end has the potential to forge alliances between men and women through the formation of affective bonds (see also van Eck 2022).

Doing boxing training is engaging in a form of controlled violence. Those training must trust each other to hold back force that would result in injury,

while still applying sufficient force to create opportunities to acquire and test strength and skill. In boxing gyms, older and experienced gym members who are no longer competing are often asked to spar with younger athletes to help them develop specific skills and a boxer's attitude. After sparring for a while, the more experienced athlete will give a cue, such as remembering to return the right hand to the chin. During subsequent sparring the less experienced athlete will receive correction when forgetting to do so, generally through a punch marking the mistake. In my time as an athlete, I can recount many times when I was matched with a man twice my age for sparring. What stands out to me from these encounters is not the hard corrective punches I got when forgetting his advice – though many of these were given – but, rather, the mutual affection that occurred afterwards: sweaty hugs, a sense of shared experience, a feeling of belonging, a brief chat about a recent professional fight or stories about personal fight records. Considering the age of these men, their first experiences in the sport most likely occurred when women were not allowed to compete. Sparring together nevertheless meant that I was able to “pay my dues” and that we could form affective and egalitarian bonds through our shared pursuit of pugilistic capital.

According to Dortants and Knoppers (2016: 247), such egalitarian bonds can be formed because the “mechanisms for regulating diversity” are “embedded within the historical-cultural routines” of boxing. Wacquant (2005), who studied boxing gyms in the segregated and deprived areas of Chicago in the 1980s, testifies to such routines when describing how interpersonal interactions were more important than class, race or nationality in the gym. To explain why this was and continues to be the case, Dortants and Knoppers (2016) speak of an egalitarian ethos in which dedication to the practice of boxing training is what matters for one's acceptance in the gym. However, it is important to stress that the presence of such an egalitarian ethos has not automatically led to equal opportunities for women. Although the teleo-affective ends of the nexus may lend themselves to the creation of a “pugilistic melting pot” with the power “to ‘deracialize’ bodies and relations” (Wacquant 2005: 454), the “somatic norm” (Puwar 2021) of boxing gyms and its practices was, and in many places still is, that of a “lean, muscular, dark, fierce-looking” *male* body (Paradis 2012: 93). In entering the boxing gym, women have defied the maleness of this somatic norm as well as the rules banning women from competing. Mixing, inverting and the formation of affective and egalitarian bonds are all premised on women first enacting bounded creativity regarding the somatic norms of the practice. Although alliances are important, these are premised on women space invaders; space invaders thus remain agents behind making the gym a site of diversalizing.

## ALLIANCES AND INTERMEDIARIES: HOW WOMEN BOXERS AND THEIR COACHES SPREAD INCLUSION VIA COMPETITION SITES

Women's bounded creativity is the agent of change towards inclusion, but innovation must travel to transform a nexus. Nicolini, who investigated the uptake of telecare in the practice of care for cardiac patients, argues that the success of any innovation depends on "the circulation of suitable intermediaries who/that can enrol new powerful allies and build a network of relationships and dependencies. When such a network grows big enough, it cannot be ignored and automatically becomes an object of imitation and later a source of conformist pressure" (Nicolini 2010: 1014).

The status of boxing coaches is intimately tied to the success of their athletes (Dortants & Knoppers 2016). As a result, there has been a strong incentive for coaches to ally themselves with talented women to amass pugilistic capital at competitions. In some cases these alliances may have been based on a common struggle to have women's pugilistic capital recognized. Katie Taylor and her father and coach Pete Taylor, for example, fought for the right for women to compete in Ireland. In other cases coaches have been motivated to team up with women upon recognizing their earning potential as boxers (van Ingen 2021).

If boxing gyms are a site on the periphery of the landscape (in the sense that they have limited connections to other sites and little influence on the rules of the game or the distribution of fame, recognition and resources), competitions can be considered more central. This is because competitions are sites in which more practices come together and in which practitioners from many different locations meet. Some competition sites are highly prestigious, such as the World Championships, the Olympics or boxing galas in Madison Square Garden. Others are less prestigious, such as club shows and regional events.

In travelling to competition sites, we can consider women as intermediaries of innovation. In the early days of women's boxing the only competition sites that women were able to access were less prestigious and thus less "central" to the nexus. Nevertheless, by travelling to these *sites* women boxers had the opportunity to gain pugilistic capital for themselves and their coaches. The presence of women in sites of competition has an accumulative effect because increased visibility can lead to the recruitment of new women boxers. This effect goes beyond the mere "inspiration" often referred to in newspapers. When there are more women boxers in the gyms, there are more potential competitors and training partners. Since competitions are so important for amassing pugilistic capital, and boxing competitions are segregated by sex, such recruitment is crucial. The increased visibility and possibilities for gaining pugilistic capital, both for athletes and coaches, spread and enforce change in the gyms.

## CENTRES OF LEGITIMIZATION AND REDISTRIBUTION: THE ROLE OF SITES SUCH AS THE OLYMPIC GAMES

An overview of the history of women's boxing highlights that inclusion in major sport events has propelled the popularity and the legitimacy of the sport forward: female participation in the Olympics, in particular, can be considered a groundbreaking moment (Channon & Matthews 2015; Woodward 2014). Building on Watson (2017), I suggest that framing the Olympics as a centre of legitimization and redistribution helps us understand what occurred when women boxers competed in the Olympics for the first time.

The Olympic Games function as a centre of (re)distribution because they (re)arrange material resources in the landscape of practice. Before the 2012 Olympics, elite women boxers reported receiving very little support from national associations (Oftadeh-Moghadam *et al.* 2020). In contrast, in the build-up to the 2012 Olympic Games, women boxers received similar support to that of the male boxers in state-of-the-art facilities in London (Ingle 2012). In Sweden, the inclusion of women boxers in the Olympics similarly led to a restructuring of the national team (*Dagens Nyheter* 2005).

The site of the Olympics also functions as a centre of legitimization. Since the Olympics is heavily covered by media, participating in the Games infers pugilistic capital through prestige and public attention. These elements can, in turn, be mobilized into greater ticket sales during a professional career and/or in the securing of sponsorship and support between events. In an article on the coverage of women's professional events by pay-per-view channels, boxer Mikaela Mayer points to this effect: "This is the first time in history that women have been able to approach promoters and say 'Hi, I am a five-time national champion, World medallist, an Olympian, an Olympic *gold* medalist.' Our skills and talent simply cannot be denied anymore" (Doerer 2018, emphasis added).

The effect of women's inclusion in the Olympics can indeed be observed in the related practice of professional boxing. Even though women were able to compete for the World Championship belts in the 1990s, their bouts have been televised by pay-per-view channels only since the 2012 Olympics. This has both increased the visibility of women's boxing and created more financial opportunities for female athletes.

### A BANDWAGON OF TRANSFORMATION

As the rules and norms have gradually changed in more central sites within the landscape of practice, supporting women boxers has become more attractive. Over time the increased circulation of women boxers, news about

them and alliances they form with, for example, coaches and managers has created a “bandwagon of transformation”. Discussing the uptake of remote technology in care for heart patients, Nicolini argues that, when a network of intermediaries and allies grows big enough that it can no longer be ignored, it “automatically becomes an object of imitation and later a source of conformist pressure” (Nicolini 2010: 1014). In newspaper articles about women’s boxing, there are indications that such conformist pressure has been reached. Swedish elite boxing coach Walter Mohr was a well-known opponent of female participation in the sport. However, in 2010 he began to coach athlete Natalie Lungo. He describes this change of perspective as one that was inevitable. In an interview with a national newspaper, he told the reporter that he could not “walk around and say that I will not work with women boxers forever” (Nordström 2010). In light of how well established the sport had become, he decided to change his mind and begin to coach women.

Boxing promoter Frank Warren is often quoted as having had to change his mind too, or, as he expresses it, having “to eat humble pie” (Warren 2017). In a blog post in 2014, Warren writes: “I make no bones about it. I don’t like women’s boxing. Never have and never will” (Boxing Scene 2014). However, he later changed his mind – a shift that he explains in the following way in a 2017 *Good Morning Britain* interview:

[I changed my mind] I think because of the standard; you had outstanding female boxers, like Nicola, but their opponents just were not so good, in some cases. And I think the standard has dramatically improved. And my kids – my daughter, especially, has been banging my head, saying: “Get with the times; you are supposed to be here today. Why are you treating women differently?” I think it is because of how I grew up: chauvinistic and a bit ignorant. Women are in the army, they are fighter pilots, they are doing jobs men do, and that is the way the world is now.<sup>5</sup>

In this interview excerpt, Warren is highlighting how the accumulation of pugilistic capital by women came to eventually convince him despite his prior reservations, which seem to have been tied mainly to strong somatic norms (i.e. women boxers did not “float his boat”, as he puts it). It is also clear that the change felt inevitable; women’s inclusion is “the way the world is now”. Although there is no doubt that many men will continue to oppose women’s boxing, many others have gone on to readdress their position. This indicates that women’s boxing has undergone a bandwagon effect.

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5. Available on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlxM7OI7VU0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlxM7OI7VU0).

## NOT A HAPPY DIVERSITY STORY

As referred to in the introduction, Puwar (2004) argues that the arrival of space invaders often presents researchers with a paradox. The presence of women in a traditionally male space highlights how that site of practice is premised on exclusion through the somatic norm. At the same time, the entry of those who do not fit the somatic norm indicates that the space is changing. In this chapter, I have used the case of boxing to argue that space invaders, at least in some cases, do more than signify a change. They become agents and intermediaries of the change that they signify, not just in the site they invade but also in the wider landscape in which that site is embedded.

In discussing how women have become agents of inclusionary change in boxing, I have foregrounded the positive developments that we have seen in the sport during the last three decades. However, it is important to emphasize that the inclusion of women in boxing by no means is a “happy diversity” story (Bell & Hartmann 2007). In the boxing gym, women have been beaten up when sparring with men, sometimes as a means to block the potential for inversion and mixing (van Ingen 2021). There is also continued evidence of sexism and, in some cases, racism against women boxers, coaches, judges and officials (Oftadeh-Moghadam *et al.* 2020; Tjønndal 2019; Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury 2022; McCree 2015). Looking back at their careers, many elite women boxers recount experiences of discrimination and missed opportunities – pain that, for some, has been compounded by the fact that they never got to enjoy the advancement they brought about in the sport themselves. In an interview, Jane Couch, who fought to make women’s boxing in the United Kingdom legal, explains to a journalist how she looks back on her career with sadness: “It was actually cruel what [the boxing authorities and promoters] did to me. The more I look at it the more I think: ‘Why couldn’t I have got the right manager or trainer to look after me like they’re looking after the girls now?’” (MacRae 2022).

The circular accumulation of positive change has thus occurred through and alongside violent conflict. In addition, there are corners of the landscape where transformation towards inclusion is yet to occur. For example, some countries do not send their women boxers to the Olympics. Similarly, there are gyms where women are not allowed to spar with men, even in countries with many famous women boxers (Dortants & Knoppers 2016). In light of the evidence of continued discrimination, boxing scholars such as Anne Tjønndal (2019) argue that the sport has not seen meaningful change. Although I agree that we cannot speak of a happy diversity story, I argue that a practice-theoretical lens allows us to speak of a hopeful one.



## CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM HOPEFUL DIVERSITY STORIES

Using practice theory and relational geography, this chapter has shed new light on the debate in the literature on women in boxing about whether female boxers have made a meaningful impact on the sport. Those who argue that meaningful change has not yet occurred tend to take a structuralist approach, which assumes that “bottom-up” social change occurs through a unidirectional and vertical trajectory. From such a perspective, evidence of sexism indicates that women’s agency has not yet shifted the structures of the sport. In applying practice theory, I have instead proposed a horizontal and circulatory way of understanding emancipatory change.

From a practice perspective, transformation happens in multiple peripheral sites of diversalizing – in this case, boxing gyms. It then travels through discrete, but connected, sites, with each circulation leading to the accumulation of more pugilistic capital. As women have increased opportunities to gain boxing skills (and, as a result, possibilities to earn money and prestige for themselves), they have been able to build alliances with coaches, managers and promoters, all of whom have reinforced the circulation of change. When women eventually enter centres of legitimization and distribution, such as prestigious competitions, the shift towards inclusion becomes even more sedimented. Eventually, the change towards equal opportunity becomes a bandwagon: even the staunchest opponents of women’s boxing report feeling that they have since changed their minds and, in turn, their practices to include women.

Thinking of change as an accumulative and circulatory horizontal process provides researchers with a lens that is both hopeful and critical. As such, it allows scholars to take more seriously the hard-won achievements of space invaders without retorting to the naivety of “happy diversity” narratives. In acknowledging the multiplicity of practices and sites within a nexus, it is possible to explain the unevenness of change and its inherent conflicts and violence. It also sheds light on how such battles have the potential to lead to change.

The case of boxing practices has domain-specific qualities, such as its highly embodied and gendered nature. Nevertheless, I believe that the framework presented has the potential to produce new insights outside the world of boxing. Thus far, the emerging literature on inclusion and practice theory has primarily considered dynamics within specific organizational spaces, such as the airport security line or an intergenerational dance company (Janssens & Steyaert 2020; van Eck 2022). In investigating how inclusion travels through the global landscape of boxing practices, this chapter responds to the call (Janssens & Steyaert 2020) for new conceptual tools to investigate processes constraining or enabling inclusion beyond specific sites.



Applying a new theoretical framework to a case study of global proportions has limitations. The first limitation is that, although I use specific events, interviews and experiences to underpin my argument, the theory is yet to be empirically tested. Possibilities to do so include an ethnographic study of centres of legitimization and distribution. Research on the global risk insurance industry (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek & Cabantous 2015) has proved that multi-sited ethnographic analysis of such locations is an effective way to understand global phenomena from a practice perspective, even though such studies are resource- and time-intensive. Another possibility is conducting narrative interviews with women boxers and their allies to learn more about how affective bonds and pugilistic capital have been mobilized to shift somatic norms outside peripheral sites, such as the gym. Lastly, the spatial unevenness of transformation towards inclusion is evident but remains underexplored. Here, geographers have an important role to play, as social and spatial conditions have been found to shape how “transgressive capabilities might be acquired, deployed, and facilitate social change” (Brown & Ali 2022: 2453). Although we should be careful not to produce “happy diversity” narratives, much can be learned from hopeful diversity stories and the sites in which they unfold.

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## CHAPTER 3

# PRACTICES AND POWER IN PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: THE EXAMPLE OF “RECOGNITION AND REWARDS” AT DUTCH UNIVERSITIES

*Arnoud Lagendijk and Mark Wiering*

This chapter develops a “practice and power” lens and applies it to assess the actual transformation of human resources (HR) practices in Dutch academia. The starting point of this “practice and power” lens is the idea that the (re)production of the social is relationally and contingently constituted, with an important role in power dynamics. Practices present temporal and spatial habits that can be characterized as processual, contingent, performative, contextual, fluid, meaningful, normative and unheroic, among other things (Lamers & Spaargaren 2016; Mueller 2017). The first part of the chapter draws on the notions of systemic, dispositional and episodic power to capture these aspects in terms of power. We also employ Schatzki’s (2001, 2005) notion of “site ontology” and Law’s (2004) notion of “hinterland” to build a dynamic, topological approach of practice and power dynamics. Our argument thus takes some distance from practice literature that searches for formats and common elements of practices, such as the threefold interpretation by Shove (the making and breaking of links between meanings, materials and competences) (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). In particular, we focus on how practices are shaped through patterns of presences and absences, and lead to patterns of power in sites, bundles, spaces and landscapes.

Applying the practice and power lens, in the second part of the chapter we discuss the case of “Recognition and Rewards” (R&R) in Dutch academia. “Recognition and Rewards” (“Erkennen en Waarderen”) is a programme of transformation launched by the Dutch universities to rethink and improve practices of staff selection, appraisal, promotion and supervision. With the context of university-wide consultation, one of us (Lagendijk) has been involved in the drafting of one of the local R&R visions, as well as in national responses to the strategy.

## SITE ONTOLOGY, NEXUS AND SEDIMENTATION

Practices are enacted and evolved in what Schatzki (2001, 2005) aptly describes as a “site ontology”. That term provides a language of composition through which we can describe the performance and situatedness of practices. Meetings are enacted in rooms (plus equipment), assessments are made behind desks with data provided by computers and phones, and so on. Sites are where practices happen, where they are arranged and performed through individuals (such as R&R receivers and givers) entangled with socio-materiality (locations, scripts, budgets, etc.). That entanglement also entails bodily capacities, habits, affects and emotions (Schatzki 2001; Weenink & Spaargaren 2016). Sites shape subjects, and vice versa. Through joined arrangements and the bundling of practices, sites gather and pervade “spaces”. Such spaces assume both organizational and geographical forms, through which practices evolve and are sustained. Spaces can be (parts of) organizations, neighbourhoods, projects, networks, and so on dedicated to a certain activity (such as teaching or doing research). Spaces, in turn, host and equip the sites vital to their constitution and development. The language of sites, spaces and landscape helps to map where and how practices are performed, with what connections and in which settings, from local to global.

Practice theorists have further developed this thinking on the distribution and connections of practices in the volume *The Nexus of Practices* (Hui, Schatzki & Shove 2017). Drawing on Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour, contributor Watson (2017: 181) portrays the role of power relations as an integral part of the performance, distribution and connections of practice: “Tangling with questions about connections between practices takes on a sharper edge when the problem is that of explaining how some actors and sites come to be loci of a disproportionate capacity for shaping action elsewhere.” This links power close to the notion of nexus. In the words of Allison Hui (2017: 52), “Multiple practices come together as a nexus with diverse links and relationships that contribute to the production of variation within the social field or plane.” These variations, moreover, can be “identified through reference to shared spatiotemporal characteristics” (52). Nexuses are thus part of concrete processes of institutionalization and social sedimentation, which underpin routinized forms of social activity, including power relations. Nexuses help us understand the sedimentation of “specific hegemonic constellations of physical, material and symbolic power” (Landau & Pohl 2023). Such sedimentation can take the form of written (policy, vision, law, research) documents shaping knowledge and meaning, and scripts and devices providing competences and resources. Within this sedimentation, power evolves and settles at the intersection of materiality (resources) and expression (meaning, knowledge). From a nexus perspective, moreover, sedimentation can be understood through the

notion of discourse, or, to use Davide Nicolini's term, "discursive formation" (Nicolini 2017). The latter, in Nicolini's words, is "obtained by assembling existing discursive and non-discursive elements in a novel way through the institutions of new social and discursive practices" (Nicolini 2017: 108). Accordingly, "[n]exus analysis is the investigation of the forms of discursivity that circulate through specific sites of practice and which lead to the emergence of specific mediated actions and regimes of activity, for example, doing a class or appearing in court" (108–9). To understand this circulation, the next section discusses the notion of "hinterland".

## HINTERLAND

As also explained in this book's Introduction (Carlsson, Lagendijk and Landau-Donnelly, [Chapter 1](#) in this volume), practices encompass a discursive (or "expressed") dimension, which is substantiated and powered through what John Law (2004: 42) characterizes as a "crafting of presences". Law calls the context of this crafting the "hinterland". The term "hinterland" refers to the whole chain of events and connections, occurring through space and time, behind the formation of the landscape of practice. In what resembles a kind of micro-genealogical work, the challenge is to trace all relevant events, texts, crossroads and processes to reveal a practice's "hinterland of pre-existing social and material realities" (Law 2004: 13). That is, a hinterland exploration unveils what is behind current presences, notably by what has been made absent. Using Latour's (2005) actor–network theory (ANT) terminology, a hinterland exploration provides insight into how certain ideas, agents and protocols have become "obligatory passage points" in a landscape (including sites and spaces) of a practice. How do patterns of presences and absences turn particular interest into "sacred cows", and how do specific exemplary cases turn into "totem poles" drawing in hypes, hosannas and gurus? How do idiosyncratic rankings and competitions, and social media rants, turn into inescapable normalities or even become so obvious no one questions them (Runia 2018; ScienceGuide 2021b)? How are landscapes of practices filled with "truisms", "beaten tracks", and so on? How are (new) practices often advocated through "happy talk" (e.g. on diversity), which often smothers sensitivities concerning difficult social issues, as Sara Ahmed (2012) describes in her seminal work on diversity and racism? On the one hand, "happy talk" presents a major affective driver, moving the happy talkers to "totem pole" positions. On the other hand, "happy talk" disheartens and excludes those affected by a painful practice, and who are in need of more radical change and recognition. In this light, a particularly interesting form of presence in academia is the "streetlight effect", or

the “drunkard’s search”. Such presence is based on the use of available, easy methods that shed a very narrow and skewed light on the issue (Molas-Gallart & Ràfols 2018). This yields practices more based on affect and sentiment (a strong wish for “numbers to compare”) than on proper argument and measure in appraisal and quality assessments.

The power that these presences exert depends on what is kept absent in the hinterland. In part, absence consists of what we can call *uncharte(re)d territories*, with no appearance of any issue of relevance or consequence. This entails a vast domain of fully dormant non-presences. More active are *manifest absences*, in which consequential items are “othered”, and *hidden presences*, in which consequential items are ignored (Table 3.1). These absences are “generative” through “flickering” (Law & Mol 2001). Through flickering, they prompt, irritate and drum, with a twofold effect. On the one hand, they sustain a practice by giving some space to alternative voices and inputs. They may thus help to bring coherence to practices operating in and across very different sites and spaces. In Law’s (2004: 99) succinct words: “Often different realities are simply held apart: cohering but not consistent.” On the other, “flickerings” may also expose so much friction, such as institutional biases, racism and sexism, that practices change. Such absences may thus play roles like “elephants in the room”, “ticking bombs” or “crises in slow motion”. Flickering, hence, encompasses the volatile zone between different realities and different truths through which practices are shaped and transformed.

So, venturing into the hinterland means investigating how presences and absences at sites, in spaces or landscapes are crafted, how, where and by whom they are experienced, articulated, scripted and further inscribed. What is the politics of bringing to light certain presences and not others? What is the power and effect of flickering, as “hidden presences” as well as “manifest absences”? This venturing recognizes the tacit and covert aspect of practices, drawing on the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, as explained by Schatzki (2001). It also chimes with Foucault’s

**Table 3.1** Mapping presences and absences: shaping practices from the hinterland

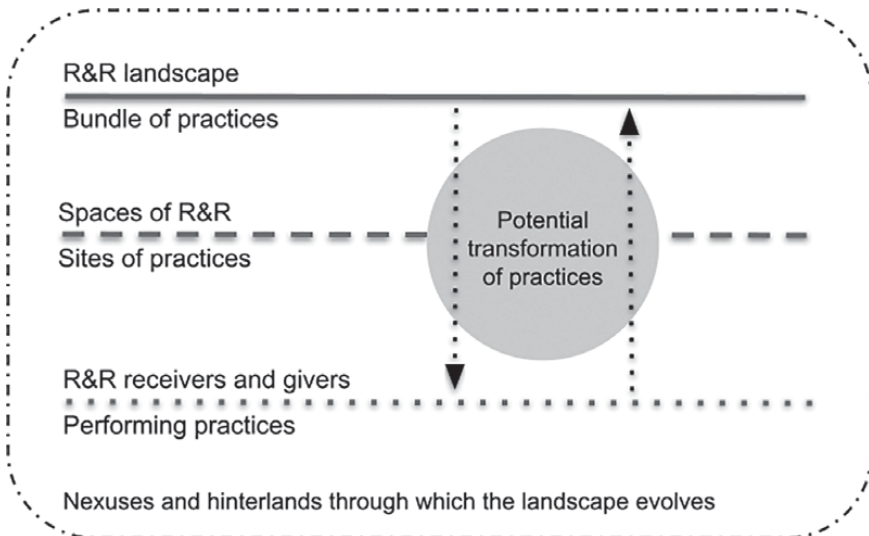
	<i>Presence</i>	<i>Absence</i>
Manifest	Empowering: gate(keeper)s, landmarks, totem poles, sacred cows, pink elephants, truisms, beaten tracks and other known knowns	Flickering: othering, (out)framing, pigeonholing and other known unknowns
Hidden	Flickering: elephants in the room, spectres, geographical unconscious, blind spots, cover-ups and other unknown knowns	Dormant: uncharte(re)d territories



genealogical approach, although the practice approach suggested here is more fine-grained and anchored in space/time than the more synthetic and grander discursive approach drawing on Foucault (Burnham 2021).

## TRANSFORMATION AND FACES OF POWER

How, therefore, do we shed light on how (nexuses of) practices evolve and transform? For this, we turn to Hanna Carlsson’s “transformational landscape” (Figure 3.1). In a material sense, as Carlsson argues, transformation becomes manifest within organizational spaces (such as universities), within which practices are (re)produced and (co-)arranged. Analytically, this entails zooming in and out (Nicolini 2009). Zooming in, we focus on changes occurring in and between sites. Sites are the key places of creativity, trials of new practices and engagements with new actors. Sites become through entanglements of knowledge, capacities, emotions, affects, and so on. This is manifested through how practitioners invest in novel and modified practices, such as new ways of recruiting, supervising, appraising and promoting academic staff. Site evolution, in turn, affects spaces, nexuses and landscapes, although this very much depends on the mechanism of communication, diffusion, adaptation and, above all, acceptance (Carlsson, Chapter 2 in this volume). Zooming out, we may follow how change and circulation are accompanied by altered connections from the hinterland, shifting patterns of



**Figure 3.1** A site-ontological perspective on the transformation of practices

Source: Carlsson (2022).

absences and presences. Which “inconvenient truths” have come out in the open, which “received wisdoms” have faded? Which horizons have opened, which closed? Which associations with (“happy”) affects have strengthened, and which weakened? How do affects and “emotions contribute to the making and breaking of linkages between (network of) practices” (Weenink & Spaargaren 2016: 80)?

Let us now, in light of this quest, delve somewhat more deeply into the concept of power. As Watson (2017) and Mueller (2017: 51) argue, practice approaches do not include a theory of power. On the one hand, power is deemed important and even considered as vital to understand the extent to which, and in what forms, transformations (can) take place. On the other hand, power presents a highly elusive, deeply contested concept, which is not easy to pin down and apply. In line with the “practice lens”, a solution is to adopt a “power lens”, in which power presents a toolbox through which social and political processes of influence and structuring can be assessed. A first step for this, as discussed above, is assessing the emergence and evolution of power relations through the lens of the hinterland. A next step is to associate different aspects of the site ontology of practices with the notions of “faces of power” (Lukes 2021).

Hence, in line with Mueller and Haugaard, and drawing on Steven Lukes’ (2021) seminal work, we follow Stewart Clegg’s (1989) threefold perspective on power, containing “episodic power”, “dispositional power” and “systemic power”. In Haugaard’s (2010: 425) words:

Episodic power refers to the exercise of power that is linked to agency. Dispositional power signifies the inherent capacities of an agent that the agent may have, irrespective of whether they exercise this capacity. Systemic power refers to the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring possibilities for action.

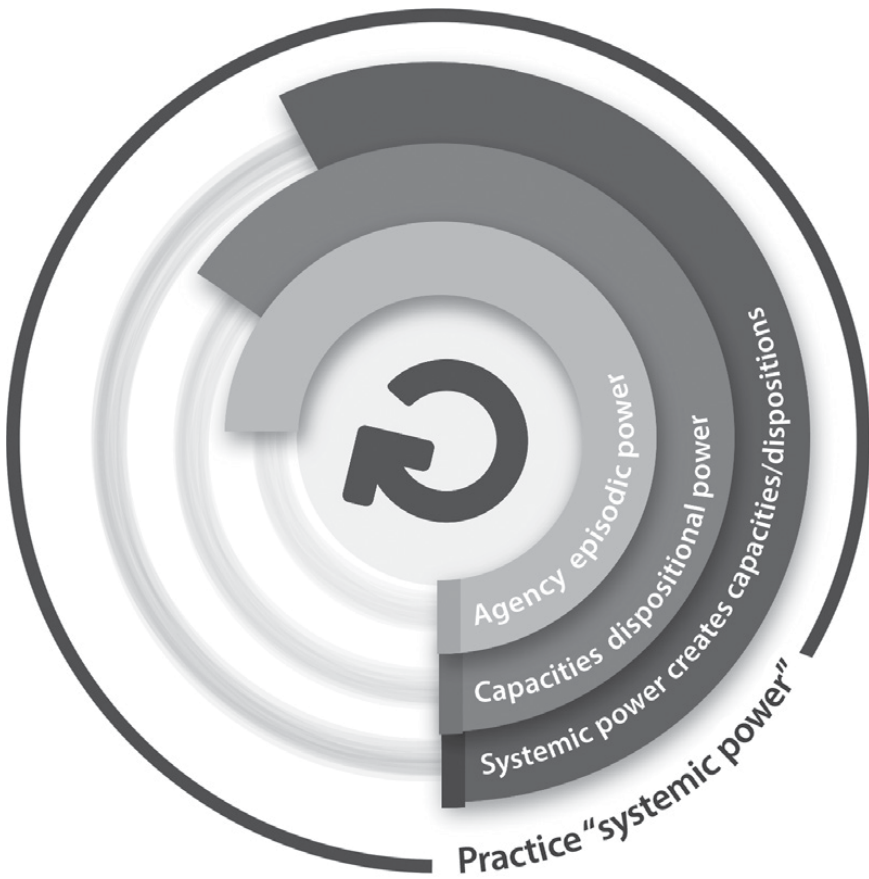
This threefold conception is more relational and performative than Lukes’ original three-faced power. Although Clegg’s triad features agency, notably as part of episodic power, what is crucial is how the scope for agency is structured through dispositional power, which in turn is distributed and shaped through asymmetric power relations (system). Dispositional power in this context encompasses the capacities at hand, including those that affect the way agents interact and act collectively (“culture”) (Haugaard 2010). Systemic power, through shaping and channelling resources at scales that (far) exceed the “site” reach of episodic power, underpins the performative and circulatory nature of power. Through these three faces, subjects are shaped by power as much as they are wielding power.

Then, episodic, dispositional and systemic power, together with notions such as influence, empowering, domination and so on, present a practice-based power toolbox. Crucially, these three dimensions present differences in scope, not levels, in the shaping and enactment of practices. For each systemic observation of certain power relations, we need to zoom in onto the corresponding dispositional and episodic faces – that is, the shaping of capacities and their actual, agency-based, exercise of power. As Weenink and Spaargaren (2016: 81) caution, “Power analyses with the lens zoomed out very easily make us forget the ‘agency-dimension’ of change in networks of practices.” A continual emphasis on the flatness of the power–practice entanglement should prevent that. Therefore, in this chapter we stay away from an idea of distinguishing between a “system level” and a “practise level”, or between “larger structures and agency”. Chiming with the notion of zooming, we use the term “scope” rather than “levels”. What intrigues us is how relatively stable practices (staff recruitment, supervision, appraisal and promotion) are up for change because of a single manifesto on R&R. What does this set in train, within the scope of sites, nexuses and landscapes, and how does this shape the overall process of transformation?

How, then, can this association between a site ontology, hinterland and faces of power help us? Let us start with the practices occurring within the sites of our R&R case, in academic meetings, processes of supervision, appraisal, promotion, and so on. This entails a direct exercise of *episodic power*, fuelled by the dispositional power that subjects and devices obtain from organizational spaces (steering capacities and knowledge) and the wider landscape (sedimented forms, protocols, rules, conventions, etc.). This power affects the way subjectivities and normativities are conceived and how these shape certain behavioural and emotional standards, and thereby behaviour itself. The latter consequently actualizes and mobilizes *dispositional power*, resulting in certain presences (capacities and procedures to do things in certain ways) and absences (impossibilities to do so), which in turn further condition and channel behaviour within sites. Such dispositions, accordingly, take the form of capacities, practical knowledge and socio-material entanglements, with a strong role for (selective) circulation and bundling. The latter gives rise finally to sedimented *systemic power* – that is, of codes, scripts, rules, conventions and “habitus” evolving in the wider landscape (Table 3.2). Landscapes, accordingly, refer to more abstract and complex concepts of interactions, separations, possibilities and impossibilities, which are bound to be more difficult to uncover and grasp than the behavioural patterns at site level. Importantly, grasping such complexity may give insights into nexuses of practices across spaces and sites.

Further, a deeper understanding of power relations and their scope is obtained by unravelling patterns of presences and absences. What becomes

dominant versus marginal, and how patterns of presences and absences evolve, stems from the particular form and development of hinterland, of what is enabled to speak out versus being silenced, and how that becomes connected. Here, in line with the work of Foucault, Hannah Arendt and others, more subtle concepts of “power over”, “power to”, “empowerment”, “hegemony”, “resistance”, and so on become important. In particular, hinterlands may reveal hidden and obscure places of resistance, alternatives and change. Transformation thus becomes a complex entanglement of behavioural change, or agency at sites (episodic), cultural change in spaces (dispositional) and institutional change at the scope of landscapes (systemic, including “discursive formations”) (Figure 3.2 and Table 3.2). With this entanglement,



**Figure 3.2** Mueller’s practice-based understanding of power

Source: The authors, based on the work of Clegg (1989) and Mueller (2017).

**Table 3.2** Tooling the power-in-practices-in-transformation lens

	<i>Practice “site ontology”</i>	<i>Faces of power</i>	<i>Scope</i>	<i>Transformation</i>
<i>Hinterland</i> (“flickering” of) <i>presences/</i> <i>absences</i> ( <i>manifest,</i> <i>hidden</i> )	Sites (enactment, performance)	Episodic power	What behaviour? What (emer- gent) subjec- tivities and normativities? What local rules, habits or emotions?	Agency/ behavioural change (new habits)
	Spaces (bundles)	Dispositional power	What distribution of knowledge and capaci- ties? What socio-material entanglements between bod- ies, materi- als, habits or affects? What subject formation?	Cultural change (new capacities)
	Landscapes (nexus, sedi- mentation)	Systemic power	What (socio-) materialities, networks of circulation and “discur- sive forma- tions”? What resources, codes, scripts, rules, conven- tions, habitus, etc., and nex- uses between them?	Institutional change (new resources and “recoding”)

power will always constitute a moving and elusive target. Power presents, to follow Gilles Deleuze’s living interpretation, “a mole that only knows its way around its networks of tunnels, its multiple hole: it ‘acts on the basis of innumerable points’; ‘it comes from below’” (Deleuze 1988: 8). Without following a strict plan or protocol, we now use this vocabulary and the questions of Table 3.2 to further study our case.

## STAGING RECOGNITION AND REWARDS

How have the Dutch ambitions to improve the way academic staff are recognized and rewarded for their work by their organization been met? To what extent has there been change in habits and activities, capacities and culture, as well as the “systemic” resources and rules of the game? The transformation of R&R in Dutch academia constitutes our case here. This case involves a broad set of both formal and informal practices. Formally, R&R is about contracts, notably fixed-term (temporal) versus open-ended (“permanent”), pay, division of tasks, performance assessment (plus consequence), appraisals, career steps, consultation and decision. One of us has been head of department for many years and formally involved in the national and local development of the R&R programme; this has helped to develop the “landscape” and “spaces” perspective on the case. Informally, it is about inclusion, social safety, combating harassment and discrimination, more intersectionality, career prospects and everyday appreciation. Both of us, as mature scholars, have experienced these aspects in detail. This has helped to shed light on the site aspects through encountering the different faces of power at work through numerous practices. Our discussion starts with a historical sketch, followed by a review of the transformation applying the lens of site ontology and hinterland.

Over time, formal R&R practices have manifested more change than informal ones, thanks to changes in the broader landscape of academic organizations and work. Like elsewhere, Dutch universities underwent massive growth in the 1960s and 1970s. This was followed by periods of what Klaas Sijtsma (2021) describes as “disciplining” (approximately the 1980s), “focusing” (1990s), “acceleration” (2000s) and “derailment” (2010s). *Disciplining and focusing* resulted from top-down intervention in the steering, financing and monitoring of higher education. Hence, funding became more “conditional” (performance-based, through multi-annual assessments of education and research) and competitive (distributed via grant organizations such as the NWO: Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Dutch Research Council). *Acceleration* resulted from a combination of rapidly growing “productivity”, both in research (turning the Netherlands into one of the “top” publishing countries in terms of articles per scholar) and in education (massive growth in student numbers, both domestic and international). *Derailment*, finally, refers to how staff have been affected by increased competition, workload, administration and insecurity, as well as to the overall strain on academic organizations to do ever more. In the view of Koenraad Debackere (2021), a professor at KU Leuven, this manifested itself as a process of “disruptive gradualism”. For staff, the years of disciplining, focusing and acceleration were accompanied by a radical overhaul in rules and practices, notably concerning contracts, workload, performance measurement and career steps and prospects. Fixed-terms contracts, such as postdocs and

temporary lecturers, became the standard for early career tracks, often for many years and without prospects of tenure. The workload exploded both quantitatively (more students, papers, proposals, etc.) and qualitatively (impact, committees, etc.). Key performance measures were whittled down to publishing in “top journals” and achieving adequate student evaluation scores.

As a result of these changes, power over staff members’ work and future shifted from heads of department (HoDs) and deans to a variety of assessment panels, journal editors, metric systems, conference organizers (e.g. keynotes), award panels (e.g. “best paper”) and, to a lesser extent, students (in the role of anonymously scoring subjects), among others. Moreover, this became mediated by new types of managers, notably the directors of research institutes and HR departments, who gained a stronger say in whom to recruit and on what terms. In practice terms, accordingly, nexuses proliferated. The recruiting and supervising practices led by HoDs became more and more dependent on all kinds of management and assessment practices, which in turn relied on a much broader landscape of interests and affects: governments setting evaluation protocols and standards to meet political aims; publishers revising journal performances to meet commercial interests; research councils changing call and panel practices in view of societal, political and organizational pressures; and so on. Within the organizational spaces of academic organizations, this unleashed a highly complex web of dispositional power caught in a culture of competition, hierarchical control and servitude. In general, research was more recognized and rewarded than education, although both became subject to nationwide, multi-annual scoring exercises. Certain universities invested heavily in standardized career tools such as tenure tracks. How exactly such practices became bundled and with what kind of capacities and cultures remained rather locally specific. One perspective comes from Sijbolt Noorda (2021: 5), professor in theology and former university governor, who continues to see the university as “an odd gathering of all kinds of subcultures”. More critically, Eelco Runia (2018, our translation), an assistant professor who decided to leave academia, laments the “systemic” penetration of academia: “The net result is that we are saddled with a Pandora’s box of audit systems, accountability protocols and powerful examination boards and assessment panels.”

Because of this diversity, many past informal practices continue to thrive. At departmental and group levels, episodic power is still highly discretionary, albeit less absolute than in the years before “disciplining”, with variable consequences. Discretionary power can do much to foster or stem career development. HoDs and supervisors make critical decisions on task allocation, projects and committees, work, authorship and grant writing, among other things, making major differences to how staff can perform. More informally, what is granted to and demanded from staff organizationally, socially and emotionally is very site- and space-specific. Typical for academic environments is



the strong autonomy of departments in HR issues (apart from recruitment and appraisals) and employees' consultation (apart from faculty and university rulings). There is often ample room for self-organization as well as oppression, discrimination and favouritism. By bending and overstepping the rules, HoDs and supervisors can simplify work processes, enhance collaboration, hence reducing workload and stress within a team. By opting for occasionally saying "No", episodic power may thus serve a department to buffer against ever-growing external demands from the organization, sector and society.

Unfortunately, recent studies have revealed the intensity of the latter, toxic side. Universities excel in aggressive, discriminating and exploitative behaviour by narcissistic and manipulative leaders (Breetvelt 2021). Early-career, female, gender-non-conforming and international staff are particularly affected (Naezer, van den Brink & Benschop 2019). Particularly toxic are departments led by highly successful professors who use their stardom to insulate themselves from external rules on recruitment, appraisal and consultation, allowing them to tyrannize their department at will. Even worse, as long as such terror remains hidden, faculty and university management often turn a blind eye in the interest of publications, grants, status and rankings. The result is what van Houtum and van Uden (2022: 3) call self-produced "autoimmune organizational disorder". However, importantly, such exercises of discretionary power are not only episodic; they draw on the broader culture of competition, permissiveness and support benefiting the "winners" (dispositional). By turning a blind eye, universities can deliberately seek to benefit from the Matthew effect, the mechanism turning winners into even stronger winners. In power terms, the vain drive for excellence thus seems to support informal yet impactful faces of systemic and dispositional power, fuelling toxic modes of episodic power and, in turn, seriously undermining fair staff recognition and rewarding.

Three quotes, from the angles of a "winner", journalist and manager, respectively, illustrate the depth of the problem. The successful professor: "Most policy makers don't like it when we say: 'We don't need your policy'. But when things work out well, it is hard for them to say we didn't do well strategically" (Scholten *et al.* 2021: 271). The science journalist: "This autonomy enables professors to make choices that they feel are better suited to their own development, without being restricted by the policies of the university" (van Heest 2021). Finally, in her inaugural lecture as new rector of Maastricht University, Pamela Habibovic firmly denounces this culture: "If we continue to name our research groups after ourselves, undervalue our teaching staff and ignore the importance of support staff, we may produce some more stars, but we will not be able to fulfil our role in society, to provide high-quality education and to push the boundaries of knowledge" (ScienceGuide 2022b).

This has presented the "Why?" of R&R. As a system, Dutch academia foregrounds the formal (assessments, career, etc.) and informal (culture of



excellence, autonomy, etc.) resources enabling selection and appraisal practices (dispositional) to be oppressive, discriminatory and exploitative (episodic). Moreover, this represents a two-way process. Competition, hierarchy and servitude are integral parts of the “episodic” working, and even living, culture on the academic work floor. Academic staff tends to be fully bought into the culture and practices of excellence, even if this means defying formal rules, ethics and even common insights about how we measure excellence (van Houtum & van Uden 2022). Although recently early-career researchers have started to claim their contractual rights for open-ended contracts, for decades undergoing precarity, exploitation and even bullying was considered part of the ritual to achieve tenure. In the words of criminologist Yarin Eski (2022, our translation):

When you learn unhealthy academic work behaviour, you teach yourself specific techniques to perform the behaviour. We rationalize our own behaviour. For example, we get up extra early and work past five o'clock. Working on weekends has also become normal ... We see conferences as holidays, get-togethers with colleagues replace our social life, and we see your name in an inaccessible Pdf file published in a pay-walled journal with a high impact factor as the highest achievement ... To this end, we are also motivated, because ‘Everyone is doing it! We tell ourselves, ‘That’s how you make a career’ or ‘I make that decision myself, right?’ In other words, when people exhibit unhealthy academic work behaviours, they do so not only because of the presence of people who have unhealthy patterns themselves, but also because of the absence of people with healthy patterns.

To break that culture, Eski (2022, our translation) advocates systemic and cultural change: “We need assessment criteria that pay attention to care, welfare and leadership, which primarily should not be about individuality, commercialism and competition, but about true collegiality.” Will the R&R movement bring this about?

## SHAPING AND LOBBYING FOR R&R

Between November 2018 and November 2019 a coalition consisting of all Dutch universities, their respective medical centres, the two major research funders (NWO and ZonMw) and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences drafted the R&R position paper “Room for everyone’s talent: towards a new balance in the recognition and rewards for academics”<sup>1</sup> (Box 3.1).

1. See <https://recognitionrewards.nl/about/position-paper>.

The paper called for a stronger diversity in careers (not only research-based), more emphasis on teamwork, a move from quantitative to qualitative assessment of assessment, an embracing of open science and investing in good leadership. Consequently, this fuelled extensive rounds of local dialogue at individual universities and research institutes, resulting in local position and policy papers. Some universities have made concrete changes in their assessment practices, notably Tilburg (MERIT) and Utrecht (TRIPLE).<sup>2</sup> Most organizations have started policies to allow for more diversified career paths, notably by adding promotions largely based on teaching. The aim is to break the “monoculture of solitary career academics” as “a jack of all trades” excelling in research (Sluijs 2021; TU/e 2021) – or, in the blunter terms of Paul Wouters, professor of scientometrics at Leiden University, to steer clear of “academics who ... are not totally deformed because they have had to work 80 hours a week for six years as a postdoc and no longer know what a normal life looks like” (Drayer 2021: 12).

To a greater or lesser extent, all organizations promote R&R as a fundamental cultural change, which, through dialogue and outreach, has to penetrate and transform the whole organization and sector. To promote outreach and the need for cultural change, two R&R “festivals” were organized, on 22 January 2021 and 4 February 2022. Besides workshops on key themes, there were keynotes and panels by core representatives of the partner organizations, the minister of education and spokespersons of academic collectives, such as the Dutch Young Academy (De Jonge Akademie: DJA), a movement of early-career academics supported by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen: KNAW).

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### BOX 3.1 THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF THE DUTCH R&R MANIFESTO

This calls for a system of recognition and rewards for academics and research that:

- (a) enables the **diversification** and **vitalization** of career paths, thereby promoting excellence in each of the key areas;
- (b) acknowledges the independence and individual qualities and ambitions of academics, as well as recognizing **team** performances;
- (c) emphasizes **quality** of work over quantitative results (such as number of publications);
- (d) encourages all aspects of **open science**; and
- (e) encourages high-quality academic **leadership**.

Source: <https://recognitionrewards.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/position-paper-room-for-everyones-talent.pdf>.

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2. See [www.uu.nl/nieuws/van-merit-naar-triple](http://www.uu.nl/nieuws/van-merit-naar-triple).

Complementing the general need felt for cultural change, various developments prompted this initiative. International, political, societal and internal sectoral pressures led to a call for “open science” (OS).<sup>3</sup> OS entails, among other things, moving away from the monoculture of paper publication “behind paywalls” dominated by global commercial publishers. In the Netherlands, a movement called “Science in Transition” strongly lamented the excessive significance given to journal articles. From a means to communicate with peers, publication has turned into a universal, quantified currency for making, and deciding, on academic careers (van Arensbergen 2014). Moreover, internationally, editors of core journals started to challenge the unwarranted use of journal impact factors (JIFs) as indicators for individuals’ academic qualities. They were backed by debates among prominent scientometricians (Waltman & Traag 2017). Although JIFs may present, especially in certain disciplines, justifiable proxies for assessing the quality of individual papers, they provide only very limited information about the academic contribution of the authors, with quite high error margins. The use of individual metrics often amounts to no more than “pseudo objectivity” (Collini 2012). These debates resulted in two major declarations: the well-known San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Leiden Manifesto for research metrics (Hicks *et al.* 2015).<sup>4</sup> R&R partners underwrote and applied these various declarations.

The funding organizations (NWO, ZonMw) implemented the practice of “narrative CVs” into grant selection procedures, banning the journal impact factors. Narrative CVs may use impact data, although only at article level, as evidence for the track record told. As part of local R&R development and advocacy, universities set themselves the task to move from quantity to quality as the main yardstick of assessment. Utrecht University followed suit, as explained in a paper in *Nature* (Woolston 2021). As the then NWO chair, Stan Gielis, explains:

If there is one party that influences the aspect of rewarding, it is the funding organizations. We are actually saying that we are going to change the system of recognition and rewarding. In the Netherlands, we are going to tackle this from NWO, with the VSNU, but above all I think that we as scientists should do this together. There are so many voices saying that this has to change that it is inevitable that people will join in. (ScienceGuide 2018)

His colleague from ZonMw, Jeroen Geurts, endorses how quality stems from collaboration: “I want to work towards a more open and honest science in which we focus more on collaboration and no longer on excellence-driven

3. See [www.nwo.nl/open-science](http://www.nwo.nl/open-science).

4. See also [wcrif.org/guidance/hong-kong-principles](http://wcrif.org/guidance/hong-kong-principles).

diva behaviour” (ScienceGuide 2019). Moreover, the most recent national Research Assessment Protocol focuses solely on quality “within context”, with metrics as support (ScienceGuide 2020). Thus, the Ministry of Education also supports the move towards “quality”, although the main funding mechanisms continue to be conditional, competitive and individualistic (Ad Valvas 2022).

R&R’s academic leaders became professors and governors, Frank Baaijens a professor at Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) and Rianne Letschert president of Maastricht University. Besides their leading roles, both express strong views about R&R’s significance, notably in the fields of leadership and teamwork. Baaijens states: “You can be incredibly good at your research, but if you intimidate your colleagues and excuse yourself from departmental tasks, do you deserve to become a professor?” (TU/e 2021). Letschert writes:

Malfunctioning leaders, we can be very brief about that, they ultimately bring inconvenience to many colleagues around them. With corresponding costs ... It is a thin line that runs between academic freedom and taking responsibility. If I intervene as rector or as director of a research institute, it is often seen as ‘interfering’. The response is: ‘I am a professional, so who are you to interfere?’ In terms of content, I think academics should have enormous freedom, but when it comes to organizational matters, that freedom often turns into arbitrariness. (de Knecht 2019a)

On teamwork, Baaijens says: “What you can do is make sure you have a team in which research, education and impact are covered. I believe in team spirit: in a group you can develop an incredible strength that would never be possible as an individual” (TU/e 2021). In a similar vein, DJA produced an “R&R manifesto” arguing that teams foster productive collaboration and impact (de Knecht 2018).

The movement also embraces, and needs, an international dimension. The pillars of OS and DORA constitute global phenomena, developed and underwritten by academic organizations and networks worldwide. Yet R&R also warrants an international acceptance and alignment of quality- and team-based norms and practices concerning performance and career steps. There is a fear that, otherwise, Dutch academics will be disadvantaged in the global competition for academic connections and careers. Hence universities, research councils and the national political level engage in an international lobby for R&R. The minister of higher education, Robert Dijkgraaf, received a positive response at a recent EU meeting discussing OS and R&R: “I am very happy that our countries now have a common agenda regarding these two principles of R&R and OS. This is an essential step for

the future” (ScienceGuide 2022a, our translation). EU’s innovation commissioner, Mariya Gabriel, endorsed the new approach, saying:

The European Commission remains firm on this point. The current assessment of research is based on a number of limited quantitative indicators. Important contributions to science are not recognized in this way. We need to look together at how we can improve this. In the future, science should be assessed mainly on the basis of qualitative indicators. The quantitative indicators can still be used, but depending on the objective and the context.

(ScienceGuide 2022a)

Associations embracing the principles include the European University Association (EUA), the Marie Curie Alumni Association and the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc) (Bakker 2022a; EUA 2021).

So, will drawing on this concrete advocacy for R&R match with the broad wish for systemic and cultural change in staff practices? And how will this transform the role of episodic power? Seen through our practice/power lens, a summary of the advocacy may read as follows. R&R presents *advocacy towards systemic recoding (career diversification, teamwork, quality, OS, leadership, etc.), nurturing capacities to re-affect, resubjectivize and empower R&R receivers/givers (dispositional scope) to transform concrete practices of staff recruitment, appraisal and leadership (episodic scope)*. How much power does this advocacy have? For the moment, *systemic* recoding appears primarily abstract. Recoding seeks to alter discursive formations and habitus rather than to change system-wide rules and scripts. The only “hard” recoding currently entails the removal of contextless metrics from research assessments and CVs. How the R&R initiative is rolled out nationally, via dialogues and festivals, and locally, via visioning and participatory processes, reveals a core orientation towards bottom-up cultural change (de Knecht 2019b). For instance, Maastricht University calls upon staff to “unmute”.<sup>5</sup> At Utrecht University, these debates help early-career staff “to change the system from within” (Bakker 2022b). “Happy talk” manifestos, festivals and social media buzz foster new entanglements between agents, emotions, affects and practices. Yet, for practices to transform within sites, genuinely changing behaviour for the better for all R&R receivers will require new presences and nexuses within and across broader spaces of academia. It is to these aspects that we turn in the next section.

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5. See [recognitionrewards.nl/portfolio/unmute](https://recognitionrewards.nl/portfolio/unmute).

## INTO THE HINTERLAND: FLICKERING OF SUPPORT AND RESISTANCE

In our perspective, for practices to change, altered connections from the hinterland are required, so that practices such as narrative CVs, diverse careers and teamwork can grow and spread. For exploitation to go, major shifts in patterns of presences and absences are needed. From a hinterland's perspective, this presents a battle of flickering, in which – willingly and unwillingly – the unknown becomes temporarily known, and the known temporarily unknown (Table 3.1). Consequently, how this battle unfolds affects what more permanent changes occur in the landscape of practices, impacting resources, codes, discursive formations, capacities and habits. Flickering may thus change as well as lock ideas, scripts, values, protagonists, and so on. This section focuses on R&R issues undergoing strong flickering, namely the use of metrics, narrative CVs, staff appraisal and hierarchy. In doing so, we cover only a very small part of the vast hinterland of R&R practices. As with any genealogical approach, the potential work is effectively infinite.

### *Use of metrics, journal impact factors or narrative CVs*

The issue of metrics stirred hefty debate. In response to NWO's and others' JIF ban, 171 academics wrote a critical manifesto titled "New Recognition and Rewards harms Dutch academia" (ScienceGuide 2021a). The manifesto posits that fair assessment of researchers warranted the use of objective measures such as the JIF, albeit differently across disciplines (ScienceGuide 2021a). It also challenges what was considered the "political agenda" of OS. This unleashed a (social) media storm between two camps, including a counter-manifesto initiated by Young Science in Transition (ScienceGuide 2021b). The pro-JIF camp recalled past, pre-metric times, when well-performing early-career academics were fully at the mercy of local supervisors, and were "saved" by objective performance indicators. As Harry Garretsen, a professor at the University of Groningen (de Knecht 2019a), argues in a nuanced way: "I welcome the movement that distances itself from quantitative indicators that are often poorly substantiated, but I myself come from a time when every form of evaluation was still subjective. If the dean didn't like you, you didn't get promoted" (see also Sijtsma 2021).

The anti-camp, on the other hand, built on evidence that metrics such as JIFs provide only illusory pseudo-objectivity, particularly since they have come to favour and incentivize particular forms and subjects of research. A prominent UK study on the role of metrics thus asserts, "Metrics hold real power: they are constitutive of values, identities and livelihoods" (Wilsdon *et al.* 2015). Wouters, a prominent Dutch scientometrician, argues that, for

fair assessment, metrics should always be used, alongside qualitative indicators against concrete, individual objectives (Drayer 2021). Those objectives should then be set in the context of the local team and be assessed through processes of peer review. JIF advocates appear particularly wary of context and the use of individual objectives. For Wouters, working with objectives is actually quite straightforward: “That is not so complex. You just write down what you want to achieve” (Drayer 2021: 10). In stronger terms, Jarno Hoekman, an innovation scientist, calls the pro-JIF manifesto a “disconcertingly weak piece”, stating: “Putting down ‘objective’ and measurable standards as science and putting down OS assessment criteria as political shows a complete lack of understanding of the historical context in which standards for measuring scientific performance were established” (ScienceGuide 2021c, our translation). This historical context encompasses political, economic (including commercial) and cultural aspects of scientometrics. Frank Miedema, who as a governor at Utrecht University supported the JIF ban, speaks of a “JIF-chasing disease” affecting science globally (Grove 2021).

Despite all the evidence and experience available, reshaping the practice of assessing researchers proves difficult. JIF advocates appear particularly agitated about the “narrative CVs”: “As [a grant] applicant, spending even more time on non-science-related drivel just makes an already onerous application process more difficult and wasteful. As a reviewer, I can’t imagine how I would use this information”, according to a critical researcher (Grove 2021). A concern is that narrative CVs will primarily promote more bragging narrators, and thus, for instance, tend to discriminate against women and minorities.<sup>6</sup> In part, these criticisms make a caricature of the narrative CV, which, rather than being a promotional story, entails a well-grounded account of somebody’s academic vision, trajectory and record. Nobody denies that metrics can provide valid evidence for certain aspects of research quality. To defuse these criticisms, therefore, the new format is now framed as “evidence-based”<sup>7</sup> As James Wilsdon, director of the UK’s Research on Research Institute, comments: “No framework is perfect but the move to narrative CVs is a good one as they represent the multi-dimensional types of excellence we need in universities and research, and they recognize that [metrical] shortcuts to assessing research lead to certain problems around gender and inequality” (Grove 2021). What R&R advocacy thus seeks to counter, against quite some resistance, is the “drunkard’s search” practice of measuring research quality through the available metrics “streetlight”, which has been proved to be invalid and unfair through extensive scientometric research.

6. See [eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/gender-sensitive-research-funding-procedures](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/gender-sensitive-research-funding-procedures).

7. See [www.nwo.nl/en/news/slight-change-course-horizon-nwo-talent-scheme](https://www.nwo.nl/en/news/slight-change-course-horizon-nwo-talent-scheme).



*Peer review and staff appraisal*

Calling for contextual assessment points towards a “hidden present”, namely the use of peer review in staff and team appraisal. Obviously, peer review presents a well-established practice for assessing papers, recruitment and research programmes (Forsberg *et al.* 2022). Although it has its biases and limitations, it has the potential to provide a fairer, better-grounded and more constructive mode of assessment. An organization that has explored, elaborated and implemented the use of peer review for individual academic appraisals and promotion is the University of Ghent (UGent), a process that the rector, Rik Van de Walle, started at his inauguration in 2017 (Cardol & de Knecht 2019). Every five years staff plans and achievements (qualitative and quantitative) are assessed through a broad panel, not only on output but also in terms of talent development and team performance.<sup>8</sup> Peer review is intended to evaluate as well as coach. Talent and team aspects play an important role in promotion. To coordinate and script the process, there is strong involvement on the part of HR. The expectation is that it will make careers more diverse, creative and geared to long-term investments. UGent’s position in rankings is seriously played down. However, like elsewhere, rankings act as veritable pink elephants. Although they have generally lost their repute as oligoptica, staff as well as management remain concerned about rankings and their impact (Lambeets & Noij 2019).

UGent’s model clearly stands out as an exemplary case, yet its future performance and significance remains to be seen. In topological terms, UGent presents a lone, “flickering” organizational space of transformed appraisal in the landscape of assessment practice. Unlike the R&R programme, UGent has deliberately refrained from (inter)national alignment (not even to DORA). Flickering appears twofold. On the one hand, UGent’s model presents an oft-mentioned landmark of proactive assessment. On the other, it repels as a spectre of control and subjectivity. This includes a concern about the need for staff to be open, and have a qualifying debate about future ambitions and expectations. In addition, the emphasis on both talent development and teamwork is full of ambiguity and tension. There is a danger that, rather than reducing the emphasis on individual performance, the staff contribution to teams becomes an additional criterion that is not easy to assess through peer review. This presents a danger also mentioned by DJA: “By making clear agreements in advance about the individual assessment and including a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures, arbitrariness and favouritism are excluded from the equation. It is important, however, to prevent the old criteria from being supplemented with extra competencies and becoming ‘and-and’” (DJA 2020: 20).

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8. See [sfdora.org/case-study/ghent-university](https://sfdora.org/case-study/ghent-university).



### Staff hierarchy

There is much more flickering to signal and reflect on, but we close here with another big elephant in the room, namely staff hierarchy. Although it is often marked by an open culture of communication, Dutch academia is rather hierarchical (Lange *et al.* 2018). The university job classification (UFO) distinguishes seven levels, from “junior docent” to “professor-1”. The system is sustained by (very) high levels of precarity in the lower ranks, and by a detailed specification of performance and promotion standards (metrics plus more qualitative measures). Besides major differences in pay and power, full professors gain a specific benefit, because they are the only ones with the right to formally supervise PhD researchers (*ius promovendi*), making it easier to co-author publications. Even though the *ius promovendi* has recently been extended to a selected group of associate professors, it continues to constitute a major mark of disrespect for the hard work many assistant and associate professors put in co-supervising PhD researchers. Moreover, full professors are usually the ones who decide on budgets and staff development, making it easier to give direction to the research themes and objectives. As Marijtje Jongsma and colleagues argue in a union manifesto (ScienceGuide 2021d), such a hierarchy is incompatible with R&R’s moves towards diversification and teamwork. However, with the exception of PhD supervision, the impact of hierarchy has not received much attention in the R&R movement. Although Rianne Letschert has expressed her wonder about the desire for hierarchy, there is no R&R standpoint on the issue (de Knecht 2019a). It is more than likely that those with vested interests in maintaining this hierarchy will prevent this issue from becoming more manifest. Moreover, as argued before, hierarchy links to another sensitive yet oft-hidden phenomenon, namely narcissism and petty competition. To what extent will academia’s social fabric, in which narcissism and petty competition are so endemic, really be able to engender a “team spirit”, going beyond the individual ethos of competition, winning and status?

### CONCLUSION

The Dutch “Recognition and Rewards” programme, started in 2018, holds the major ambition and intention of changing academic practices of staff appraisal. R&R was launched and is steered by core players, university associations and main funders, and is assisted by the ministry, academic gurus and all academic organizations in the Netherlands. The core aspiration is to achieve fundamental “cultural change” in Dutch academia, shifting from a monoculture of solitary, “jack-of-all-trades” careers to diverse tracks and

teamwork, from a focus on impact from metric-based quantity to broadly reviewed quality, from commercial domination to open science and from toxic to high-quality leadership. This chapter has reviewed R&R using a site-ontological practice lens, combining Clegg's (1989) three-faced power concept (episodic, dispositional, systemic) with Law's (2004) notion of "hinterland". The key premise is that, for practices to transform, changes are required in their (often "flickering") hinterland power connections, altering habits (episodic), capacities (dispositional) and resources and codes (systemic).

Using this lens, the review has yielded three insights. First, the problem R&R faces is that, in current academia, local, episodic power often draws on informal capacities, resources and codes of domination, exploitation and favouritism, complemented by dysfunctional formal practices (metrics, competition, hierarchy). Second, through orchestrated (inter)local dialogue, R&R primarily seeks to re-affect, resubjectivize and empower R&R receivers/givers (dispositional) to transform bottom-up practices of staff appraisal (episodic). R&R primarily presents an advocacy for (incremental) agency change in sites (behavioural change), while embracing cultural rather than institutional change. To do so, R&R promotes "happy talk" to nurture transformational episodic power to counter the current unfairness of exerted episodic power. By way of exception, one fundamental institutional shift has occurred, namely the recoding and rescripting of the use of metrics, severing the link to JIFs (so far by two major funding bodies and one university).

Critically, how does the hinterland play out? To what extent will R&R result in a full rewiring of underlying presences (and absences) to meet its lofty aims? This dialogical, bottom-up character has opened the window wide for manifold arguments, stances, tools and tactics, inducing a strong flickering of presences and absences. Although only a few examples could be discussed here, this flickering is witness to how all kinds of (f)actors seek to reshape discursive formations, rewiring more or less deliberately what affects, equips and conditions a practice, and what does not. Here, we are left with the conclusion that, although R&R ambitions are generally well received, the hinterland is still full of quagmires (use of metrics, OS), spectres (peer review) and pink elephants (rankings) in the room (endemic hierarchy). As a result, the limitations on the use of metrics are meeting fierce resistance, notably from science departments; a key question is the extent to which, and how, (JIF-free?) "evidence-based CVs" will be implemented further.

The "Recognition and Rewards" landscape is obviously less characterized by rigid rules, laws and clear supervisory structures – for example, by structured state regulation or definite market principles – and allows for more diversity between universities or countries. The disciplining and structuring principles in academia are often only gradually coming to the surface, making them less tangible and making "resistance" more difficult to organize. Power is therefore not

so much outside the force field as it is internal, often more fluid but within spaces with many established structures, with some explicit messages, but where many remain implicit. However, other domains and landscapes will have other dynamics of power and practices, with sometimes more “overruling” transformative events and consequential rule-making (e.g. Covid-19) or supranational state planning (e.g. European Green Deal). How the more subtle and covert relations between power and practices, as we found them in the R&R landscape, relate to clearer “authoritative” rule-making spaces and sites, and how practices travel and are then influenced, is for further academic investigation.

Concluding, the ambitions of cultural and behavioural change will face many hurdles. To what extent will spaces such as departments and faculties prove immune to “happy” cultural change (van Houtum & van Uden 2022)? Will actual shifts in the discursive formation (open-ended contracts based on legal rights rather than “rites of passage”, “more diverse careers”) yield more dispositional power to dependent staff, unleashing true, systematic change in the landscape recruitment and promotion practices? In battle terms, to what extent will R&R staff, notably in precarious positions, help to enforce change by claiming their rights through collective, perhaps even legal, force? What other presences and absences will be able to exert influence, within the scope of sites, spaces and landscapes?

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## CHAPTER 4

# TRANSNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICES OF DIASPORAS IN POSTWAR SRI LANKA

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Diasporas are increasingly recognized as important actors in addressing the ongoing challenges of underdevelopment, poverty and inequality in places of origin (Bakewell 2011). However, diasporas do not merely perform practices in places of origin, but also apply them to their countries of residence. This much affects their commitment to the nature, the kind of engagement with local communities, the location and scale of envisaged interventions for social change, and the kinds of transnational practices this requires. Thereby it is important to realize that collective engagements with other actors in intervention practices are often configured in ways that transcend national boundaries.

Transnational engagement practices of communities in places of origin with diasporas can help them overcome crises that are often considered difficult to deal with by other actors including, notably, the state. The engagement of diasporas may, for instance, entail helping communities repair damaged infrastructure such as schools, religious buildings, wells and damaged electricity networks. The responsibility for these kinds of amenities obviously lies with the state. Yet, notably in post-conflict regions the state may deem these practices complicated, politically charged and overly biased towards certain local communities rather than more aggregate societal needs. By contrast, developmental activities conceived by the diasporas are often targeted to specific contexts and intimately embedded in transnational connections. These connections often relate to descent or some other shared identity. Through collective, sometimes global, diasporic movements, a relationship is sought with the “motherland”. This relationship is in part based on perceived needs in regions of origin but will be exacted through the personal, familial and professional ties of those coordinating these engagements. There is a fear that this may lead to biased agendas and limited knowledge of the larger context (Van Hear & Cohen 2017; Faist 2010). Clearly, the engagement of diasporas is physically and emotionally embedded in multiple sites (Horst 2018). This strong embeddedness of diasporas can help us understand the choice for



certain local contexts on which to target interventions. The result of this (inter)personal engagement may be a somewhat uneven set of development interventions within a particular region, with adjacent communities securing very different levels of support. Therefore, diasporic intervention practices may strongly influence transnational power dynamics.

We look at transnational practices of diaspora actors as social interactions, connecting remote diaspora communities with counterparts in a country of origin. Based on our research in Sri Lanka, we seek to understand how intervention practices produce certain forms of transnational engagements and scope for transnational community-building. The place or site where practices are performed is thereby key, as transnationalism relates to an individual's belonging to multiple spaces and fields, with specific attention to citizenship notions of diaspora members. These are often simultaneously attached to a certain "here" – that is, current places of settlement – and "there" – that is, so-called places of origin (Grillo & Mazzucato 2008). Through transnational engagements, diaspora collectives may try to give meaning to their collective sense of belonging in multiple societies, bringing societal changes they have been part of into the "here" from the "there" via certain societal transformations (Waldinger 2017; Vertovec 2004). Such actions, in turn, transcend their more direct individual sphere of influence on their own families and friends in Sri Lanka through remittances and other forms of support.

The nexus between diasporas and development is largely conceptualized through processes of "diaspora governance" and other state strategies oriented towards diaspora remittances and direct investments (Gamlen 2014). However, for diasporas that originated from domestic conflict, as is the case for a large part of Sri Lanka's current diaspora, the relationship with the state of a country of origin may be problematic at best, fraught with distrust towards the state, or enduring hatred. This feeling is often reciprocal (Amarasingam & Poologaindran 2016). For many Sri Lankan diaspora organizations, the general approach is to avoid becoming entangled in long-term macro-level processes with the state, and, rather, to return to the micro scale. To this end, postwar Sri Lanka has witnessed a mushrooming of micro-level-oriented diaspora interventions, each seeking to help achieve the recovery of particular war-affected communities.

In our research, we adopted a practice approach to better understand the emergence and significance of diaspora-led development interventions in postwar Sri Lanka. A practice approach allows a detailed account of the micro-level dynamics at play by examining the orchestration and coordination of projects as they are conceptualized and implemented. According to Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson (2012), practices consist of three key elements: materiality, meaning and competence. These are helpful concepts for looking critically at diaspora intervention projects. Thereby we can evaluate these projects to present an alternative perspective on the role of



transnational diasporas in societal transformations. In particular, we seek to shift the debate from state-centric overtones, in which transnational engagements are concerned, towards more stakeholder-oriented approaches. To this end, we juxtapose three vignettes of diaspora engagement for development in the fragile postwar context in Sri Lanka to discern and explore the value of such transnational interventions for local communities. The three different vignettes highlight differences in diaspora engagement. They are similar in that they each exhibit a diaspora intervention, yet they are also significantly different. The first vignette showcases the kinds of complexities that may arise in developmental cooperation between various actors in a situation in which there is a clear and vested interest of one actor over the others, in this case the diaspora's desire to eventually return to Sri Lanka. The second vignette highlights the shifting role of religion in the lives of people, asking about the attachment to religious investments by all involved, notably in the face of other needs of the local community. Finally, the third vignette, an animal welfare project, discusses the transferability of global cultural norms to local society.

## MATERIALS, MEANINGS AND COMPETENCES IN DIASPORA-LED DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

In this chapter we adhere to the orientation of Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) on practice, and their focus on three elements: competences, materiality and meanings. Social practices involve the integration of these three elements through material and non-material arrangements. In considering diasporic transnationalism and resultant development practices, we factor in the material and non-material (Shove 2009) elements in flows coming forth out of collective activities.

Understanding the dynamism of the three core elements is critical in practices, as practices are constantly evolving and shifting with the incorporation of new elements. Through continual transitions and linkages between the three elements, practices can emerge, get re-enacted, shift in their modality and sometimes even disappear altogether (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). This adjustment of practices is highly relevant and directly applicable to our research and its exploration of transnational diasporic engagements as dynamic and multi-sited processes of engagement (Horst 2018). In our view, the enactment of practices through *the act of doing*, i.e., recurrent performances that connect materiality, meaning and competences, produces practice entities (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). As such, constellations of micro-level, site-specific diaspora developments may incite developments at more aggregate levels.

Elsewhere (Munas & Smith 2023), we examine the notion of relevant development through transnational engagements of the Sri Lankan diaspora in their country of origin, addressing senses of morality and rightness from a developmentalist angle. Here, instead, we look at the core meaning of collective diaspora-led practices in a transnational context. Whereas in this prior study our transnational approach uncovered a different set of interventions, a practice-theoretical approach allows us to see the *meaning* attached to these interventions (i.e. the value and meaning attributed to particular investments). Furthermore, the competence of the different actors involved and how they perceive their role in various stages of interventions is also evaluated. A practice-theoretical approach demands careful scrutiny of different actors' engagement with a particular activity.

We view the development practices of diaspora collectives as bundles of interrelated practices (Schatzki 2010) with which to achieve the overall objective of bringing about a socio-economic change, such as improved livelihoods or spiritual attainment. These new developments can lead to heightened tensions, as they alter power relations within local communities, as well as between diasporas and local communities. These types of interventions sought by diasporas can also modify social configurations. This reifies that activities can hardly ever be understood in isolation; rather, they should be examined in terms of how they unfold spatially and temporally, especially in transnational contexts (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012).

As pointed out by Schatzki (2001a: 3), practices always involve "material configurations". This constitutive role of things, technologies and material with human interactions produces and gives meaning to these practices. In general, conventional developmental activities centre on the provision of material resources and/or particular knowledge (e.g. extension services to farmers) to those lacking them. The diasporas we studied also take this approach of channelling resources and material from one place to the other as their premise, doing so for the betterment of communities in places of origin. Therefore, it is important to discuss the concept of bundling as a way of giving meaning to a particular practice (Schatzki 2001b). According to Theodore Schatzki, practices are best understood as organized bundles of human activities that are linked through a collection of practical understandings, rules and teleo-affectivities. In our research, we saw the prevalence of such practices when several activities were bundled together.

The "competence", or skill and know-how concerning a particular action, is significant for the overall coherence of practice (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). Likewise, conceptualizing and delivering development requires related competences. For instance, related knowledge, skills and capacities are required to understand the development context, the issues to be addressed, the strategies to be used and the resources required. Furthermore,

competences and materials are often closely linked. In relation to transnational diaspora development practices we see that, although diasporas may bring special knowledge to the places of origin, they may also lack necessary and pivotal insight in local dynamics (Lachenmann 2009).

“Meaning” here refers to the symbolic meanings of actions, ideas, affection, norms and aspirations (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012: 14). Meaning is treated as an element of practice and not viewed as a product. In addressing the transnational practices of diasporas, the shared meaning given to a practice is attributable to the collective nature of engagement. The meaning given to a particular activity is driven by its motivation, organizational nature and the goal to engage in a particular way with the places of origin. These motivations are shaped by diaspora experiences and other attributes, such as education, profession, gender, ethno-religious background and culture. These circumstances and identities colour the meaning(s) of what is considered development (Espinosa 2015). Although some diasporas give development meaning by pursuing material-centric activities, others focus on enhancing spirituality as the main form of intervention.

In line with this conceptualization of diaspora development practices, in this chapter we discuss developmental interventions by engaging with each through their different stages: their conceptualization (what is the issue? Whose issue is it? Where is the issue located?), their realization or implementation (again, where? Who is involved? And when?) and, finally, its effect (has the issue been resolved? For whom? Have other issues arisen?).

The rest of this chapter articulates the role of diaspora collectives in carrying out development-oriented practices in Sri Lanka (the country of origin), with transnational linkages to diasporas based in the United Kingdom and Australia. After a brief introduction of our methods, we describe three vignettes. Thereafter, we discuss the competences associated with these engagements, their material (re)arrangements and the meanings implied with performing these developmental practices. We also articulate the outcomes of diasporic transnational practices on local communities, with specific emphasis on actor–actor relationships and power dynamics.

## METHODS

This chapter is based on primary data collected with a multi-sited study that looked at diaspora engagement in postwar Sri Lanka. An in-depth qualitative approach was used to gather data in 2017 and 2018 from different actors involved in development processes in Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Semi-structured interviews were combined with informal interactions at official events, group discussions and participant observation in various formal

and informal settings. Data were collected to obtain diverse perspectives on diaspora-led development interventions from the various actors, who were either directly linked to the projects or otherwise had indirect influences. Thus, interviews were carried out with representatives of diaspora organizations and their members in the United Kingdom and Australia. In Sri Lanka we spoke with government officers, representatives of community-based organizations, community leaders and various members of the communities living around the projects we focused on. In addition, we examined secondary data and existing literature on the Sri Lankan diaspora. This section continues by providing three brief vignettes. This is followed by a synthesis and conclusion.

*Vignette 1: return and development*

Panaimarathadi<sup>1</sup> is a mono-ethnic Tamil village, contrasting with the neighbouring communities, which are mainly Sinhalese. It is located on the border of Northern and Eastern Provinces. The village borders a lagoon and is blessed with rich, fertile soil and good fishing grounds. The villagers mainly engage in fisheries, (rice) paddy farming and vegetable cultivation for their livelihood. During the civil war this area was a place of armed confrontation between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka. In July 1983 Panaimarathadi was dramatically struck by one of the deadliest riots that took place in Sri Lanka, when the lives and assets of Tamil people became a prime target of state-sponsored Sinhalese mobs that looted, burned and killed Tamils elsewhere in the country. This event came to be known as “Black July”. In this particular village, the houses and properties of all 115 families were destroyed, and the entire village was displaced as a result. Many of them fled to nearby Mullaitivu, the adjacent district that is part of the more Tamil-populated Northern Province. Others fled to Trincomalee, the district capital. Several villagers left the country altogether, seeking refuge in Europe and Australia. The village remained uninhabited from this displacement until the end of the war, in 2009. The next year people began to return to the village in stages, with the older men being the first to return. Nevertheless, by 2016 only 90 families from the previously displaced population had returned completely. Three decades of absence from the village brought about various complexities. This included difficulties in identifying and locating lands (many had lost the title deeds to their land), rights to fishing areas and the ownership of houses and other assets, such as fishing gear.

In the absence of their Tamil neighbours, surrounding Sinhalese villagers had started to encroach on the land, giving rise to new tensions and the

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1. Pseudonym given to protect anonymity.

need for more water irrigation. Furthermore, the village lacked facilities for education, health and transport. The national government played an initial role in facilitating the return of villagers by providing housing for them, with the financial support of the government of India. Further funds were allocated to the construction of an access road, an electric fence to stop invading elephants and the acquisition of a local bus, providing some modest relief. However, the role of the state was marginal in addressing other pressing issues, such as resolving the ongoing land disputes.

The diaspora groups linked to this community have a strong sense of home, and readily produce images of returning to their village of origin without actually doing so. However, they are very committed to the village, and explain that they feel a strong moral responsibility for those villagers who had not been able to leave Sri Lanka with them during the war. These diasporas give meaning to their emotional connections to their place of origin by engaging with them through multiple development projects. Examples include the construction of community buildings, rejuvenating rural infrastructure, rebuilding the local health centre, upgrading local education facilities, providing seed money for agriculture start-ups and strengthening community-based organizations.

These projects can be seen as complementary to the work done by the state to help communities return and resettle in their original villages. Nevertheless, diaspora organizations often have tense relations with the state agencies involved. These tensions stem primarily from the distrust of diaspora organizations that state authorities will play a fair role in land-related disputes. Instead, the diasporas feel that the state will play a largely negative role in resolving land disputes pertaining to returnee villagers.

Having a land claim is pivotal to refugees returning to their villages, as well as to diasporas with a vested interest in the return of their community to their original villages. However, competing land claims were also one of the causes of the civil war. To strengthen the claims of their relatives and friends to ancestral land, diaspora organizations facilitate access to legal aid at a distance by providing the necessary financial and human resources. This support is a key priority for diaspora organizations. Reclaiming land from those who had encroached upon and occupied this land because of the protracted displacement in a postwar context is confrontational, as there are new inhabitants who have put a claim on the land after the war. The resulting legal disputes have led to distrust and simmering tensions between neighbouring communities.

Given that the diasporas engage in these issues at a distance, they could safely stake their claim on land from neighbouring Sinhalese villagers without needing to directly confront them, or state authorities, and face possible unintended consequences of their actions. To them, reclaiming this land

was chiefly a matter of pride, as most of them would never actually return, since their offspring had already become rooted elsewhere in the world, and would not join them in returning to Sri Lanka. Thus, their successful claims remained imagined and symbolic.

*Vignette 2: spirituality in development*

The village of Puthumanal<sup>2</sup> is located on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka, in the southern part of the Ampara District. This already impoverished village was largely destroyed by the tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean in 2004. An Italian philanthropist, also a survivor of the same tsunami, assisted the village by constructing 30 houses for the survivors. At the time of the handover of these houses, the village still lacked basic facilities, such as toilets, a primary school, irrigated fields, water and grazing land. The philanthropist anticipated that the government would provide these services when the construction of the houses was completed and withdrew further commitment.

However, the continuing failure of the state to provide these services left the villagers in a dire situation. In this context, an emigrant from the district who had left the country because of war-related experiences made a plea for the village of Puthumanal with a diaspora organization. A Tamil diaspora network in Australia premised on the principles of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (the SAI Movement) focuses its interventions in Sri Lanka on changing the quality of life in rural communities, such as through the provision of school meals. For many poor children, these school meal programmes are vital for supplementing what they get at home. The diaspora organization promised to help the community recover from its poverty-stricken situation by provided material and immaterial support to the villagers to help them improve their general well-being in a comprehensive and holistic way.

While keeping a certain spiritual approach to addressing poverty, the Australian network engaged in the construction and renovation of houses for individuals and households it identified as poor. The religious practices of the SAI Movement are given central attention in each activity. For instance, when recipients are selected to receive a house, they need to prove that they are committed to SAI practices. This could be in the form of regular participation in collective religious events, by chanting mantras, taking an oath to be a member of the SAI Movement or simply by showcasing a picture of Sathya Sai Baba in their house. As such, subscribing to this form of spirituality is implicitly part of the selection process and thus integral to the overall intervention. In keeping with this implicit religious and spiritual orientation, the

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2. Pseudonym given to protect anonymity.

SAI Movement also focuses on educational enhancement in the area. This takes the shape of arranging additional classes and education equipment, facilitating transportation to the closest school and providing midday meals. With the significant livelihood improvements, which visually transformed the village, the practices of Sathya Sai Baba were largely adopted by the village residents. Indeed, this conversion is something many villagers are proud of.

### *Vignette 3: animal welfare and development*

Sri Diaspora, an organization formed by a group of Sri Lankans originally living in Australia, decided to focus their attention on the Mannar District in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Sri Diaspora is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious diaspora organization that seeks to help (re)develop the most marginalized, excluded communities of Sri Lanka. It selected Mannar District for its interventions because the district was historically deprived of development aid, has high levels of poverty and seems to be generally excluded from the mainstream development processes found elsewhere in Sri Lanka, such as the development of the tourism sector. Nonetheless, Sri Diaspora believed that Mannar District has clear development potential. The organization claims to adopt sustainability as its core principle in its project design and implementation. While working on mainstream development activities such as rejuvenating rural infrastructure and improving livelihoods, it also invests in more innovative interventions. To that end, the organization tries to connect a range of themes, such as urban planning, eco-tourism and improving prospects for sustainable livelihoods, such as through organic cultivation. In this context, animal welfare has been prioritized, notably with the rehabilitation of the many stray donkeys of Mannar Town, integrating them in therapeutic contexts.

The latter idea was implemented in a context in which donkeys were locally considered to be largely “useless”, semi-wild and generally just a nuisance. Initially the donkey rehabilitation idea was ridiculed by many local people. Immediate local adoption and a sense of “ownership” were therefore paramount challenges. The introduction of such new practice created resistance within the local population to adjust their routine practices. However, the organization kept pursuing the idea of donkey welfare, and went on to initiate the project, with financial resources and networks being used to help channel knowledge on the potential of donkey rehabilitation and welfare. Through the persistent efforts of local staff and volunteers from Australia, a donkey clinic, education centre and a district donkey therapy centre were set up. The donkey clinic provided a place to treat and rehabilitate stray or injured donkeys, while the donkey therapy centre provided a treatment place



for differently abled local children, presenting an innovative way of utilizing the many donkeys present in the area. This project took decades to get local recognition, but gradually gained recognition and appreciation following the positive response of the first children participating, but also because it brought about certain economic benefits.

Indeed, the project incited the arrival of local and international tourists to the region, who came to learn about the donkeys. The tourists provided an economic boost to the community as a whole. Local and international media coverage of the donkey project increased the visibility of the hitherto much-ignored Mannar District. This visibility also contributed to a local sense of ownership of the project. Sri Diaspora views this slow infusion and diffusion of the idea that donkeys are a welcome and useful part of the local community as a significant social change. Therefore, this special knowledge and competence channelled from diasporas to a local context have contributed to an innovation that, in the end, created an attitudinal change among people. These new practices regarding the use of donkeys have shifted the meaning given to the presence of donkeys in the area, and have helped to end certain types of maltreatment of donkeys.

#### DISCUSSION: CONCEIVING CHANGE – TRANSNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES OF DIASPORAS

These vignettes of three specific diaspora interventions show that conceptualizing diasporas of important developmental needs in Sri Lanka has had far-reaching effects on local communities. These effects also stem from access to specific capital (including knowledge) and to the choice of spaces through which diasporas intervene in local societies. The diasporas, in many ways, largely define what and how development practices have taken place, often doing so from afar, or otherwise pointing to distant donor dependence to explain their agenda. In the practice of each project, unequal power relations are thus clearly present from the very onset, influencing the nature and organization of activities (Splitter, Seidl & Loscher 2018). This space of engagement is further shaped by an often deliberately strategic approach of diaspora organizations to act through bundles of practices (Schatzki 2010). The latter intends to further increase the dependence of local communities, hence reducing their own space for intervention. This has far-reaching implications for local communities, especially when this falls in line with the objectives of the diaspora organization and their need to show accountability to their donors and “constituency”.

The involvement of diasporas in multiple spaces interconnects objects, materials and people, and envisages changes in specific places. The sense of



belonging of these diasporas to multiple places encourages them to channel resources and materials to those sites that they consider most in need of support. This may often be directed to their own hometown and surrounding regions. However, sometimes resources are channelled to new areas diasporas have been called upon to provide developmental support to, as demonstrated in the vignettes above. We unpack this engagement further below, returning to the three central notions of Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012).

## THE MEANING OF CHANGE

The choice of local interventions, specifically in places of origin, as a “space” of engagement by diasporas arises out of the affection that diasporas maintain for their country of origin, despite being far away from their home country. As widely discussed in the literature on diasporas (Brubaker 2005; Cohen 1997), this notion of “belonging at a distance” underlines the position of diasporas as inevitably departed people from their homeland, with a strong urge to either return home soon or to create the “right” kind of conditions “back home” for an eventual return (Safran 1991; Sheffer 2006; Cohen 2008). The choice of a particular local setting allows them to anchor the temporal and spatial through transnational, transboundary practices. These transnational exchanges induce change in the meanings, attitudes and experiences of actors, impacting existing social structures and institutions both here and there. These exchanges influence the habitus, value systems, way of life, expectations and everyday lives of people. This change starts with the acknowledgement of diaspora organizations of a particular concern to address, framing this as a “problem” or “need” of a community or a region that needs to be addressed to bring about a desired change. This framing as a *problem* is an outcome of what the diaspora conceives as a “desirable” change. These changes visibly “prove” the value of the investment made. Hence, interventions are often conceptualized in a way that changes among actors or “intended” beneficiaries, and can be assessed in a measurable way, without really focusing on the quality of the desired outcome. Most projects carried out by the diaspora organizations in Sri Lanka are conceived around “materials” and “things” (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012) that are tangible and measurable, to prove some form of performance.

It is through their developmental practices that the diasporas aspire to bring “social change” to sites where they intervene. As a strategy to channel this change, the diasporic community constitutes collectives and organizations through a mobilization process. The principal reason for the formation and function of the organizations and networks is to induce change by performing a set of developmental practices, such as providing critical needs for war-affected

communities in various spheres, either in their places of origin or in countries of residence, or both. However, the exact meaning given to “change” may be defined, conceived and perceived differently by different collectives. We note that, by and large, the socio-economic uplifting of war-affected marginalized communities was the primary motive of these diaspora collectives. Providing water supply, housing, health facilities, roads, livelihood support and the construction of schools and temple buildings are all tangible outcomes of this endeavour. Certainly, the provision of material and things through development interventions have contributed to an immediate change in the everyday lives of certain marginalized groups that had been excluded until then by mainstream development actors and/or local, regional and national governments. These changes at the individual level of villagers are more tangible and give inner satisfaction to those who believe in and support such actions. However, the perceptions and attitudes of other actors in the same context can give a different interpretation of this materialistic approach to development. For one, the role of new power dynamics between the actors involved warrants critical scrutiny. The varying expectations and competing interests of diasporas, local communities and the state may lead to various tensions and confrontations, with unintended “negative” implications as a result of a lack of support from the state. As with any other development practice, the diasporas make certain choices regarding the nature of interventions, geographical location and target group. Selecting one group or an area over the other may upset other groups. Thereby, projects can become a site of unintended tensions and enduring conflict (see Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, [Chapter 5](#) in this volume).

Furthermore, interventions that do not result in tangible materialities, and have little state support, are less welcomed by people, because the benefits or changes brought about are not instant for them. As shown, the examples include projects focusing on environmental conservation and animal welfare. Often these issues and interventions are challenged, especially if they are not seen as meeting local needs. By still engaging in such projects, diasporas may challenge established conventional ways of thinking rooted in local society, changing how people give meaning to development through particularly innovative thinking. The donkey rehabilitation project illustrates how an initial idea was much challenged by local actors but later accepted once they began to see the results of the transformation.

Although bringing about change was the motive of all diasporas, the vignettes discussed show that each conceived different parameters for the changes needed in their projects. Thus, the return of displaced populations was at the centre of changes in Sri Lanka that were sought by the diaspora organization discussed in the first vignette. Return was thereby considered more symbolically for themselves, providing a sense of fulfilment. However, it also brought change to the local community.

The intentions and motives of diaspora organizations are often shaped by individuals who lead and actively participate in their activities. This is motivated, often strongly, by a sense of responsibility derived from a certain sense of guilt of being part of the “early flight” from the crisis. For instance, one female respondent, who had fled the war during her childhood, now steers and provides directions to a diaspora collective that operates on the principles of Sathya Sai Baba in engaging with the poor and destitute. Her motive to help was clearly driven by her own experiences and struggles with the war: “Even though I live a better life here, I want to help others, as I know these people are being affected by the devastating war and need to come out of it” (personal communication, representative of a diaspora organization, Ampara, August 2017).

One of the leaders of a prominent diaspora organization working on various developmental issues recalls a childhood filled with ethnic harmony and peace, which lasted until the civil war. His intention was thus to come back and recreate that environment by building social harmony. His orientation towards Sri Lanka also shaped the overall aim of the organization he provides leadership to:

It is because of my first 9 years in Sri Lanka, I think we had a charming existence when we lived in Kandy, and my father and mother had friends from many different communities, and everyone. So, we just grew up with all, and mingled. And while there were differences, hey we were also friends. As I said, I have a closer connection to Sri Lanka than I had with my family growing up. So it was a very hard experience for me to leave Sri Lanka, I really had to deal with that trauma. So, I think from an early age, I always wanted to come back.

(personal communication, representative of diaspora organization, Mannar, June 2018)

## BUNDLING MATERIALS AND PRACTICES FOR CHANGE

The interaction between materiality and social processes (Shove 2009) is explored in the vignette on return. This vignette shows how many of the people who had fled from their village because of the war 30 years ago had still not returned, even when the war ended. The diaspora’s attempt to fix this by channelling material and non-material means to their places of origin ultimately created a complex situation in the local communities. These material arrangements were expected to bring order and reduce issues in the locality. However, in this particular vignette the role of ideas and soft forms

of materiality, such as the creation of a sense of urgency to return to places of origin, stimulated by constant interaction with left-behind communities, were important too. Moreover, this moral encouragement to return brought about new crises. Notably, the return of the villagers sparked a land dispute with neighbouring communities, which the diaspora sought to resolve in favour of its sponsored community through legal interventions. These material and non-material interventions by the diasporas converted a local matter into a transnational question, shifting the power dynamics. Furthermore, the sustainability of the outcomes achieved by the transnationalization of local problems by diasporas is at stake. For instance, if land disputes are resolved in favour of the returnees, this appears to be a positive sign. However, in the long run, such land reallocation may contribute to further the tensions between the two neighbouring communities.

The problem is that such actions alter existing relationships within and between communities. For instance, the support of the Tamil diaspora to one local Tamil community reinforced a lack of trust between neighbouring Tamil and Sinhala communities. These types of transnational practices by diasporas demonstrate the importance of temporality in social change, even with material arrangements (Boccagni 2014). In this case, the continued relevance of a prior history in current local positionalities was not well regarded by the diaspora. This was attributable in part to their engagement from afar, but it might also have related to their altered sense of relevant institutional norms as a result of living abroad. Accordingly, resolving resource conflicts through formal legal engagements might be considered a more normal approach in the open societies they are now part of, which departs from consensus-building and mediating approaches preferred in rural Sri Lanka.

The interconnection between different practices forms bundles of activities performed together to create practice bundles. In diasporic transnational engagement, multiple activities are performed to bring about societal change in places of origin. However, some activities may also impact the situation in their own places of settlement. The interconnected nature of practices that blend spirituality and materiality is a good example of such a transnational effect. In this case, delivering development through material support to impoverished communities was conceived in such a way that it was able to simultaneously achieve spiritual goals. It is important to understand *why* these transnational practices are bundled, especially when this combines religion-oriented spirituality with materiality, and when this is done strategically to gain more religious influence over particular parts of society through material co-interventions.

Religious activities are central to some diaspora collectives and may act as nodes of transnational engagement (van Dijk 2002) through an agenda of addressing social issues in countries of origin or residence. Diasporas may

have an explicit or more implicit religious orientation with their activities, by embedding religious engagements in “development” initiatives. This allows them to still fit the label of a developmental organization, which may give access to external funds, while maintaining their own higher goals. The second vignette shows this well, with an explicit religious allegiance to SAI devotion, while working on principles of changing human behaviour for poverty alleviation:

As SAI devotees, we teach people real discipline and proper behaviour. We tell them good stories, teach them not to lie, not to kill, and to love people. We promote Sarvamatham (Omnism); so we do not have a religion. For us Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism are all the same. We say there is only one ethnicity (or race) which is human, only one language, which is the language of heart, only one God, but he comes in different forms.

(national coordinator of a local organization,  
Ampara, August 2017)

In the meantime, the network of this diaspora organization allows for local engagement through multiple activities, making its engagement omnipresent and persistent. This is clear in vignette 2, where the diaspora collective worked with a community, providing houses to the most affected while concomitantly providing support to underprivileged children for their educational improvement. At the same time, SAI devotion practices were performed. This type of bundling of activities is an illustration of how practices work together. Indeed, when many practices are performed as one bundle, the impact of their individual interventions may also be higher. Continuous engagement with local communities makes these activities part of their everyday life. The members of the community may embody the anticipated changes among themselves. In this example, this was done by fulfilling the anticipated need to embrace practices promoted by SAI devotees to gain access to other resources from them. This is evident in the third vignette as well, when, despite initial opposition, Sri Diaspora kept promoting the idea of donkey rehabilitation and the importance of it with the community through various other activities. Over time, these kinds of consistent engagements of diasporas helped the local community recognize the role diasporas can play in their area. However, the conditionalities implied in the emergent bundles of practices do raise questions around the notions of ownership, notably at the stage of conceptualization of issues and practices to tackle them.

Likewise, vignette 3 illustrates how the aim of one diaspora organization to change people’s attitudes towards animal welfare not only required simultaneous engagement with local communities in multiple activities to create a

sense of overall credit but also persistence with these over a longer period to slowly gain recognition and acceptance of these interventions. Thus, beyond engaging with the local community in other infrastructure-oriented developments, such as the rehabilitation of water reservoirs (see Munas & Smith 2023), the diaspora organization also went to great lengths to consistently engage with the local community and convince them of the value of donkey rehabilitation, even bringing in international expertise. Its engagement with the local community helped to challenge and gradually transform existing perspectives within the local community on the value and role of donkeys.

### BUNDLING COMPETENCES FOR CHANGE

The diaspora collectives organize and operate in a manner that ensures that the required competences to deliver a certain development are all in place. A coherent performance requires an arrangement of related competences (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). In the example of the returning villagers (vignette 1), the diasporas were able to provide material support. However, the diasporas were less competent in understanding the implications of their actions in a local context, and how this could upset existing relationships within the region. Thus, the rising tensions between the local Sinhalese and Tamils because of interventions geared towards the needs of one ethnicity, as in the first vignette, were largely ignored. Once this was recognized, a formal legal settlement rather than local mediation (cooperative approach) was sought.

Development assistance to places of origin is often carried out by mobilizing the necessary skills, increasing the know-how of the individuals involved and introducing new techniques to address the specific developmental problems perceived to be most important. Competences travel across spaces, from transnational to local, and are given impetus through the transmission of knowledge between groups of practitioners. The knowledgeability of diasporas thereby sometimes gets challenged by local counterparts, which requires of the diaspora that they legitimize their knowledge as well as their (envisaged) actions, especially when operating from a distance. This is also evidenced in the third vignette on animal welfare, where the knowledge of local people of more innovative roles for local donkeys was limited as, for centuries, they had used donkeys for hard manual labour, with limited insight in their potential in other roles. Over time, Sri Diaspora was able to transfer a niche innovation in practice competence from a transnational space into the local arena, to provide mental relief for challenged children of the area while, concomitantly, creating a more sustainable and animal-friendly solution for stray donkeys in the area.

Not only do diasporas need to have recognized knowledge of interventions but they should also have the organizational skills and know-how to engage in a positive and sustainable way with local actors while navigating a developmental interface. One important way to dealing with this is through engagement with different segments of a local community, who may have different, sometimes even competing, expectations. For vignette 2, in which the diaspora organization sought to infuse certain practices of spirituality through development, there is a clear power bias, as local interest in the material gains brought in by the diaspora provided leeway to introduce and convert this community to new religious thoughts. The community visibly exhibited an acceptance of this change by publicly placing SAI posters and placards. Religious events linked to SAI practices are now held every week in public places such as temples and community halls. These acts provide some level of satisfaction with the diasporas, as thereby their higher intentions were met. However, in-depth conversations with the local communities revealed that these symbolic SAI practices are performed on particular days of the week when diaspora representatives are likely to visit the village. This example shows that the diasporas may not have a full understanding of the complex societal arrangements their interventions have brought about.

#### CONCLUSION: THE MEDIATING SPACES OF DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

The three transnational diaspora-derived developments discussed here have shown the diverse conceptualization of how places of origin change by diaspora interventions. These interventions are looked at through interlinkages between the competences of diaspora collectives, material dimensions and diverse meanings attributed to notions of development. It is evident that these three dimensions are interlinked and that the linkages are not uniform across different developmental practices. This, as we have witnessed, leads to multiple forms of understanding of what development is, resulting in rather diverse enactments of development practices by different diaspora collectives. The role of affection, as a sincere attachment to communities left behind (albeit configured at various geographical scales) in places of origin, is crucial for explaining the heterogeneity among diasporas in what they conceive as relevant or desired “development”. Thereby, linkages between materiality, meanings and competence are sometimes redefined, rebalanced or reconnected, depending on how the development is conceived and practised, and with what recognized role for local communities. As a result, the transnational dimension of diasporas, as in most cases they operated from



afar, introduces new complications and meanings to what development is relevant, and how it should be practised. So, what is their impact?

Diasporic transnational activities and practices may lead to enduring social transformations across transnational spaces, connecting places of origin with countries of residence (Waldinger 2017; Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004; Vertovec 2004). These transformations are the outcomes of diasporic transnationality, simultaneity and dual engagement (Grillo & Mazzucato 2008; Smith & van Naerssen 2009). In post-conflict settings, diasporic transnational exchanges can form invaluable vehicles of transformation (van Hear 2011). Transformations are, accordingly, perceived as social reconfigurations emerging out of collective (and sometimes individual) actions that are immersed into particular local contexts (Ongayo 2019). As discussed in the vignettes, these transformations can be observed in the socio-cultural domain, as conceptual transformations in the political domain and as institutional transformations in the economic domain. Impacts can be both intentional and unintentional, tangible and intangible, desirable and undesirable. This depends greatly on the scope of engagement and the benefits derived by local actors and their ability to navigate their transnational relationships with intervening diaspora groups.

In considering the use of practice theory in diaspora studies, we hope this chapter has contributed to the conceptualization of diaspora practices and the implications of such practices for local community spheres. Furthermore, this chapter has sought to contribute to debates on the complexity of diasporic engagement practices in multiple sites, particularly in places of origin, with concern for the role of power hierarchies and related social relations both at local and transnational levels. This chapter has thus explored how diasporas and their multi-sited transnational engagement practices interact with different socio-cultural domains across various contextual and spatial boundaries. Practice theory, as deployed in the chapter, has helped us understand the complexities that emerge from transnational, multi-sited practices of diasporas (Featherstone, Phillips & Waters 2007). These multi-sited practices showcase a complex interplay between local and global through the interventions of remotely operating diasporas, affecting the lives of local actors. Yet local actors were not merely passive in these processes. Instead, they showed various kinds of reciprocal engagements, linking back their “here” to the diasporic “there”, mediating their position in evidently unequal power relations by addressing the legitimacy of diasporas and their expected role for local communities.

Nonetheless, external interventions by the diasporas as carriers of practices have resulted in a certain shift in local relationships. The visible impact on existing social hierarchies of diasporic interventions may not only lead to new relationships but also change existing ones. These can be sources of



(often unintended) new tensions. Notably, in fragile postwar contexts, this is of great importance. Thus, diaspora initiatives that seek to bring about development in war-affected regions can produce mixed results at higher societal levels, disturbing existing social orders and/or producing new ones. Indeed, the engagements following from a strong “homeland” orientation of a diaspora might even incite regional disturbances, when neighbouring communities feel they are left out of a particular development provided by a diaspora organization to a particular community. If these neighbouring communities represent other ethnic or religious groups, this can make the situation more volatile. Therefore, even in situations when diaspora interventions incline towards “small is beautiful” impacts at local levels, the long-term net effect may be increasingly uneven development, particularly at more regional and national scales. This suggests the need for increased co-creative efforts, linking and adjusting the practices of different actors across various geographic scales. In the context of a still politically sensitive postwar Sri Lanka, this is a serious challenge not just for diasporas through their intended interventions but for all the actors involved.

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## **PART II**

### **ESSAYS ON PRACTISING CONTESTED EVERYDAY LIFE**



## CHAPTER 5

# PRACTISING POST-FOUNDATIONALISM: ENCOUNTERING CONFLICT AND CONTINGENCY IN PANDEMIC EVERYDAY LIFE

*Friederike Landau-Donnelly and Lucas Pohl*

In this exploratory chapter, we engage in a conceptual dialogue between political theories of post-foundationalism and practice-oriented ontologies. From this conceptual endeavour, we derive new insights into the connections between conflict, practice and politics. Studying these interrelations is relevant to better navigate the political dynamics determining which practices turn into hegemonic norms or rules, while other practices are dismissed or marginalized. As such, the chapter offers a conflict-attuned reading of practices, which helps us understand the potential of practices to rupture existing topologies of power, and to ignite socio-spatial change on multiple levels.

We place this post-foundational, practice-oriented framework within the eruptive moment of the emerging Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, to demonstrate how everyday spaces and practices are continuously striated by conflicts. Building on recent works in human geography that have contributed to developing a post-foundational notion of space (Blakey *et al.* 2022; Hussey 2022; Landau & Pohl 2021; Landau, Pohl & Roskamm 2021), crucially articulated from ontological negativity and antagonism, we here stake out what it means to *practise* life with and within insurmountable (ontological) conflict. What is more, to live in the face of antagonisms has real-life implications. Whereas, for example, the constant feeling of insecurity or unpredictability or the incessant changing of plans were triggered by the pandemic, and caused ruptures in everyday life, a conflict-attuned understanding of practices reveals that generally practised regimes of mobility, movement and encounter were already subject to tensions and exclusions before the pandemic and will far exceed this era. As such conflicts are deeper-seated, the chapter tackles the question of how to move forward in the face of ongoing antagonism, and contingency; the latter implies acknowledgement that

everything is necessarily uncertain, yet could always be *otherwise*. In light of the generative potential of practices to challenge hegemonies, we argue that a post-foundational approach to practices strengthens both theoretical and concrete perspectives of practice as inherently contentious, and constantly reshaping spaces of everyday political life.

What is our post-foundational approach? Post-foundationalism, very simply, departs from the conceptual assumption that there is no ultimate reason or ground that is indispensable or necessary for the institution of politics (Marchart 2007), society (Marchart 2013) or space (Landau, Pohl & Roskamm 2021). Similarly, in practice-theoretical debates, Kirsten Simonson (2007: 168) has claimed that “nothing in the social world is prior to human practice”. We radicalize this statement by giving it a post-foundational twist: there “is” nothing in the social world prior to practice. In other words, a post-foundational take on practices assumes that there is nothing prior to what is being produced through practices. Practices, then, are constitutive of political, social and spatial life that emerges from nothing. Hence, when engaging with the so-called “foundations” of socio-political worlds, we find ourselves in a condition of utter nothingness, or negativity, as we conceptualize it. From nothingness or ontological negativity, contingent articulations of socially, culturally and politically hegemonic meaning are instituted. Practices are not rooted in steady grounds but, rather, emerge from an abyss in which (only) nothing is certain. It follows that practices crucially shape the socio-spatial realities we encounter. Moreover, practices that challenge occupations of space and power foreground the latter as necessarily reversible and contested. With the objective to discuss the interrelations between the political everyday practices of humans,<sup>1</sup> conflict and contingency, in this chapter, we sketch the contours of a post-foundational geography that can derive only from an ontological lack of foundations and certainties, or absence (see also Landau-Donnelly & Pohl 2023). As Klaus Geiselhart, Simon Runkel, Susann Schäfer and Benedikt Schmid (Chapter 9 in this volume) demonstrate, an ontologically reified conception of practice forecloses more processual conceptions of both practice and subjectivity.

To unpack the multiscalar experience of the often perceived abstract concepts of conflict and contingency, we set out on a fourfold excursion into everyday life and space transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic. First, we discuss how (European) borders were significantly irritated, moved and barred

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1. Although dialogue between more-than-human geographies and post-foundational thought constitutes an intriguing arena for further conceptual debate, our discussion of practice in this chapter is limited to the human actors' practices of and with conflict and contingency. Notably, the practice and sensory-affective experience of both conflict and contingency are crucially shaped by non- or more-than-human actors, such as objects, atmospheres, and so on, but a thorough analysis of these multi-species relations cannot be provided here.

at the outset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020. Second, looking back on the first months of the pandemic as unleashing an unprecedented mode of crisis, we explore how cities created experiences of emptiness during lockdowns and became “filled” with new spatial routines, practices and usages of public and private spaces. Third, by looking at homes as being (semi-) private spaces, which gained importance in Covid-19 because of lockdown measures, we reflect on the implications of the blurring lines between self- and state-regulated spatial practices. Fourth, we turn to bodies, including our own, to consider the most micro-level unit of analysis to experience and sense the pandemic implications of contingency and conflict.

Our account draws primarily on our own encounters and experiences. As friends, we spent hours in early lockdown with Zoom talks, drinking wine together, working on papers, discussing books and ranting about life. We often spoke about the radical *Kontingenzerfahrung* of this time, a German term that is difficult to translate. *Erfahrung* is often translated as “experience” (but, ironically enough, also “expertise”). In combination with contingency, *Kontingenzerfahrung* points to the visceral, embodied, emotional and rational realization that nothing is really fixed, stable or even necessary anymore. Within the dispersed irritations of senses of place, space and scale, we sketch everyday experiences of the pandemic politics in relation to necessary crisis management tactics, ranging from patrolled borders, curfews and closed kindergartens to overflowing hospitals and queues in gun shops. Along the spectrum of pandemic spatial practices and conditions, we trace how the omnipresent experience of contingency shaped possibilities of urban everyday life (Colebrook 2002; de Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 2014), or “urban everyday politics” (Beveridge & Koch 2019) in the here and how, while longer-term political and health-related stages of the pandemic were still unfolding. In this uncertain undertaking, we acknowledge the deeply uneven experiences of pandemic irritation, suffering, pain, loss, anxiety and vulnerability that have affected people from different ages, genders and socio-economic backgrounds in geographic locations all over the world.

Hence, although we write from our positionalities that were personally and professionally strongly affected by pandemic restrictions, we also write from contexts in which we had stable incomes, places to stay and social networks of care throughout the pandemic. Later, we also write as vaccinated and boosted bodies, one female, one male, who have experienced the virus itself in different times and places, with strange arrays of symptoms, surfacing the visceral states of (un)groundedness. Situated within this volume’s objective of shedding light on critical geographers’ ways of researching practices and practising research, we reflect here on our own practising and theorizing of post-foundational concepts.

## CONCEPTUALIZING PRACTICES OF POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL

The tectonic shifts of everyday urban life as manifested viscerally and visibly throughout the pandemic have brought about changes in what post-foundational theorists call “politics” and “the political”. In this framework of “political difference”, inspired by Martin Heidegger’s “ontological difference” (Marchart 2007), the distinction between a logic of “politics” and that of “the political” addresses the differing practices and institutions of hegemony. Generally, the rationale of politics seeks to institute order, control and the reduction of complexity, whereas “the political” constantly intervenes, disturbs and dislocates the places and practices of politics (Swyngedouw 2014). In the pandemic, the state-enforced policies, regulations, emergency decisions and laws roughly delineated the logic of “politics”, whereas new practices could be captured as emergences of the political. Notably, politics and the political are not hermetically separate spheres (or practices, for that matter). Rather, they continuously interpenetrate. As Joe Blakey, Ruth Machen, Derek Ruez and Paula Medina García (Blakey *et al.* 2022: 3) have recently stated, considering the political as more “enmeshed” might aid in “highlight[ing] how any order of politics necessarily takes place in the context of the political, and how any political event occurs within and against the spaces of politics”. Following Claire Colebrook (2002: 703), the everyday can be considered as “a constant and overwhelming refusal” instead of a self-sufficient, transcendental positive substance or coherent experience. Our reflections are inspired by emergent literatures on geographies of the void (Kingsbury & Secor 2021), negative geographies (Bissell, Rose & Harrison 2021) and geographies besides affirmation (Dekeyser & Jellis 2020). Although we do not unpack these notions further, the negative approach to practices sketched here will equip these literatures with a nuanced conception of grasping the origins of practices, and their transformational potential, as deriving out of nothingness. With the post-foundational gaze on practice we advocate, we challenge the ontological position of what practice “is” and what it “is not”.

This challenge is based on a twofold lacuna in the literature. On the one hand, post-foundational political (and spatial) theory has engaged very little, or at least little specifically, with existing accounts of practice theory, also ranging under labels such as “practice theory”, “praxeology” and “practice ontology” (one exception is Dünckmann & Fladvad 2016). However, we are convinced that post-foundational scholars can learn from practice theories to more closely examine how political routines, institutions or hegemonies come about. Although micropolitical practices of resistance and dissent have been discussed within post-foundational scholarship (Beveridge & Koch 2019; Groth 2021; Kenis & Lieuwen 2021; Rosol 2014), these accounts have rarely advanced processes of political mobilization or depoliticization via a



practice-theoretical lens. On the other hand, leading practice-theoretical scholars, such as Theodore Schatzki (2001), have pointed to the influential ontological work of Heidegger, but without taking the “left-Heideggerian” implications of post-foundational theory into account.<sup>2</sup> In light of these mutual shortcomings in terms of engaging post-foundational and practice theories, we mobilize approaches from critical urban studies, in which practices have been discussed as possible grounds to articulate counter-hegemonic critique (see Beveridge & Koch 2019 and Kyrönviita & Wallin 2022). We believe that practice theorists can learn from post-foundational thought to better understand the conflictual contours of politics and the political. As Ross Beveridge and Philippe Koch (2019: 146, 150) specify, the everyday as “source, stake and site of struggle” helps us consider urban everyday politics as “strategic, collective, conflictual and organized practices that are shaped by and reshape the urban”. This aligns with Warren Magnussen’s (2014) proposition for a “political ontology of urbanism as a way of life”, which strongly echoes post-foundational thought without explicitly making reference to it. In a specifically post-foundational spatial framework, Gary Hussey (2022: 2) argues that “thinking antagonism spatially in the context of contested spaces, underlines the ways through which ontological or foundational violence can be concretized through spatial practices.” Notably, our approach to practising research, and researching the practice of post-foundationalism (which turns out to be the same thing), is sensitive to the uneven distribution of power, manifest in intersectional inequities and violence (Blakey *et al.* 2022).

To pursue our approach, we draw from the heterogeneous post-foundational conceptual repertoire, containing various connectors that serve to capture their existing, latent or manifest understandings of how to practise conflict and contingency. In concrete terms, we are inspired by Davide Nicolini’s (2009) methodology of “zooming in” and “zooming out of practice” to sketch a post-foundational geography erected from pillars of contingency, conflict and political difference. By zooming in, we use some of the most incisive conceptual tools of post-foundationalism, marking the latter as a political theory of contingency and antagonism (Marchart 2018). By zooming out, we project the practical implications of what it feels like to be entangled in conflict and contingency against the negative ontology of antagonism. Nicolini (2009: 1404–5) suggests that “practising is therefore inherently and necessarily an act of poiesis, creation, invention and improvisation, aimed at producing sameness with what is, by definition, different and changeable: practices are literally re-produced on each novel occasion”. However, at the same time, practising is also “bounded”.

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2. The term “Heideggerian Left” was created by Oliver Marchart (2007) to describe the critical yet affirmative stance of post-foundational theory regarding Heidegger’s ontological framework.

Although bounded practices are conceptually insightful for understanding routines, social rituals and the institutionalization of practices, in zooming out we push the implications of practices into a realm *without* bonds, bounding, boundaries, foundations or grounds, which directly resonates with our work on (un)grounding (Landau, Pohl & Roskamm 2021: 27ff.). In this sense, considering practice as potentiality to (un)bound hegemony in society, politics and space advances the emancipatory power of practices.

As conceptual ciphers running through our multiple lenses, we mobilize three prominent conceptual dimensions in post-foundational thought to examine how political difference plays out in everyday spatial practice. First, we engage with Ernesto Laclau's (1990) notion of "space" and "time", leveraged through practices of "sedimentation" and "dislocation" (see Marchart 2021). As we show, practice can both relate to sedimentation (i.e. the repetition, routinization and naturalization of norms, etc.) and dislocation (i.e. the challenging and perpetual refusal). Following Laclau, "there is no place without dislocation ... In other words, dislocation is both precondition and result of the antagonistic construction of social identity" (Marchart 2021: 108). Second, we summon Michel de Certeau's (1988) approach of "place" and "space" via practices of "strategies" and "tactics" (see Groth 2021). As Colebrook (2002: 700) puts it, de Certeau defines strategies as "the movements of life in all their fluidity and contingency ... subject ... to a repeatable and unified order", while he considers tactics as "not conscious disruptions of that order, but unintended dilations, wanderings, or events that occur beyond all sense of order" (700). As a third conceptual pillar, we turn to Jacques Lacan's (2013) distinction between "world", as the realm of a socio-spatial order "that works" for the subject, and "the Real", as "what does not work" (see Pohl & Swyngedouw 2023). All these post-foundational ciphers unpack differences between hegemonic institutions on the one hand, and counter-hegemonic destabilizations on the other. By situating these terms along the continuum of political difference, this chapter advances a unique conceptualization of *practices of politics* that hinges on Laclau's sedimentations, de Certeau's strategies and the Lacanian world: respectively, *practices of the political* are articulated as dislocations, tactics, the Real. Following Deen Sharp (2019: 836, emphasis in original), our post-foundational geographical approach to practices is invested in creating "new possibilities for geographical knowledge production by facilitating the *practice* of difference, where new ways of forging commitments, connections and geography are constantly explored". Ultimately, our conceptual synthesis not only reinforces the dialogue between post-foundational thinking and practice-theoretical approaches but also offers political difference as a practical device to understand practices as conflictual. The following section takes us back to the beginnings of the Covid-19 pandemic, zooming in onto a strange, often visceral experience of conflict and contingency, as the start of our fourfold excursion.

## PRACTISING PANDEMIC SPACE BETWEEN POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL

The Covid-19 pandemic was a strange collective experience that disrupted various notions of time and temporality (Secor & Blum 2023), just as it transformed multiple existing spatial relations. Your apartment suddenly had an international conference audience peeking into your semi-made bed, your vacation photos, your artsy prints in the back. Your life shrank to a small box showing your torso, leaving the lower half of your body forever dwelling in sweatpants (so we heard). Interruptions by cats or other non-human companions gave “unprofessional” insights into already weird ways of doing work as academics. *To work or not to work* became an ever more pressing question, challenging parents now squeezed between Lego towers, unfinished laundry and deadlines for research grants to be submitted. Contingency crept up at home, conflicts about priorities bubbled up between partners, friends and families. Lockdowns not only hampered globalized mobility streams of people, goods, services and thoughts but also significantly destabilized the paradigm of globalization itself, which had seemingly gone unchallenged since the 1990s.

It is not as if everyday life was full of utmost necessities, or without feelings of contingency in the pre-pandemic era. Yet the first pandemic months in 2020 unprecedentedly – and unexpectedly – dismantled assumed normalcies, ranging from going to work in the morning to dating, transport and everyday mobility. “The pandemic marks the end of an era and the beginning of another,” Rebecca Solnit (2020) wrote in *The Guardian*. Although it is crucial to highlight the vagueness of the “new era”, especially when looking at it from the standpoint of 2023, it is equally crucial to insist that 2020 *did* mark an unparalleled moment in global history and politics, which was perceived by many as an endpoint of globalized neoliberalism. Against this background, Srećko Horvat (2021: 148) states that “if there was any recent year that could be described as the year of the Apocalypse ... it was 2020”.

The word “pandemic”, stemming from the Greek πᾶν, “pan”, which means “all”, and δῆμος, “demos”, indicates that it is an event which affects the world “as a whole”. However, in evaluating the development of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that it did not hit everyone in the same way, or everywhere at the same time. The pandemic proceeded unevenly across time and space, and in many ways unveiled “the fundamental inequalities and class divisions inscribed into our societies and produced by the global capitalist system” (Horvat 2021: 170–1). With regard to Lacan’s notion of the world as “what works”, the “worldly” quality of the pandemic chimes with this rationale. During the pandemic the world was affected in connection with both making new things work and making other things stop working. More concretely, what worked was the quick turnover of political decision-making to facilitate

necessary support funds, emergency payments or the waiving of fees. In contrast, something that no longer worked, for example, was the once uninhibited supply of imported goods: one might remember empty shelves in supermarkets and huge delays in delivery times for online shopping. More generally, what interests us here are the practices that make spaces “work” (i.e. the space whose functioning is enabled by the logic of politics to produce hegemonic sedimentations). Put differently, the space of the pandemic “world” was confronted with both practices of politics and the political, yet these two logics affected and folded into space differently, ranging from practices that no longer worked within this world (i.e. constricting or foreclosing space via lockdown measures, quarantine) to practices that made the world work anew (new forms of solidarity, travelling, connecting, sharing, etc.).

Although the virus has significantly impacted practices of political and spatial organization, we do not consider the virus itself as an agential political entity or actor. Accordingly, there is nothing inherently political about Covid-19 but, rather, about the effects it produced. As such, the virus obtained a strange position both inside and radically outside the world. The virus became an externalized intruder not to be localized via the coordinates that usually indicate or map how the world works. Slavoj Žižek (2020: 132–3) refers to this unlocalizable place of the virus with reference to Lacan’s distinction between reality and the Real by emphasizing that it is precisely the impossibility of properly localizing the virus that makes it powerful:

What we are dealing with here is the distinction, elaborated by Lacan, between reality and the real: reality is external reality, our social and material space to which we are used and within which we are able to orient ourselves and interact with others, while the real is a spectral entity, invisible and for that very reason appearing as all-powerful. The moment this spectral agent becomes part of our reality (even if it means catching a virus), its power is localized, it becomes something we can deal with (even if we lose the battle).

In short, the virus becomes, and continues to become political via practices that facilitate or interrupt the socio-spatial functioning of the world. It is precisely this rupture that a post-foundationalist would call “dislocation”.

The framework of political difference provides further explanation. The aim of pandemic politics (i.e. the ways in which the logic of “politics” pervaded and was practised in the pandemic) was to ground and thus control, order or manage the virus, to situate it in space. The logic of politics aimed at turning the virus into something we can deal with. The spatialization of the virus was dependent upon where the virus was, and where it was not

(yet). From the standpoint of pandemic politics, the virus had to stay outside, while infected bodies had to stay inside, being contained in quarantine. Thus, pandemic politics turned the virus into a sedimented, controllable form. In sum, on many different spatial scales, the strategy of politics attempted to isolate the existence and spread of the virus to keep the world working. The acute experience of scale-bending – or, maybe more accurately, that of scale implosions on local, regional, national and global levels – reshuffled those practices that became dominant, routinized or hegemonic, and those that were continuously dismissed or marginalized. The following four vignettes – Europe, the city, the home and the body – unpack the meandering of the virus between outsides and insides, between politics and the political, folding in and out of space. From these insights, we ultimately put into practice a post-foundational political ontology of space that embraces the utter contingency and conflicting natures of our political world.

#### *Vignette 1: pandemic (European) borders*

*Let us scale down “the world” to the level of sovereign nation states.* One of the first responses to the spread of Covid-19 by territorially defined units worldwide was to close the physical borders that surround nation states. For the sake of argumentative brevity, we consider only the immense body of work on European borders in this section, noting how different yet sometimes surprisingly similar the responses to the pandemic have been in other parts of the world (Radil, Pinos & Ptak 2021; Ikotun, Akhigbe & Okunade 2021). National borders, which had consistently been losing relevance in the course of globalization since the 1990s (at least for the majority of white, Western populations across Europe and North America), suddenly reappeared as a significant space of geopolitics in 2020. Although the idea of “the nation” serves as a sense-making device to systematize scales of belonging as a sense of place and identity, the geographies of everyday nationhood (see Edensor & Sumartojo 2018 and Padgen 2002) are subject to contingent acts of boundary- or border-drawing. As such, nations are contested and without fixed core, final reason or ground. Constructions of borders are also a result of practices, facilitated both by official state agencies and by other (un)bordering actors challenging these borders (see Giudice & Giubilaro 2015).

Border controls became an essential strategy (in de Certeau’s sense) to ensure a definitive distribution into geographically situated insides and outsides of Covid-19, as well as its political control and accountability. To (re-)erect borders was seen as a feasible measure to regulate who could enter a country, and who could not. Relatedly, border closures were

considered efficient to control how the virus would be contained, kept out or eradicated. In other words, the border functioned as an effort to enact a specific order of space and serenity after the unwanted interruption caused by the pandemic. Borders were (re)affirmed to establish a space of stabilization, closure and control. However, these newly assembled border geographies and anticipated securities were accompanied by the dislocation of supposed certainties: Freedom of mobility was restricted, entry restrictions were imposed and, paradoxically, exactly 25 years after the Schengen Agreement came into force, many internal EU borders were closed and patrolled again. In Germany, for instance, the term *Risikogebiet* (“risk area”) became a prominent trope that circulated in media and political communication to denote those areas in the country that were highly affected by Covid-19. Hence, the spatial distribution of insides, outsides and risks was reproduced within nation states that clung to the idea of maintaining a world that *works*, as Lacan would put it.

In sum, Covid-19 illustrated the fragility of spatial concepts such as the nation state or Europe, having brought forth a cacophony of different political approaches to respond to the crisis. Swedish or Dutch approaches to relative herd immunity differed greatly from strict and total lockdowns, including curfews, in France, Spain or Portugal and versions of “lockdown light” in Germany, the United Kingdom or northern European countries such as Denmark and Sweden (see Wang & Mao 2021). In particular, the initial emergency responses at the beginning of the pandemic have shown that the “European Union” in a foundational sense does not exist (i.e. there is no absolute or “true” foundation to the European Union, or even to Europe, which are nothing other than constructions). Individual nation states’ healthcare responses were polyvalent; yet they were later unified in the European Union’s shared efforts to purchase vaccines, distribute them and create a streamlined EU proof of vaccination known as a Covid passport or certificate.

The logic of pandemic politics initially appealed to nationally defined borders. Concerted efforts to contain the virus wafted into the governance of the pandemic later (e.g. to coordinate vaccination or harmonize ways of checking vaccination proof). Although there have certainly been cross-border collaborations and acts of solidarity (e.g. transferring intensive-care patients across borders), the logic of politics has once more overruled the nagging and contradictory presence of the political. To conclude, the desire to protect the sedimented construction of Europe, based on distinctive nation states, was prioritized over the irreducibly conflictual presence of that which does *not* work, neither in the world nor in Europe; the excessive, uncontrollable Real of the pandemic.



## *Vignette 2: pandemic cities*

*Scale down to the city.* Besides the territorial scale of Europe, cities across the globe were intensely affected by the pandemic in 2020 as a result of their socio-spatial density, socio-economic heterogeneity and existing cleavages of race-, health- and gender-related justice. Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 critical urban scholars had already recognized that the spread of infectious diseases is accelerated by processes of urbanization (see Connolly, Keil & Ali 2020). It has also been stated that Covid-19 is not only a “disease of globalization” (Peet & Peet 2020) but also a disease of urbanization – or, rather, of globalized urbanization (Ali, Connolly & Keil 2022). After originating in Wuhan, a city of 11 million inhabitants in mainland China, the virus started to spread most effectively in densely populated urban areas around the world. One of the responses of pandemic politics was lockdown measures, leading to sudden shutdowns of urban public and semi-public space in many parts of the world and endowed cities with an apocalyptic imagination (see Pohl 2022).

When urban everyday life moved almost entirely to private and digital spaces, it left behind countless office buildings, shopping malls, movie theatres, swimming pools, concert halls, coffee shops, restaurants and stores, which stood out as material remainders/reminders of the time before the crisis. Spaces that had been considered essential and significant for the unique experience of city life abruptly lost their purpose. Places that used to be visited or traversed by hundreds and thousands of people every day suddenly lay deserted and, in a certain sense, became useless. As Žižek (2020: 114–15) points out in his reading of the pandemic, “We suddenly saw the buildings and objects that we used every day – stores, cafeterias, buses, trains, and planes – just resting there, closed, deprived of their function ... Such moments should make us think: is it really worth returning to the smooth functioning of the same system?” What and who are all the stores and shopping centres *for* if they are not used as consumerist meeting grounds or the sedimented structures of capitalism? What do we need all these streets, garages and car parks for if no one drives to work? Why are countless office spaces standing empty while there are countless people who are experiencing homelessness? The lockdown has demonstrated how little of urban space is still available, or useful, when it no longer functions under the imperative of the pre-pandemic status quo.

Of course, urban life did not simply vanish or come to a complete halt during Covid-19. Yet the common routines of urban life – everyday practices such as crossing an intersection at a green light, stopping at red – were challenged. *Why* would you stick to the pre-pandemic status quo when certain functions and necessities of cities are no longer in place? *Why* wait at a red light if there

is no car in this deserted place? Notably, the voiding of public space reshuffled relations between imposed and routinized practices (i.e. sedimentations and strategies) and self-organized and appropriating practices (dislocations and tactics). In other words, strategies became porous while temporary tactics could claim space in cities (e.g. hosting birthday picnics outside, going for a walk with an online date instead of meeting in a bar, moving band practices, choir rehearsals or sports classes into the public realm). There was something like an aftertaste to some of the ritualized practices, repetitions, sedimentations that became negotiable: why go back to paying €5 for a beer on a terrace if you can bring your own and hang out on a park bench?

Although some of the emptying of public spaces was instructed and planned displacement, other disappearances from the urban scene had unforeseen consequences; as soon as urban space was no longer primarily used for capitalist consumption, trade and wage labour, its potential functions were radically unhinged. As indicators of things *not* working any more in the urban world, empty and emptied spaces became almost ghostly. What, in short, is the city left to be if it is not populated with people and products? What shall we do in/with cities? Do we even still need the city? As long as it could be assumed that Covid-19 was still among us, and would spread as soon as we encountered each other in public space, cities had to shut down according to the credo of pandemic politics. Even though cities reopened in later stages of the pandemic, defiant of the ongoing spread and mutation of the virus, there were different rationales and priorities at play. Were shops open again to revive capitalist consumption and circulation or were cultural infrastructures opened to boost public morale, provide inspiration and give space to rest? In summary, in the first iterations of lockdowns, the voiding of public space was a striking articulation of “the political” that was inconsistently tamed by the logic of politics. Although “the political” was emptying urban space during the pandemic, it also enabled new practices of sharing space and being private in public space, dislocating a consumption-only conception of urban space.

### *Vignette 3: pandemic homes*

*We move from cities to homes.* As part of lockdowns, decreed by local governments and hastily installed expert task forces, the more or less private space of the home became another significant site of pandemic practices of contingency and conflict. We understand home here following the “Western” conception of the physical container of a house, apartment, studio, room or whatever form of semi-permanent dwelling – in short, as a place that mediates both inclusion and exclusion (Blunt & Dowling 2006). During the pandemic, the material structures of the home became one of the most



prominent everyday spatial reference points (see Bowlby & Jupp 2021 and Byrne 2020): the home was imagined to function as a place of exclusion, in the sense that the virus should have no place in the private home. We were to “#stayhome” to protect vulnerable social groups such as the elderly, people with disabilities and prior respiratory or chronic illnesses. Furthermore, reining in the logic of “politics”, the home was supposed to serve as a realm of inclusion, isolation or containment of the virus, namely when infected people stayed at home to protect the rest of the population. In this case, staying at home served to keep Covid-19 outside public space, and relegated it inside the private home, situating, and seemingly safely containing it, within the physical borders of the private home.

The experience of foreclosing contingency was communicated via referring people to their homes. This implied that in one’s own home one was safe, and, even more implicitly, that one *had* a home. Outside, in the arguably less controllable realm of public space, one was less safe. This awkward *mélange* of private and public spaces and safety concerns surfaced the equality-centred debate about the vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness, who were disproportionately more vulnerable to contract the virus than other social groups. As stated by Debanjan Banerjee and Prama Bhattacharya (2020), people experiencing homelessness were one of the most vulnerable groups affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Next to their inability to properly self-isolate, houseless individuals often suffer from malnutrition and may have reduced immunity as a result of a lack of public hygiene, inadequate waste disposal, weather extremes, contamination, substance abuse and potentially poorer quality of physical and mental health. People experiencing homelessness, who are materially and thus discursively deprived from the reference to an inside of a fixed dwelling, were exposed to the rule of “the political” of space in non-private space. In some ways, the politics – that is, the regulations and recommendations to #stayhome – were stingingly inapplicable to people who do not have a home. Distinctions between inside and outside became porous and difficult to maintain when real-life conditions of inequality, precarity and poverty entered the stage. The political of pandemic space, therefore, confronted us with the fact that the home does not exist, at least not for everyone, neither in a material sense as a container nor in an imaginative or affective sense as a space of belonging.

#### *Vignette 4: pandemic bodies*

The smallest yet perhaps most visceral dimension through which the pandemic politics of contingency and conflict were practised was the individual body (see Kramsch, [Chapter 7](#) in this volume). Self-determined agency and

movement (and their counterpart of externally decreed prohibition of activity or movement) stalled societal dynamics of exchange and mobility, pushing them into “standby”. Laura Kemmer *et al.* (2021: 1, emphasis in original) define standby as practices or “acts as an ordinary *mode of organizing* socio-material lifeworlds”. In this sense, standby can be understood as a state of relative activity “that indicates readiness without immediate engagement, but that nevertheless requires and generates energy, resources, and relations” (Kemmer *et al.* 2021: 1). We incorporate the notion of standby into our last vignette of bodily pandemic practices.

Imperatives of bodily containment and distance in the pandemic brought the “sensuous character of practice” to the fore (Simonson 2007: 169). What is more, “the corporeality of social practices, however, does not concern only the sensuous, generative and intracorporeal nature of lived experiences, but also how these embodied experiences themselves form a basis for social action” (Simonson 2007: 172). These existing accounts of bodily malleability, through practice, underline the ineradicable contingency of the body itself, which was amplified throughout the pandemic. To keep bodies away from the virus was and is the primary goal of the strategy of pandemic politics. Individual bodies experienced and sensed the pandemic (and the virus, if they contracted it) very differently. How have we governed our own bodies in this pandemic time? Wearing face masks, not hugging friends and family, not inviting people to our homes? The pandemic body has been guided by rules of social distancing, by hygienic interferences, but also by self-limiting practices (e.g. opting out of using public transport, not going to the office, not engaging in casual sex with strangers). Bodies exposed to the pandemic were reined in by pandemic politics in several ways, primarily focusing on containment of the virus. As soon as the virus had infected a body, pandemic politics aimed at not letting the virus spread from one body to another. Like other political dimensions of spaces infiltrated by the pandemic, the body served as a space that monitored inclusion and exclusion. The politics of pandemic space instructed the body to act as a container to remain uninfected, and, if infected, demanded it to bear the virus only within itself and not to transmit it to others. In comparison, the political exposed the utter porosity, fragility and mortality of the body: “The body of the sovereign had been attacked, not decapitated mind you, but the membrane was broken by the alien virus” (Bratton 2021: 154). This brokenness – or radical openness of the political of the pandemic – reveals the dislocatory potential of practices of the political. The experience of contingency also became apparent in the randomness of symptoms popping up in the body and the disbelief in asymptomatic infections; the body was not reliable in Covid-19 times (but, notably, was not in pre-pandemic times, either). When taking the post-foundational notion of contingency seriously, the body can no longer be understood as a space that

“belongs” to the individual. Rather, the body is considered as a space that exists based on a radical relationality, not only with other bodies but also with political power relations. In conclusion, Colebrook (2002: 703) gives a noteworthy outlook on bodies in conflict and contingency:

In the face of a general, rational, and incontestable humanity a body engages in an act because it is possible. This possibility is not the realization of life, but the perverse delight taken in being at odds with life, where a body’s power is not that of an intentional subjectivity so much as an assemblage: a collection of competing affects and powers.

With the taste of this “perverse delight” of radical possibility in mind, we summarize our concluding thoughts on practices of post-foundationalism in this pandemic, and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have utilized post-foundationalism as a conceptual framework to grasp irreducibly contingent and conflictual practices of pandemic everyday life. This took the shape of a dialogue between concepts of contingency, conflict and political difference on the one hand, and practice ontologies on the other. The result is a synthetic notion of the *political difference of practices*, oscillating between practices of politics and practices of the political. We have examined the multiscalar implications of Covid-19 to illuminate the multiple practices of conflict and contingency during this unsettling event. Through four vignettes (nation state/border, city, home, body), we have both located and dislocated, grounded and ungrounded places and practices where conflict and contingency are practised. Tracing the contours of articulations of pandemic politics and the political, we have outlined new formations and practices of being in and out of space, fluctuating between conditions of inclusion and exclusion, producing geographically and imagined, material and embodied insides and outsides. Within the spectrum of pandemic practices, we have reflected on the myriad of (im)possibilities to encounter and engage with conflict and contingency that *can* unfold. With this, we have shown how some practices of pandemic politics enabled new possibilities, or repeatedly foreclosed possibilities, to use public space and arrange communities.

Our account highlights the significance of the multiple potentiality of the political of practice. In this light, we have pointed to some tactics to challenge hegemonic practice, for example, in urban public space. Inspired by

Beveridge's and Koch's (2019: 143) appeal to consider urban everyday politics as "collective, organized and strategic practices that articulate a political antagonism embedded in, but breaking with, urban everyday life through altering – however temporarily – time- and place-specific social relations", we have demonstrated how thinking about politics, space and everyday practice have irreversibly been altered by the pandemic. Pandemic spaces, in their many shapes, have been practised in line with territorial fixations, state-enforced regulations and prohibitions, but also dislocations, transgressions, creative appropriations and non-conforming solutions. Although the logic of politics has strangely (yet maybe unsurprisingly) dominated the management of the Covid-19 crisis, the virus has also unleashed the potency of "the political" to take place everywhere and nowhere at the same time. In sum, the political penetrates every corner of the world. It is a planetary phenomenon arising out of radical negativity. The logic of the political not only captures the always excessive spatiality of something such as Covid-19 but makes visible how political decisions surrounding such events are necessarily entrenched in conflict and contingency. Our conceptualization to pandemic practices shows that not all practices are shared or consensus-driven (see Schapendonk, [Chapter 6](#) in this volume, and Lagendijk and Wiering, [Chapter 3](#)). Our post-foundational account of practices has theorized emergent formations of conflict and contingency in everyday urban life. Ultimately, we have shown that both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic politics are continuously shaped by the negotiation between politics and the irreducible power of the political. Hence, how to practise forward? Will you feel the wind of the political whirling into your everyday practices of change?

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## CHAPTER 6

# EMERGENT AND STRANDED PRACTICES: INFRASTRUCTURING PARENTAL SPACES AS ANTI-DEPORTATION PROTESTS

*Joris Schapendonk*

It's not often you can catch raids in the act like this, but the south side has a lot of folks pulling together.

(activist publicly known as “the Van Man”, as he spent eight hours underneath an immigration enforcement van to prevent deportations of two men in Glasgow)

When the lawyer came to visit me, he told me he could not do anything for me at this moment. But he said, there is one thing you can do. When the police is entering next time, you just start to cry. You really need to cry because your girlfriend is pregnant.

(Maggis talking about a particular moment after being confronted with the risk of deportation after he violated an expulsion order of the Dutch authorities)

The children – of whom the youngest is four years old – were picked up by armed police forces with bulletproof vests and put in a blinded van. They lived for years in the Netherlands, they are rooted here, they have their social networks here, but they are nevertheless criminalized in this way.

(fragment of a press release written by Sonja, a mother who witnessed how the Dutch migration authorities tore apart the friendship between her daughter Anne and Farah)

These three opening quotes speak to very different ways of contesting deportation practices by European migration apparatuses. The “Van Man” in Glasgow



was connected to the No Eviction Network – a grassroots movement in the city. This entry refers to a “border spectacle” (De Genova 2015), by which a crowd turned out to be successful in blocking a deportation practice of the Scottish immigration authorities. The Van Man is, in this sense, the archetype of an anti-deportation activist. In a way, expressing his voice against the oppressive migration regime is his *raison d'être*. The second entry derives from a conversation with Maggis<sup>1</sup> – a friend of mine whose turbulent migration history I have closely followed for over a decade. His position is that of another archetype: the deportable migrant, subjected to the permanent possibility of being confronted with deportation. His example indicates how juridical assistance and emotions turn into a powerful instrument of contestation, even in cases when there are hardly any juridical escape routes left. This entry thus indeed articulates that migrants may still have their tactics at the edge of deportation (Schapendonk 2018). The fact that his lawyer suggested amplifying his future parenthood to destabilize the practice of deportation functions as the analytical bridge between the Van Man and the third entry, that of Sonja. Sonja had never really embodied an activist role against deportation regimes (De Genova & Peutz 2010). To my knowledge, she never engaged in progressive or activist movements. Sonja admitted she had never really thought carefully about the injustices of migration policies. She cannot be positioned as the archetypal figure in this migration landscape. She identifies herself in this setting as just the mother of Anne, whose close friend Farah (12 years old) was put in a van – a similar van to that of the Van Man. That materiality of the van appeared to Farah to “return” her to a country she barely knew, as she had spent almost half her childhood in the Netherlands.

From an auto-ethnographic position (Denshire 2014), this chapter deals with the becoming and micropolitics of a social infrastructure that contests the deportation of a group of children who lived for over five years in the Netherlands. In this context, I speak of a social infrastructure, since parental emotions against this deportation merged into a form of collective societal engagement and a quest for activism and intervention. However, this infrastructure (or platform) was not there yet. In other words, there was no preset initiative, no clear programme or movement, as it is in the case of the Van Man. For this reason, I relate the emergence of this social platform to conceptual discussions of infrastructure and *infrastructuring practices* – that is, the actions, improvisations, communications and continuous attempts to align ideas (or, indeed, to bundle practices) in order to build something larger than its separate parts (see also Wajsberg & Schapendonk 2021 and Simone & Pieterse 2017).

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1. As a matter of practice, and to ensure confidentiality, I have changed all names into pseudonyms for this chapter.



In line with the main aims of this book, the insights into the parental emotions and social platform are critically embedded in practice theory in two ways. First, I frame the breaking of routines – or what I call the *rupturing* of a practice – as the crack from which new and affective spaces emerge. In other words, I do not so much focus on routinized rhythms of the everyday itself (as practice theorists from Pierre Bourdieu to Elizabeth Shove do) but use practice as a frame of reference to understand what emerges when practices are disturbed, distorted or – in this case – recklessly broken down. Second, I critically engage with the notion of *shared* practices. I use my empirical material to show that we do not necessarily *share* the practices of anti-deportation protest. This implies that, while engaged in a particular social initiative, we do not necessarily play the same rules of the game or find common grounds in our shared knowledges (see Carlsson, [Chapter 2](#) in this volume). The empirical material is extracted from autobiographical notes from the period between January and November 2022. My reflections in this chapter are thus written from a personal space, and they first and foremost represent my active engagement with the parental group. In so doing, this chapter moves away from the distant observer, who is all too often the only starting point of academic knowledge production (Aparna, Schapendonk & Merlín-Escorza [2020](#)). However, this does not mean that my writings are to be reduced to individualized storylines only. As auto-ethnographic researchers claim, such auto-ethnographic reflections can indeed be seen as relational phenomena, as they seek to capture interactive moments in social and cultural spaces (Denshire [2014](#)).

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section sets the scene by discussing infrastructures and infrastructure practices in relation to the Dutch landscape of migrant return and deportation. For my understanding of the Dutch return landscape and return industry, I rely on the works of Barak Kalir ([2019](#)) and Marieke van Houte ([2022](#)). Subsequently, I use three dimensions to discuss the infrastructuring involved to contest the forced relocation of five children from two families from the city of Nijmegen to a Dutch exit centre from where migrants are deported to third countries. I relate these dimensions to the practice theory orientation of this book (see Introduction, by Carlsson, Lagendijk and Landau-Donnelly, [Chapter 1](#) in this volume). The first dimension of infrastructuring is *emergence*. It points to the ways the parental energies emerged not out of practice-like routines but out of a rupturing event. The second dimension focuses on the *holdings* and *doings* of our practices. Basically, it discusses the issue of what glues our different perspectives, actions and knowledges together. The third dimension focuses on the struggle to find a *collective voice* in connection with the responsible political actor or public. Thereby, I also discuss the multi-fold interpretations of injustices involved in relation to deportation. Ultimately, I discuss how

our differing explanations within this parent group made us constantly fail to define our ideas and doings in a truly shared manner. To conclude this chapter, I reflect on the notion of what I call “stranded practices”.

## INFRASTRUCTURES OF EMPIRE: MIGRANT RETURNS AND DEPORTATIONS FROM THE NETHERLANDS

As discussed in mobilities studies and migration studies, the notion of infrastructure moves beyond solely material interpretations. Although this debate does not necessarily ignore roads, fences, vehicles, pipelines and cable works, it does stretch the idea of infrastructure to non-material mediations of migration and mobility (see also Xiang & Lindquist 2014, Kathiravelu 2021 and Walters, Heller & Pezzani 2021). In this sense, terms such as “migration infrastructure” relate to notions of people as infrastructure (Simone 2004) or the concept of social platforms (Collins 2021). Moreover, infrastructuring centres the forging of relationships as well as the circulation of affect and emotions (see Landau-Donnelly 2023). The crucial aspect here is that questions of injustice are embedded in and mediated by infrastructures (Kathiravelu 2021). This is clearly articulated in questions of deportations and forced returns of migrants.

Deborah Cowen speaks of “infrastructures of empire” to enclose governmental techniques that turn people on the move into racialized and securitized bodies (Cowen, Garelli & Tazzioli 2018). In a lecture at the Geography Department of Radboud University Nijmegen in September 2021, entitled “Corridor colonialism” (Cowen 2021), she illustrates the coloniality of infrastructures by discussing how the expansion of a colonial railway network in Canada facilitated securitization, domination and violence in Indigenous spaces. Similar imperial logics appear in contemporary migration governance architectures (van Riemsdijk, Marchand & Heins 2021) as a form of domination over space and people that is based on “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory” (Said 1994; see also Blunt & Wills 2000: 171). To relate this imperial connotation with the practices of return in the Netherlands, I turn to the important work of the critical anthropologist Barak Kalir. In one of his papers (Kalir 2019), he uses the concept of “*Deepartheid*” to conceptualize the colonial configuration of Dutch migration governance. As he writes, he uses this particular term to understand “the banality of evil (Arendt 1963) that engulfs the systemic production and structural (mis)treatment of illegalized migrants on a massive societal scale with little palpable opposition” (Kalir 2019: 20).

As with Cowen’s infrastructure of empire, *Deepartheid* consists of material and immaterial dimensions that articulate the racialized dimension of

mobility regimes, differentiating welcome from unwelcome movements (see Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013). Moreover, Departheid puts emphasis on the longevity – or colonial *durée* – of infrastructures of domination and control (Morris 2021). As outlined by Wittock *et al.* (2021: 1591), the banality of Departheid relates to the ways the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice “transform[s] a moral-political conflict about detention and deportation into a web of administrative procedures, norms and arguments, so that they appear to be genuinely procedural problems which can be argued and decided on via legal instruments”. In so doing, the moral questions of deportation and returns are indeed made invisible and depoliticized. To put it differently, deportation is seen as a crucial element of a “rationalized process wherein the rule of law allegedly trumps the rule of emotions” (Wittock *et al.* 2021: 1591).

People subjected to deportation in the Netherlands are mostly labelled *uitgeprocudeerde asielzoekers* (“rejected asylum seekers”). The two families involved illustrate the situation of many more families in the Netherlands. They have spent a considerable time in the country; they have been subjected to multiple forced relocations during their asylum process; and these relocations often come as confronting and surprising moments for the people involved as well as for their direct relationships. In the case of two families, some of the children involved were not able to say goodbye to their classmates, teachers or friends. According to the migration authorities, it is the parents’ responsibility to inform schools and other social institutions about their departure. Because it concerns families with underaged children, they were sent to one of the so-called *gezinslocaties* (“family locations”) in Katwijk (located some 135 kilometres away from their previous living place). The term *gezinslocatie* is a euphemism for an exit centre. According to COA (the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers: the national institution that is responsible for the housing of asylum seekers), the family locations are sober and stringent. Adults must report themselves five days a week to the immigration authorities in the exit centre, and they cannot leave without permission the territorial boundaries of the municipality. Children are said to have access to the same facilities as a regular asylum centre in the Netherlands.

To further understand the practices of deportation, it is important to discuss some of the main actors in the Dutch return industry. The main governmental body involved is the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice. Next to the ministry, the official actors are in this respect Dienst Terugkeer & Vertrek (DT&V: the state-owned repatriation “services”), the immigration authorities (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst: IND) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Especially in the framework of assisted voluntary return (or soft deportations), there are smaller NGOs trying to get their financial share of the return cake. I interviewed officials at one of the smaller organizations in this field a few years ago. They framed their objective

as the creation of a “win-win situation for the Dutch government and their clients (undocumented migrants)”. They mostly receive “resistant cases” from DT&V, for example: people who lack a cooperative attitude towards the governmental “services” (interview, 14 March 2016). These dynamics indicate that there exists some cosy consensus between some NGOs and the migration enforcement activities of the Dutch state (Kalir & Wissink 2016). The cosiness in this case implies that NGOs do not work as forces outside the realm of the state but that they are well aligned with, and thus potentially reproducing, state-centric agendas.

Arjen Leerkes and Marieke van Houte (2020) discuss the Dutch return infrastructure in a broader European framework. The Dutch return infrastructure (or industry, as van Houte [2022] defines it), which facilitates assisted returns (or soft deportations) as well as forced returns, appears to be rather “successful”, as it has one of the highest “return rates” of Europe. Roughly 43 per cent of the persons not granted international protection (“rejected asylum seekers”) are returned to a “third country”. This is considerably higher than in Sweden (16 per cent), Denmark (4 per cent) or France (20 per cent; Leerkes & van Houte 2020: 327). Nevertheless, this effective infrastructure is confronted with “non-deportability”. This is particularly important in the case below, as advocacy groups, legal scholars and migration experts agreed upon the fact that it was rather unlikely that the transportation of the families involved to an exit centre in Katwijk would result in direct and immediate deportation to their countries of origin. According to locally based organizations, medical doctors and asylum lawyers, it was more likely that the families would waste several years in these exit centres before being returned, or disappearing from the radar. It is important to note that the high return rate of rejected asylum seekers – the 43 per cent, mentioned above – implies that 57 per cent of rejected asylum seekers in the Netherlands are *not* returned to a third country. Some societal actors consider both the deportation and the long-lived limbo involved as a deep injustice. The question for them is how to challenge the *Departheid* practice and the limbos it creates.

## INFRASTRUCTURING AGAINST DEPORTATION AS EMERGENCE

Although there is extensive literature on the struggles of undocumented people in the Netherlands, as well as societal attention to regularization programmes (see van Eijl 2012), there are to my knowledge no studies that focus entirely on anti-deportation networks and groups in this particular country (with the exception of We Are Here groups based in Amsterdam; see Hajer & Broër 2020). This literature on anti-deportation protests does exist

for other contexts, such as in the British, Swedish and German settings (e.g. Moghaddari 2021).

However, throughout the years, and with my work on African mobility within Europe (Schapendonk 2018, 2020), I gradually gained more insights into the anti-deportation infrastructure in the Netherlands. During field-work activities and through ongoing relations with the shelter organization Stichting Gast in Nijmegen (with Kolar Aparna; see also Aparna 2020), we came across the semi-joke that the contestation of deportation is mostly the work of *paters en krakers* (translated as “fathers and squatters”). *Pater* refers to the dominant role of the Progressive Church in protesting against migrant detention and pleading for humane asylum and child pardons. *Kraker* refers to anarchist networks – similar to the network of the Van Man – that attempt to contest governmental powers at different levels. However, this semi-joke ignores the role of vocal migrant-led groups such as We Are Here, mentioned above. It also ignores more ad hoc constellations of protests that often emerge after media coverage.

In 2018, there was national attention for two Armenian children, resulting in substantial solidarity against their deportation. Even more controversial was the case of Mauro, a young man who had moved from Angola to the Netherlands as an unaccompanied minor of nine years. He was confronted with deportation to Angola after he turned 18 years old (i.e. after having spent half his life in the Netherlands). After an aired debate in the Dutch parliament, the typically Dutch “midway” solution was to *not* deport him but to give him a student visa. At age 29, he received a Dutch passport.<sup>2</sup> The following illustrations of the Nijmegen case are based on similar emotions and ad hoc constellations of contestation of deportation practices. In some ways, the parent group was looking for similar effects as in the cases described above, creating some wider societal irritation and protest regarding the ways in which the migration system in the Netherlands is practised.

I use three dimensions to indicate the infrastructuring involved and the failures around it. The first dimension covers how a rupturing event was related to the emergence of parental space of action. In a more conceptual sense, I question the foundation of sharedness that is so evidently the starting point of many practice theories. The second dimension relates to the question of what holds our social platform together. This section is an attempt to identify the things, words, thoughts and agendas that kept the platform alive, but that also produced confusion and divergence. The third dimension discusses the (lack of) direction towards one shared or coherent political voice. This third dimension discusses primarily how our activities relate to other societal engagements against deportation. It particularly positions our

2. See [www.llimburg.nl/tien-jaar-later-heeft-mauro-net-een-paspoort-en-blijkt-terug](http://www.llimburg.nl/tien-jaar-later-heeft-mauro-net-een-paspoort-en-blijkt-terug).

parental space in geo-histories of deportation protest in the Netherlands and discusses the way we continually failed to direct our interventions to the right political body.

## WHERE DID WE EMERGE FROM?

The first time I read about the families soon to be deported was in a regional newspaper. On 28 January 2022, the newspaper covered the story of Zeynep – a 14-year-old girl – who never told her friends and classmates about her life in an asylum centre. Now, with the forced relocation, she had no other options than informing her friends and class about her daily reality, as she said to the journalist. The class appeared to be shocked, as they had never regarded her as an asylum seeker or refugee. Soon I learned that Zeynep was the older sister of Ilhan, a classmate of my son who had suddenly disappeared from school that same week. As a six-year-old, he probably had found neither the words nor the space to inform his class about his looming departure. The Dutch immigration authorities did not inform the schools either, as they generally hold parents responsible for any communication around schools and their asylum cases. The head of the school told us that this was not an exceptional case. Several other kids from the nearby asylum centre had suddenly disappeared from the sight of their teachers, classmates and friends. This particular case concerned six<sup>3</sup> children spread over one primary school and one secondary school.

Thus, whereas practice-theoretical approaches focus on the everyday, on routines, on the tacit aspects of lifeworlds (Reckwitz 2002), the emergence of our anti-deportation social platform emerged from a rupture in the everyday space of a school: the disappearance of some classmates and friends. This platform consisted of six parents, who barely knew each other until that moment (which was also a result of the various lockdowns in the Covid-19 period). What used to be “normal” – or, indeed, a routinized practice of *doing* school – was now marked with absence: a friend not being there, an empty chair in the classroom, a voice not heard on the playground. As one of the members of our group expressed in a media interview, “Both of my kids were in the same classroom as Ilhan, who disappeared all of a sudden. For years I have seen this boy. First he struggled a lot, later on everything was more stable and smooth with him in class. And right at this particular moment he is taken away” (interview by Vox, August 2022). Thus, whereas most practice

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3. I speak of five children in the rest of this chapter since the sixth case here was related to a Dublin claim, which implies that the people involved are not necessarily to be deported to the country of origin.

theorists are interested in the unconscious layers of doings (Reckwitz 2002), it was, rather, a confrontation with our sudden consciousness of a particular governmental practice that brought us together. In other words, in the cracks of breaking a practice (as routinized behaviour of “doing school”), a parental space of protest and contestation emerged.

There were multiple phone calls and dozens of WhatsApp messages before the parents actually physically met up. The first meeting occurred in the week just after the news hit us. I knew only one father quite well, and I had had contact with the migration lawyer involved (a mother who once had children in the same primary school and volunteered to assist us). The other four people were familiar faces, but I never really had conversations with them.

The question, in a conceptual sense, is: what moved us to act? What moved our platform? What moved through us? We were all affected by the emergent situation, but, in my view, it would be too easy a conceptual escape to simply point to affect as the main vector that brought us together. In this regard, it is worth delving into the discussion on affect and emotion and practice theory. Mikkel Bille and Kirsten Simonsen (2021: 297) point to the problem of affective transmission: affect is all too often framed as “a kind of autonomous social and psychic/biological energy, flowing through humans and non-humans, like waves in the sea”. There is a problematic aspect in transmission, which I outline here. As Bille and Simonsen carefully show, the idea of a full package of affective energy relates to the uncritical idea of contagion. This idea indeed tends to remove bodies from their social-political context (Bille & Simonsen 2021), and, like practice theory in general, puts too much weight on the sharedness of a practice. To develop this further, I would like to make a small empirical detour to cycling – as the prototypical and everyday practice.

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### BOX 6.1 CYCLING AS AN UNSHARED PRACTICE

A central claim of practice theory is if somebody is carrying out a practice, they *take over* the embodied and mental patterns of that practice. This claim, which articulates the practice as social and as worldview, is something that puzzles me when I try to relate it to my work on African Eurospaces that are characterized by shifting geopolitical settings (Aparna & Schapendonk 2020), dynamic social infrastructures (Wajsberg & Schapendonk 2021) and the blending of mobility facilitation and mobility control (Merlín-Escorza, Davids & Schapendonk 2021). From this position, routines may look the same, and they may involve similar doings, but they still hide very different meanings, understandings, feelings and embodiments, which are painfully bypassed when we uncritically fall into the idea of shared practices.



*When Maggis and I jumped on our bicycles we – to use practice-theoretical language – turned into the carriers of the cycling-as-practice. We cycled, we chit-chatted, we cycled, we laughed, we stopped, we cycled. With this practice, the objects, know-hows and bodily performances all seemed to blend into each other. Nothing special: just a shiny, happy practice. But at a certain traffic light, just before we had to pass a main street to enter a small one-way street that we had to take in the wrong direction for only 100 metres, our shared practice stranded. I continued on my bike, while he exclaimed a brief but firm “Ey”. In a split second, we both saw a glimpse of a police car. He stopped and continued walking, while I kept cycling. Whereas I felt there was very little chance of being fined, Maggis feared a one-way ticket to a migrant detention centre (where he had been before). This rupture reveals that we perhaps never “carried the same practice”. My cycling-as-citizen-practice has been from the very start very different from his cycling-as-citizen-without-paper-practice. For him, moving through this urban landscape required an extra sensor that I simply lacked (see also Tsoni 2013). Maggis did not just “carry a practice”; he also carried a border (Khosravi 2011), and this produced tremendously unequal weights in the carrying. In the end, so I conclude now, it appeared that there was nothing really social in this practice; the practice was, to a large extent, unshared.*

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To relate the empirical detour to the anti-deportation platform that emerged, we should question the sharedness and commonality of the affective in this space of activism. In line with this, Sonja Moghaddari (2021) stresses that migration-related solidarity rests on ambivalence, ambiguity, divergence, conflict and fluctuation. In her view, the anti-deportation protests that were central to her research were “arenas of contention” in themselves. This could indeed be related to agonistic practices that oscillate between conflict and consensus (Landau 2019). Moghaddari continues to criticize the literature on emotions and solidarity work that portrays the experiences of participants as similar – “as if all participants experience the same affect and emotions at the same time, and second, that a person’s emotions are relatively stable and coherent” (Moghaddari 2021: 237).

In line with Moghaddari’s observations, the parents involved in our case in fact realized along the way that we all articulated different motivations for being engaged. A parent couple stressed the deep sadness of their daughter as their reason for engagement, another parent had been involved in a similar case of deportation, and others wanted to contest the relocations and child-unfriendliness of asylum. For me, as a migration scholar, I felt the border injustices that I write about in terms of Europe’s borders enter my son’s classroom, and that touched me deeply. Moreover, besides these various ways that affect mattered – the various ways we were affected by the notion that it “concerns me” – we all entered the spaces of our dialogues with “bundles of



other practices” (see Carlsson, Pijpers & Van Melik 2022, based on Nicolini’s work), and hence had to deal with different recalibrations of parts of these practices. Here, I refer to Sarah Sharma’s notion of recalibration, defined as “the multiple ways in which individuals and social groups synchronize their body clocks, their senses of the future or the present, to an exterior relation – be it another person, pace, technology, chronometer, institution, or ideology” (Sharma 2014: 18). To mention just a few of the issues involved, we all had full daily schedules with job and family obligations, and our availability in evening hours differed considerably, because of kids of different ages (and hence different bedtimes, sport sessions and more). Nevertheless, there were things that held our social infrastructure together.

### WHAT HOLDS US TOGETHER?

In one turbulent week not only did our platform grow, with regional experts and academics working on deportation, but also many initiatives arose independently of our platform. Separate petitions started (one on the primary school, one on the secondary school and one by the mothers of our platform). Unsurprisingly, the online petition attracted the most attention, and this became the vehicle for wider action. The “Voor Farah” (“For Farah”) petition highlighted the situation of the 12-year-old girl I introduced earlier in this chapter. The outcry came from her best friend Anne (from the same primary school).

As a spontaneous infrastructure, we felt the urgency to bundle all the different petitions into one central message. This was not easy, since some thousand signatures arrived in the first few days alone. The “Voor Farah” petition quickly changed into the “For All Farahs” petition, which indicates that the five cases we highlighted became extrapolated to the situation of many to-be-deported children in the Netherlands. The initiative of the petition was embraced by a local journalist writing for the regional newspaper *De Gelderlander*, with concrete links to the national newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad*. The case became public on Saturday 5 February 2022. We reached out to different NGOs, varying from pro-migrant groups to children’s right groups. We managed to get in touch with the public figure Sinan Can, known for his touching television reports related to migration. He came to the primary and secondary schools and made a short film. From there, we circulated our entries to popular online social media channels, and a national talk show on prime time. We found our catalyst for a public campaign, and hope started to rise and held us together.

The day of the television performance was hectic. The performance was centred on Farah and her close friend Anne. However, since the family was officially not allowed to leave the municipality borders, there were concerns that Farah would be stopped at the gates. Thereupon, I called different organizations

and representatives of the migration regime (including COA), stressing the urgency of this television show. We finally had the green light. The television show articulated not so much Farah's looming deportation but, rather, Anne's tears (saying that this was the third time that her best friend was about to leave the country). Somehow it was the pain of a Dutch child, not the migrant Other, that resonated the most in reactions on social media. Just before the show started we opened a "forallfarahs" e-mail account, and there many more support reactions came in, with the petition soon reaching 8,000 signatures.

Yet, after this breakthrough moment, there was a kind of fatigue visible in the group, which is not an uncommon phenomenon for engaged researchers and practitioners (Wajsberg 2020). Anne's mother, for example, revealed that she felt a need for a break after being on the television show herself. Anne's father seemed to search for a way to protect his child from another emotional rollercoaster. And the others also felt tired after such a hectic week of campaigning. Besides the fatigue, there was also confusion in the days after the television show. We had our public attention, but the question was: what to do with it? To whom did we direct the petition? How did we concretely translate this media attention into a legal escape route for the families? Did we do it only for the families, or was it the wider picture of how to change the Dutch deportation practices?

## WHERE TO DIRECT OUR VOICE?

As the end of the previous section indicates, some basic questions continually came back to us: what is our main message? What do we protest? And towards whom should we direct our protests? As always, simple questions do not necessarily lead to easy answers. In this case, I could identify mainly three reasons. First, only along the way had we noticed that the different persons involved had different interpretations of the injustices involved. Second, many civil society organizations we contacted reminded us that we had stepped into a field of existing protests with particular historical legacies. We learned there were certain "no go" areas, and certain hot items, even within the rather narrow realm of deportations of families with young children. Finally, because the migration industries of deportation and return are so networked, it is quite difficult to find the right actor to whom we should direct our voice (Wittock *et al.* 2021). In this sense, this field of migration governance can indeed be seen as a complex landscape in which "objectives oppose each other, roles overlap and responsibilities shift over time" (Schapendonk 2018: 664; see also Andersson 2014).

Regarding the first issue, we had fraught discussions on injustice. While the lawyer of our group stressed that forced returns are a necessary component

of our asylum system, as they guarantee the protection of the genuine refugee (an argument that is often used by representatives of the state), I articulated the violence of taking imagined futures away from kids who have been raised in Dutch schools. Another tension emerged between the aspirations of some to improve the immediate situation of the families (and especially Farah's family) and the aspiration of others to contest the systemic practices of sudden and multiple relocations of young children. According to all the civil society actors we spoke to, the latter – *het onnodige gesleep met asielkinderen* – was definitely the item that could create the most political and societal controversy. Furthermore, whereas all the public campaigning so far was about the prevention of deportation of the families, most societal actors could not relate to that as they would not advocate for individual cases. Moreover, they often replied that the deportation of families was the consequence of the Dutch political climate today. With the focus on our plea to let the families stay, we partly lost our societal back-up, and this made our successful petition rather impotent.

In relation to our struggle to find the right addressee for our protest, it is interesting that we actually thought we had located our main target: the secretary of state of the Security and Justice Ministry. We made plans to create public controversy by offering this petition to the secretary of state during a mediatized event. But, then, we figured that the secretary of state had lost his mandate to review individual asylum cases (a consequence of the societal controversies in cases such as the Armenian children and Mauro, discussed at the beginning of this chapter). Therefore, it was rather difficult to find the right person to address our concerns to, and this substantiates the argument that the state manages to translate moral questions into a very fuzzy landscape of bureaucracy and responsibility (Wittock *et al.* 2021). The reallocation of this power to a non-public figure (the head of the IND) can indeed best be seen as an act of depoliticization of deportations. We felt we were very busy creating commotion, but the commotion lacked wider politicization. This was also reflected in the moment we opened the petition. At the time our petition peaked at over 8,000 signatures, a very different petition was started: to reopen football stadiums in Covid-19 times. In two days, they had five times the signatories compared to our petition. So, yes, it might have been a commotion for us, but we could not extrapolate this to wider Dutch society. The society apparently had other priorities, so it felt.

#### AFTERTHOUGHT: STRANDED PRACTICES

In line with the wider objectives of this book, this chapter has critically engaged with practice-theoretical approaches in dialogue with mobility and affect studies. I have questioned the starting point of sharedness to discuss

routines and daily life. In some ways, partial sharedness can be a powerful asset for infrastructuring practices, as new ideas, new experiences, new actions and different positionalities can (but do not automatically) work in synergy. In our case, partial sharedness existed because we engaged in this social platform with different knowledges and perspectives, and we all participated in very different practices – from motherhood, to law, to academia, and so on. This is highlighted by the three dimensions above. *Emergence* did occur, but the motivations and emotions behind it only partly resonated with each other. Our infrastructure was held together by collective values, but we were also confronted with fatigue, confusion and diffusion, destabilizing our collective thinking and doing. We were successful in terms of constructing a mediatized momentum, but we had recurrent difficulty defining both our main message and the main goal of our message. In other words, we only partly succeeded in bundling our practice that could have led to a clearer political intervention against deportation. Consider the Van Man, who I opened this chapter with. He had a clear role to play as an activist part of a wider social movement, and a target for his intervention.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that our infrastructuring practices were about to become stranded, not solely because we all brought different views and knowledges but also because political accountability and responsibility are difficult to target in a wider network of the return migration industry. This particular case also indicates that our failure to build an effective social infrastructure against deportations might be the desired effect of an obscure governance architecture – or, indeed, particular infrastructures of empire (Cowen 2021). This is an important observation, as the infrastructures of empire not only produced certain deportation practices but also weakened the contestation against these practices.

At the time of writing this chapter, in 2022, our petition had still not been submitted anywhere, and we continued to have meetings about new ideas (centring on the prospect of making a documentary). However, we still have divergent ideas as to the most prominent problem we address: is it deportation, or the relocation during asylum procedures? And, yes, the families are still in the *gezinslocatie* in Katwijk. Regarding the latter, Farah told us that she felt no energy to go to school anymore, which relates to notions of being stranded. Without claiming a commonality, we should ask ourselves what happens when practices strand, when vibrant energies become dormant or when the concerns over two families dry up because the heat of the moment has been left behind. My final thoughts are not what this means in terms of practice theory but, rather, to wonder how practice theory could help us avoid becoming stranded in societal engagements. What practical tools do practice theories bring us for building more sustainable and more vocal social infrastructures? In terms of this chapter, a first hint of an answer to these

questions is the realization that it is important to understand not only how daily routines can be built but also how they might be continuously destabilized by other infrastructures. This can indeed be read as an invitation to put more emphasis on power, governmentality and marginalization when we engage with practices of bordering, deportation and mobility.

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## CHAPTER 7

# PRACTISING COVID-19 QUARANTINE

*Olivier Thomas Kramsch*

Counting your cats can be useful, but don't expect that count to ever be definitive while herding them across the open plains.

Miller (2013: 26)

Attempting to move beyond the ostensible tensions between purely materialist or symbolic, individual or collective, approaches to contemporary geographies of memory, Gunnar Maus draws on Theodore Schatzki's (1996) practice theory and Jonathan Everts', Matthias Lahr-Kurten's and Matt Watson's (2011) "site ontology" to articulate a specific understanding of space and place in relation to the "practice of localized memory" (Maus 2015: 215). In this view, space is produced by any social practice that "consists of routinised 'doings and sayings' that share a specific organizational structure" (Maus 2015: 217). Following Schatzki (1996: 88–130), Maus defines the organization of practices in terms of

(a) a practical understanding or knowledge of where and how to perform certain tasks, (b) a teleoaffective structure that suggests which tasks are necessary or emotions appropriate to achieve an end, (c) possibly explicit rules that have a binding capacity on how to do something and (d) general understandings that are expressed in a number of practices and can thus be likened to cultural dispositions. (Maus 2015: 217)

Less interested in the collective basis and social phenomena of memory (Halbwachs 1925; Nora 1989), Maus is concerned with tracing how memory "is performed in organized 'doings and sayings' by individuals [via] 'formal' performance and 'specialist carriers' of cultural memory" (Maus 2015: 217). In describing the social production of localized cultural memories as "landscapes of memory", Maus gestures towards the production of a relational



space, one whose “material arrangements” in turn “*anchor* ... commemorative meanings at specific places” (Maus 2015: 218, emphasis in original).

In this chapter, I focus narrative attention on my two-room apartment, to which I was banished for ten months at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, as a site from which I reflect on my practice of localized memory, in the sense referred to by Maus. Mapping the material arrangements of such practices, I begin with an intimate geography of my lived space, encompassing bed, hallway, bathroom, kitchen area, living room, working chair, including various “tools” such as toothbrush, razor, face cream, clothing, cooking utensils, plate, book, writing instrument, Excel spreadsheet, artwork, and the like, each of which in turn integrates distinct practices of localized memory that I have structured, honed, refined and infused with personal meaning these past months. Furthermore, I use such a “geography closest in” as a starting point to reflect on the perils and possibilities of a practice-oriented, “object-oriented approach” (Miller 2013: 11). For Adam Miller (2013: 11),

[t]reating the term “object” as a generic name for any and every kind of existing thing, we must begin by granting full metaphysical dignity to the buzzing multitude of objects that are presently and available at work in the foreground of the world, assume that they are capable of explaining themselves, and then trace with great care the polyvalent trails that the objects themselves both break and follow as they pursue their business.

Against this background, my quarantine-constrained memory-work serves to have a sympathetic confrontation with Schatzki’s more human-centred, categorical practice approach and the open, pluralist perspective on practice coming from Miller and Bruno Latour. Regarding Schatzki, this speaks to the degrees of teleo-affectivity informing such work; and the rules and general understandings that subtend the routinized “doings and sayings” of my memory performances. In dialogue with Miller and Latour, I explore the tension between an authorial “I” – whose genealogy returns us as far back as Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* and Immanuel Kant’s doctrine “Dare to know”, passing through the German Romantic tradition of *Innerlichkeit* – in relation to its surrounding “objects”; the extent and limits of a “dignity” that can therefore be conferred upon such “objects”; and the nature and scale of the “world” to which such tracings attain, which immediately presses upon us the issue of “space”. Finally, engaging with all authors, I entertain the question of the ultimate aim of the exercise, best summed up by Miller (2013: 24–5) when he asks: “But if each object is a bee’s nest that is itself ‘made of another bee’s nest swarming in all directions’ and this ‘goes on indefinitely’, then when the hell are we supposed to stop?” To what purpose is it all?



One could wonder how useful it is to engage with these strands of thinking, which, in problematization, scope and vocabulary, are so different. My motive is that these authors all operate within a shared discursive field positing the importance of non-human objects in the formation of human subjectivity. A playful, empirically driven engagement may therefore sharpen our sensitivity and purpose for practice.

## ASCENDING EVEREST

I awaken to the subtlest change of light. I am aware of this now, entering my tenth month of confinement in my two-room flat overlooking the rooftops of Kleve, Niederrhein, Germany. A soft hue, barely perceptible, appears through my large triptych window. I stretch under the covers, scratch my belly and pause for a moment before heaving myself out of bed. It is like this, morning after morning, day after day, seemingly interminable. Rather than preparing myself to travel outward, into the world, I steel myself for another day of inward-turning activity, driven by an “I” increasingly in possession of itself. Another day of *Innerlichkeit*, by which the measure of the world will be taken.

My bed! What a magnificent theatre for the imagination! What grand dramas and tragedies are staged therein! That most intimate slip of sleep, yet to what wondrous and far-off lands does it take me! For instance, a recurring dream: I am in transit between two countries, Mexico and Pakistan, say. In one version of the dream, I am attempting to transfer from one flight to another, but have been robbed of my baggage, or have lost my ticket, or both. Time is pressing. The plane bound for Islamabad is boarding, and I cannot find the departure lounge. Why on earth did I agree to add this Pakistan assignment to an already exhausting itinerary? In another version of my dream, I cannot find the airport shuttle terminal for the bus that will take me from my Mexican arrival gate to my Pakistan-bound flight. Lost in transit?

But as I awake from this dilemma, miraculously, my bedroom is still here just as I had left it the night beforehand. The view out of my bedroom window looks onto an inner neighbourhood courtyard, small balconies, hanging potted plants, hanging laundry and, off in the distance, the medieval steeple of the small *Bollensteeg* church. All still there! As well as my old work desk and PC, gathering a fine layer of dust. Fresh clothes hanging from the drying rack under my windowsill. Assorted chairs, bags, suitcases, which give the room the air of a hotel lounge, producing a familiar pang of shame at not having fully “arrived” in the place I inhabit. Am I still travelling in my dream? My *Staubsauger* (sorry, I momentarily cannot remember the English word), like a trusted animal companion, lies in the corner near the foot of my bed.

The 2-metre distance from my bed to my small bathroom alcove is currently the most traversed piece of land on Earth, akin to the crowded ascent near the summit of Everest. O, the large, dark square tiles, warm underfoot. O, the so well-known narrow corridor between sink and washing machine. O, the awaiting toilet, lid still open from my (often myriad) nightly assignations. O, the way the hallway sits still, patiently, while I do my morning's business, feeling myself at my most animalesque.

The morning's ablutions have taken on a pattern and rhythm of their own, each move offering a structure bringing a reassuring predictability into the day: turquoise-coloured towel taken from bedroom rack and folded just so on edge of bathroom washing machine, beard clipped with Braun trimmer, neck and chin area lathered with shaving cream, teeth brushed with new rough-edged toothbrush from DM, then shaving with Wilkinson Sword yellow disposable razor blades using lukewarm water, shower with Pantene shampoo and Nivea body wash, a first round of drying off while humming under my breath (the way, as a child, I used to hear my German Oma do while ironing clothes in her Krefeld war widower's flat), Nivea deodorant under both arms, then Zeinz facial cream, a dab on forehead, one on left cheek, one on right cheek, massage. Hair combed rightwards over the forehead. A crumpled square of toilet paper to wipe any remaining sleep from the corner of the eyes.

Having crossed the Alps to get back to my bedroom, I dry myself off fully at the edge of my bed while continuing to hum. Dressing has become a purely functional issue, a perfunctory matter. I remove yesterday's clothes from the ironing board, fold, and place back in clear, plastic IKEA *Regal* (forget English word!). I then remove whatever pair of trousers lies at the bottom of the stack on right-hand side of upper shelf, slide them on, then leather belt, then whatever shirt catches my fancy, usually an interesting opposing colour to that of the trousers I'm wearing, followed by a split-second choice of Opa cardigan (either grey or green), and – *voilà*: the "I" is assembled, made presentable to myself, an "I" who may be the only person to see me for the remainder of the day. My cologne bottle of Chanel Eau de Bleu remains unused, gathering dust. Why? For whom?

#### PETITE OMELETTE DE FROMAGE ET CHAMPIGNONS

I now look forward to my *petite omelette de fromage et champignons* (you will excuse me: this food item can be said only in French, although to British or Dutch ears it may sound desperately pretentious). To do so, I must now hike the three metres of Appalachian Trail of narrow corridor to reach my kitchen area, located in the rear corner of my living room, whose large bay windows look out upon the rooftops of Kleve, as well as the city's iconic skyline image,

the Schwanenburg Castle, scene of Madame de Lafayette's *La princesse de Clèves*, considered by many to be the first European novel (1678). Crossing this room, I hew out of habit to well-known local landscapes: the edge of my *Waschbecken* (again, I forget the English word!), where I drink my dissolved sugar-free, multi-vitamin pill in a glass of cold water; the small refrigerator whence I retrieve eggs bought from an old lady in the Saturday farmer's market, Polish butter from my Silesian convenience store (which reminds me of my father's Breslau origins), whole milk Tetra Pak, grated cheese, brown mushrooms; the glass electric range on which I cook my *petite omelette* in a black frying pan while listening to Joni Mitchell's album *Hejira*, played from my Samsung phone on a black soundbox lying in the left-hand corner of my small white dining table, Mitchell in turn taking me to a California I only partly know, of "melancholy cafés" and the immense "white, white lines of freeways".

Over the months my daily movements have streamlined themselves through repetition: I place my pre-bake *Brötchen* in the oven and set at 110°C. I then crack two eggs, always on the right-hand side of my frying pan, always careful to cup one half eggshell into the other before delicately throwing them in the trash under the sink (suddenly I remember the English word!), remembering that as a child I dreamed of eggs with endless amounts of egg yolk into which I could then dip finger-length pieces of buttered toast (*mouillettes*). I whisk the eggs in same light-blue ceramic bowl, emptying the swirling egg yolk into the pan once the dabs of cooking oil have been heated to the required pitch, followed by grated cheese and washed, diced mushrooms. I then pull my hot, pre-baked *Brötchen* out of the oven, cut into two halves and place on toaster, pressing right-hand bar down to begin toasting. Everything has its pace, order and time. Have my movements taken on this ordered form in order to provide a safe crucible for my memories, which continuously risk spilling over the sides of any container I may set in their path? Or do these practised practices keep me from having to confront the unconfontable, namely the fact that there is no going back to "normal" after the pandemic, the terror that what is coming upon us on our collective horizon is thoroughly *unimaginable*?

## FRANCE AND JEAN-CHARLES

Let us now rest for a moment before a tableau that accompanies me at every meal, located directly to my right, propped up against the wall on my small, white dining table. First, my eye falls lovingly on the photograph of my favorite French aunt, France, who passed away a few years ago. In the photograph she sits on an embankment overlooking the river Garonne in

the southwest of France, staring hopefully into the distance. An artist trained at l'École de Beaux-Arts de Paris by Paul Belmondo<sup>1</sup> in the arts and crafts of wood sculpture, she found many of her best pieces of driftwood along the Garonne, as well as on the northern shores of Big Sur (California), as well as Tahiti, where she lived for many years. France's sculptures traffic in fantastic animals and beings, each with a name and personality of its own. By my elbow is one of her statues, *Le Ravi*, referring to that figure in French religious lore who stands before the manger where Christ was born, arms outstretched. One of its arms broke off when I accidentally dropped this statue. *Le Ravi* now raises only one arm upwards to the sky, increasing its poignancy. At the time of France's funeral I entered her *atelier*, located on a farm in a southern French province. A wondrous space filled to the brim with myriad pieces of driftwood she had found all over the world, the *atelier* featured some pieces still placed firmly in the metal clamps she used to hold them steady while she worked her magic on them. "France, I miss you; *dis-moi où se trouve l'heureux coin de la terre que tu habites?*"

At the foot of the photograph of France is a small paper cutout featuring a photo paste-up of an announcement of a painting *vernissage* exhibiting the work of my great-grand uncle Jean-Charles Duval (1880–1963), held at the Musée départemental de l'Oise, Beauvais, from 12 October to 15 December 1983. Personal friend of Edgar Degas, Jean-Charles visited Constantine (Algeria) in 1908, then travelled officially to Damascus (Syria) under the patronage of the Institut Français d'Art Musulman. In the early twentieth-century French Orientalist tradition, his paintings often focus on the customs and folklore in the regions through which he travelled. He would also go on to paint artists and theatrical productions of the Russian Ballet (1910–11), as well as at the Opéra de Paris. I remember France telling me that, as an artist, Jean-Charles felt he was the "black sheep" of the Duval family, a "respectable" bourgeois Versailles clan of doctors, lawyers and engineers. France equally felt herself to be the black sheep of her Versailles family, later as a student at Beaux Arts taking part in the student rebellions of May 1968. After graduating she closed the door on France, and, like many of her generation, spent subsequent years living in hippie communes abroad in former French colonies, first in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), then Tahiti (French Polynesia), before returning to France. I consider myself in the restless, globe-trotting lineage of Jean-Charles and France, and am reminded of it each time I look at this little family *madeleine des espaces perdus*. They help remind me why I am where I am now, in this most "French" of German cities with roots elsewhere: Clèves.

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1. Father of the actor Jean-Paul Belmondo.

Now allow me to move a few inches to the left of the dinner table altar dedicated to the memory of France and Jean-Charles. Over the northeast ridge of the table lie tiny objects that are dear to me. A French Opinel knife with the light wooden handle on which is written “La Main Couronnée”, the blade featuring a tiny engraving of a hand with two fingers pointing towards a crown. I have owned this penknife since it was given to me as a child; it contains something essential about me that I could not express in words even if I tried. Next to it, a small soccer fan collection sticker showing my son Oscar in his Kranenburg-Nütterden soccer uniform, smiling self-consciously into the camera. Then a pyramid of Danish coins, and next to it a red button clasp with three yellow dots – a reminder of an afternoon in Christianstad, Copenhagen, when I sat down at a table in the open and was soon joined by a young man who, while we conversed, immediately began rolling a marijuana joint over a copy of Machiavelli’s *Prince*. A tiny red patch of cloth pierced by a needle fastener (forget the precise English word!), fruit of a solidarity action for the occupation of the Amsterdam-based Magdehuis some years ago, contemporaneous with the student occupation of an abandoned cafeteria in Radboud’s Spinozagebouw, subsequently renamed Terecht Café, which, during the time of its brief existence, became a premier experiment in radical self-governance on our university campus. A red-and-white-coloured string wrist band, given to me by Miroslav, a Bulgarian ex-student of mine, as a bringer of luck (so far so good, Miro!). The figurine of a tiny elephant dressed in yellow ochre-coloured Indian trousers blaring a horn, a gift from Kolar Aparna. A small origami paper swan (symbol of the city of Clèves), made spontaneously for me by an elderly Syrian immigrant whom I met at a music jam session. A historical black and white postcard featuring a road in the Rif countryside, sent to me by a Spanish PhD comrade then living in Morocco. A hand-sewn piece of cloth revealing white kerchiefs worn by the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (an association of women activists mobilizing since 40 years to find the truth about the “disappearance” of their loved ones during the so-called “dirty wars” of the 1970s), gifted me by a former girlfriend now living in Buenos Aires.

Each object exudes its own memory-perfume. Writing about each of them releases their delicious odour of time-spaces past. *Confieso que he vivido* (Neruda).

### MUSICAL MADELEINES

Now allow me to add my “grain of sand” to the subject of the practice of listening to music while in quarantine. Listening to music these past months has been a haphazard affair, but it has provided vital anchoring points in

structuring my days. When I am not very bold or imaginative, I resort to familiar stand-bys, mostly of the French, German and Italian Baroque canon: Rameau, Lully, Couperin, Bach, Fasch, Telemann, Vivaldi, Veracini. They fill my small, carpeted living room with deep meaning and joy. Rameau, especially with his piano works, carries me into a very intimate space that is akin to a conversation with an ancient comrade. By contrast, Lully, Fasch and Telemann open up vast, majestic spaces that in their grandeur project me out of myself into a tragic world bordering on the sublime (I realize how cliché this sounds, but I leave it as it stands). These works *never* age; I *never* tire of hearing them.

But I am also provoked into hearing musical *madeleines* by the news I read on my online *New York Times* each morning. When I learned of the death of the Van Halen guitarist Eddie Van Halen some months ago, I was transported back to a concert my brother and I first saw of the band in Boston's Orpheum Theater in 1982. The thrill of hearing Eddie's near-classical riffs then for the first time reappear in my living room 40 years later as I blast classics such as "Ain't Talkin' 'bout Love", or the volcanic guitar solo "Eruption". I do not laugh at this music. It may have lost some of its mind-blowing freshness and energy over the years, but in the bass licks and in David Lee Roth's vocal swagger I can still locate my 18-year-old heavy metal self, as I can when hearing Peter Frampton's "Do You Feel Like We Do", particularly in the passages on mouth harmonics. Hearing Snoop Dog and Dr Dre's "Still Dre" brings me back to my time in the barrios of 1990s Los Angeles. Listening to Silvio Rodriguez and Pablo Milanes takes me back further to the mammoth five-day concert of *Nueva Canción* I took part in in Quito, Ecuador, in the mid-1980s, which awoke an entire Latin American student generation. Playing Grand Master Flash and the Furious 5's "The Message" returns me to my undergraduate student days at Georgetown. Each musical piece resurrects a part of me, a place, a smell, a taste, an energy, an experience of freedom, here in my tiny flat overlooking the rooftops of Clèves. In this way, music threads and re-stages all the places I have inhabited – Boston; Washington, DC; Quito; LA – creating within the four walls of my tiny living room in Clèves a mosaic-like palimpsest of all these cities.

I may go for days listening and relistening to only one album, such as the recently discovered *Hejira*, by Joni Mitchell. The songs on this album speak of a California I never knew while living there, a California I now ache for: melancholy and restless. When I learn from my *New York Times* of the death of a musician I have not yet heard of, such as the young, transgender electronic music pioneer Sophie, I play their music, and listen with patience to the end of their songs while eating my breakfast porridge, respecting their energy, feeling old by their aesthetics but abiding with that feeling rather than being

dragged under by it, made all the more poignant by the knowledge of this artist's premature passing.

I align my music to my writing. Not so long ago, while writing an article in Spanish addressing the European Union's border externalization strategy in/around the islands of Cape Verde, I listened to Cesarea Evora the entire time I was writing this piece. In this way, Cesarea entered my household and became a dear guest, filling my tiny living room with *saudade*, literally, for weeks. Music may not be timeless, but precisely therefore the practice of listening creates a layered palimpsest of moods and atmospheres touching different historical registers of the self in the lived, pandemic present.

## FACE/HOME

I have only one mirror in my flat. It is a tiny, yellow plastic-framed shaving mirror that hangs in my bathroom from three, multicoloured exposed wires erupting from the white plaster wall above my sink, like the tendrils of a particularly exuberant plant. The mirror is so small I see only my face when looking into it. Before the pandemic I would go for months on end without seeing the rest of my body; it always came as a surprise, then, to re-encounter it when seeing myself in a full-length hotel room mirror. "My, how I have aged," I say to myself, seeing all that snow-white hair on my chest.

Oh, my hair. Not having been to my barber Dieter for two months, it takes all my ingenuity, once having towelled off after my shower, to tame the Einsteinian-electricized mess that is my coiffure into a semblance of order. Nevertheless, despite my best efforts, I cannot prevent my hair's bulbous protrusions both right and left of my temples. My hair accompanies me on my *voyage*; it grows day by day as I explore the remotest *terrae incognitae* of my flat.

My face is accustomed to looking at itself through this mirror, most times frontally, sometimes sideways with a knowing Gioconda smile. I can tell when it looks tired, when elated, when in pain. Lockdown has been accompanied by psychosoma made visible on the face's surface: a sty in my inner left eye that swelled to bulbous proportions for an entire two-week period, reminding me of the Elephant Man each time I saw myself in the mirror. On another occasion odd accretions of facial skin appeared like early-growth beauty marks, on the left and upper-right forehead, only to melt away suddenly and unexpectedly. I take each indignity as it comes, prepared to adapt to whatever fate decides to do with my face, knowing that my proclivity to inflammation is the price I must pay for being a type II diabetic. And age. "I must remain stoic," I tell myself. "This is nothing compared to what others are suffering," I tell myself. "Be kind to yourself," I tell myself.



A face. Our calling card to the world. What happens to this calling card when the only people who see it do so through a Zoom window? What margins of freedom are granted us when we can mediate our facial presence via such technologies? What liberties may we take under such circumstances? As an experiment, I change the Zoom background framing my face as the circumstances permit. On some days, it is the Schwanenburg Castle, as seen from my balcony on a sunny day in Clèves. Rather staid, conventional and boring. At other times, though, I prefer to set my face against the backdrop of Perloff Hall, home of the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning at UCLA until the mid-1990s, with its temple-like columns, the short, narrow cream-coloured stairs cascading softly downwards from the courtyard into the wide, grass-filled expanse. The sun. The palm trees. Or, at another moment, my face is shown inside Perloff's central gleaming hallway. At these times I am no longer in Clèves, no longer in Nijmegen, no longer even in the Perloff of today, but an imagined Perloff Hall as I remember it, sitting on the cement edges of that large, cigarette-stub-filled planter in the inner courtyard, conversing with Ed Soja, sometime in 1994 or 1995, the world feeling open, free and limitless, our conversation knowingly surfing the white-hot edge of our *zeitgeist* (or did that knowledge only come later?), that *savoir* giving our smiles a peculiar ferocity. This is what I wish to transmit via my "Zoom face": that smile, that ferocity, a smile that says "I am still here, at the white-hot edge, whether you see it or not. No modesty intended here."

Still within the frame of that smile's ferocity, I now realize I play with time-space(s) when practising this facial mirror effect on Zoom, visually quoting a Perloff that no longer exists and drawing on a reputational effect I never felt while a graduate student there, refracted now into a now largely ghostly place that is Nijmegen/Clèves, thereby creating an altogether novel space we might call LA-Nijmegen or LA-Clèves, or, better yet, LA-Nimegeneves or LA-Clevegen, where palm trees and endlessly sunny skies collide with the grey embankment of the Waal, or where towering Möbius strips of freeway wind through the Kranenburg Düffel, the metallic hubs of West Covina diners punctuating the *Klever Fußgängerzone* and the dwindling remains of the LA Aqueduct meandering serenely along the *Ooij Polder*.

When living in UCLA student housing, while the traffic roared outside my window on Sepulveda Boulevard, I used to daydream of living one day in a small, peaceable European town, near a castle, hearing the sound of church bells. Now that I live in a small, peaceable European town near a castle amid the sound of church bells I am struck by the memory of being in Los Angeles dreaming about being in the place where I am currently confined, dreaming of LA. In the manner of the Proust-inspired essays of the Alexandrian exile André Aciman (2000), I call this convoluted, juxtaposed, parallax, in-between space "home".



## UNBEARABLE “I”

Pre-pandemic “normality”. So many of us, I perceive, yearn for it, pine for it, long for it. Desperate to achieve it, we act as if normality has not left us, as it has, in fact, for good. Concerned to maintain our waning visibility and influence, we continue to e-mail each other our latest publications, disciplinary assessments of our previous “landmark” articles, while mentioning previously high citation rates for the work we have previously achieved, and in our e-mail footers we nervously continue to list our most recent publications, signalling, however tenuously, how productive we still are. More than ever, we obsessively curate our personal Internet homepages, neurotically attentive to our “click-through” rates. During meetings we discuss with serious demeanour the fine points of a task allocation table as if the funded hours allocated to our duties really mattered in a period when one hour is indistinguishable from the next, one day, week, month equal to any other. In the austere “economy of attention” that governs our working lives, we rush to offer fine administrative assessments of our current “situation”, each falling over the other to appear “reasonable”, astute, aware and concerned for the well-being of the collective. We trumpet our “research interests” with an unbearable “I”, “I”, “I”, “I”, “I”, “I”, “I”, “I”, “I”, gone all sense that one’s thoughts come in relation to and with and through others. We celebrate when someone has been awarded a grant/bursary/fellowship, as if that honour places its recipient on a surer path to (fill in the blank). We agree to restructure our MA programmes, so that they are “with the times” (although we have no idea what the “times” demand), continue to subject ourselves to annual performance reviews, as we have year after year, as if this were any other year, as if the goals we set for the coming year are as reasonable as any other ... (sound of record scratching to a halt) ... *They are not.*

The pandemic makes painfully visible the illusion of temporal “advancement” of any kind in this time of glacial stasis; the illusion that, if we do X or appear to do Y, someday Z will surely happen and we shall gloriously “move on to the next level”. On Zoom, the whole performance of smooth-running normalcy falters; it appears as “through a glass darkly”, as grainy video feed on a black and white television. *Zap.* What if the whole machinery ... just ... stopped? Might this offer an opening to rethink our institutional structures as a set of *spatial* rather than temporal relations, as a sustainable ecology of collective research practices, teaching practices and career development practices, rather than as linear, temporally driven practices forcing all towards the cliff of so-called “optimal” performance?

Perhaps it is time to pause. There is no going back to “normal”. Do we have the imagination to invent, together, what we will look like in a post-normal world once we come out the other side of our individual, encapsulated *confines*?

## SCHNURRIE

Schnurrie<sup>2</sup> walked into our house one snowy winter's day, fully pregnant, knowing this as a do-or-die moment: either she would be allowed to give birth to her brood here, in a warm indoor place, or she would be shooed back outside and her offspring would die from the cold. We allowed her in, and she has remained in our lives and hearts ever since.

Years on, Schnurrie has gained weight, her belly sags, although her black hair has not lost its glamorous sheen. She has lost most of her teeth. She ambles about the house, its true Madame. When in repose, she either finds an open box to sit in in the kitchen area, lies majestically splayed out on the tiles of the kitchen floor smack in the middle of our activities, raising her head up slightly and meowing happily to let us know she is fully taking part in what we are doing, or stretching out on the blue velour sofa in the dining room, observing all the goings-on of the house, including the patio and garden. She defends her territory ruthlessly in the face of visiting cats.

Our friends may also come and go, as they have during the pandemic. Schnurrie remains a constant, loyal presence in our lives. When I visit her during the week, in the company of my son Oscar and ex-partner Sabine, we sit in the living room on the olive-coloured canvas couch that used to belong to the geographer-planner Barbara Hooper, eating dinner and watching Netflix or the Franco-German television channel ARTE. Schnurrie already announces her appearance from the hallway with her usual grunting noise, pads noiselessly under the coffee table, then a sudden pair of eyes looking hopefully upwards, a great effort, and she then pole-vaults her large body (I lovingly call it a *Dudelsack*) over the rim of the couch into our midst, usually settling between Oscar and Sabine, facing the television. In her routine, Schnurrie settles there, pink tongue lolling outwards, sometimes turning over on her back, legs inelegantly splayed, so that we may rub her belly, sending her into nirvana.

On the face of it, Schnurrie has been living in quarantine since she entered our lives (Oscar Kramsch, personal communication). She rarely leaves the house. She knows how to occupy herself, mostly by sleeping, snoring softly. She is never anxious about whether she is sufficiently “productive”. She has no need for Zoom, Tinder or fellow cats. She is never, ever bored. With uncanny alertness, she comes to us when she smells we are feeling down, climbs into our laps and lets herself be stroked, which has the effect of calming *us* down. The price to be paid for this “therapy” is that, when she “treads water” with her sharp claws on your lap before settling down, she ruins whatever sweater you are wearing. Schnurrie, we love you.

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2. So called because, early on, she loved playing with string. Schnurrie passed away in summer 2020, buried with full honours high in our Clèves garden.

## LETTERS

My work “bureau” consists of an IKEA leather chair, a small wooden garden table and a corner of my living room containing a 1950s wooden base and conical paper lamp, surrounded by piles of books and plastic files containing printed articles, photographs, handwritten letters and the latest copy of the *New York Review of Books*. My IKEA “writing chair” faces directly onto my balcony through large bay windows, which in turn look out over the slate rooftops of Clèves and, further beyond, the Schwanenburg Castle, brooding majestically against an often cloud-tossed skyline.

In fact, letters can be found strewn about in different parts of my living room: on the floor, in Spanish, from a female comrade in Galicia; on my dining table, also in Spanish, from a former girlfriend living in Buenos Aires; and, in French, from another beloved aunt. All these, in response to one of the major practices occupying me at the start of the pandemic: letter-writing. Starting in April 2020, I decided to write one letter by hand per day. I write them using a Lamy pen on expensive, cream-coloured paper, and send them in equally expensive envelopes to comrades located all over the world, thereby creating an invisible Republic of Letters in the pandemic: Berlin, Frankfurt an der Oder, Paris, London, Belfast, Durham (UK), Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Den Bosch (the Netherlands), Budapest, Barcelona, Madrid, La Coruña (Galicia), Thessaloniki, Copenhagen, Oulu (Finland), Joensuu (Finland), Tampere (Finland), Oslo (Norway), Cambridge (Massachusetts), Chapel Hill (North Carolina), Carleton (Canada), Vancouver, Berkeley, Santa Cruz (California), Los Angeles, Santa Fe (New Mexico), Tijuana (Mexico), Leticia/Tabatinga (Colombia/Brazil), Rio de Janeiro, Singapore, Jakarta, Macquarie (Australia) ... the list could go on. I send my letters as messages in a bottle thrown into the sea, expecting nothing in return. I know that by sending them to institutional addresses they will land like comets from a distant solar system, and possibly lie for months on office desktops, untouched, since their recipients are also confined, just as I, to their home offices. But that is what gave, and continues to give, my letter-writing in these pandemic times a certain charge: the knowledge that they would possibly not be read for months; the awareness that they might never arrive at their destination; the sense that, when finally discovered, they might be received with the same excitement an archaeologist must feel when discovering an ancient fossil or sarcophagus.

My letters are written as an act of solidarity, from my isolated balcony to the isolated balcony of others. Months later, some have responded gratefully by e-mail. Some have also taken the effort to respond by handwritten letter, expressing surprise that they can still express themselves in this most ancient manner. In this way, I partake in the practices of what the

Argentinian geographer Perla Zusman calls the *flaneur confinado* (the “confined flaneur”), travelling from balcony to balcony, windowsill to windowsill, in a poignantly global display of togetherness-in-isolation (see Zusman’s multi-media project at [flaneurconfinado.com](http://flaneurconfinado.com)). *Gracias por todo, Perla. Y gracias a la vida.*

## LIBRARY

The floor of my flat facing its bay windows and balcony is consumed by books: books standing, books lying face-up, rows of books stacked atop each other ten-deep, books everywhere the eye can see. A small, wooden, three-tiered bookcase located to the left of my writing chair heaves with tomes. The top tier is dedicated to urban planning, spatial theory and borders, the latter representing numerous collective efforts I have joined over the years. The middle tier is occupied by novels. The bottom tier specializes in postcolonial literature. This unruly sea of books is my library.

My books speak French, German, Spanish, English and Dutch. They converse with each other, murmuring in the silence of the night. From the top shelf, Michel Serres stares down at T. E. Lawrence, discussing the latter’s approach on Aqaba, Michel suggesting to Lawrence philosophical niceties on bridge-building with angels. From the bottom shelf, Derek Gregory looks up to Mario Vargas Llosa at mid-shelf, expounding on Edward Said’s potential contribution to Vargas Llosa’s understanding of Peruvian political economy. From the far corner of the floor, J. G. Ballard shouts out to Orhan Pamuk, asking him whether in Istanbul there are any futuristic luxury high-rise blocks of the kind he violently dismantles. And so the pages rustle to each other, and I sit amid the soft cacophony of voices, listening.

The characters found in my books have come to my succour at key moments of crisis in my life. I am thankful to Pierre (Count Bezukhov) in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, for his good-natured warmth, and for sharing his epiphany with me at the Battle of Borodino (1812) that a horizon could be at the same time an emancipatory border. Jean d’Ormesson reconnected me to my own French family in a way I never had anticipated. Gloria Anzaldúa continues to speak of my borderland existence between Clèves and Nijmegen with the same power as when I discovered her at Santa Monica’s Midnight Special bookstore in 1987. I could go on ... Holding the books in my hand, feeling their heft, calms me. I read personal inscriptions from their authors on the side jackets and am taken back to other times, other places, to friendships and comradeships, travels and conferences, long conversations on Greek islands, wine, drunken revelry, doubts. I am reminded of an earlier time in academia,

when academics actually wrote books and were rewarded for doing so; when one could spend years writing just one book, and could dispense with journal articles; when what mattered was what Fred Moten and Kolar Aparna now simply call “study”: the luxury of going deep into something.

As I write a paper dealing with issues of comparative urbanism, I stage my book-reading in such a way that I will be making house visits, planning each approach with care. First I must plough my way through small mountains of recent articles I have downloaded and printed from the Internet to get the gist of existing debates. These lowland snowbound Alps lie to my right in transparent plastic folders. Like baby chicks, they cry to be seen, for they know they are the *dernier cri*. To my left, lying patiently on the floor, are the “classics,” heavy volumes from distinguished presses; they were there at the foundation of whatever debates now animate the young chicklets, and they look on quietly bemused. “I will get to you in good time,” I reassure the old ones; “your moment will come, trust me.”

The quality of my reading has changed during my pandemic lockdown. Whereas, prior to the pandemic, my reading was often distracted, shot through and cut short by travels outside my flat – elsewhere in Clèves, across the border to Nijmegen, staff meetings, teaching in large, noisy classroom halls, return commutes – now my reading is thickly uninterrupted, dense, an undiluted concentrate. Readerly dialogues with my authors become more private, intimate and sensual. My academic reading practice slows down to the gait of an amiable conversation over a long, well-lubricated lunch or dinner. My note-taking pays attention to penmanship! The sparks that fly between my note pages intensify, charged by a memory that has become more acute and demanding, extending the dialogue to versions of myself that evolve with time (it goes without saying, this chapter is a perfect example of this new reading/writing habitus).

My mother sends me copies of her published books. They also litter my apartment floor. The latest one is from Cambridge University Press, but that is not what matters. What matters is that I have an 85-year old mother who still writes *books*. There is a slow-burning spatiality and temporality to writing books, which I imbibe when I speak with her during our Friday night Zoom chats. That, too, calms me. Perhaps, one day, I, too, will overcome the shadow of my mother and write my own book.

Although they are worn thoroughly unreflectively as a result of custom and use after months of quarantine, my clothes still have a particular *feel*. They protect me (or not) from the cold that may creep in through the glass door on my balcony, kept ajar. They may feel tight or loose, especially the latter, as I have lost muscle mass in my legs as a result of not being able to go to the gym. They may smell and need to be washed. Whether known or unknown

to me, this casing is important for my writing: its length, its pensiveness, its awareness, its “quality”. It constitutes my “face” to the outside world.

## BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

Friends and comrades have passed during the time of my quarantine. I first invite the memory of Herbert Püplichhüsen, my dearly departed German friend, into my room. Herbert died in 2019 of brain cancer, still young, in his early to mid-60s. He was the youngest son of a farming family located in a nearby village. He suffered under a domineering older brother and a tyrannical mother. His whole life. He never had a chance to get out from under their shadow. We sang together in the same choir; we two were for a long time the only tenor voices. I remember him always arriving late to choir practice, seeing him hang up his coat in the hallway, then run across the floor with a guilty child’s grin, sidling up to me with a knowing smile, his face red from having ridden his bicycle through the cold air of the polder.

Herbert had two passions: old-time American rockabilly music; and dancing. During choir tea breaks he would always ask me about a band he had discovered, which was of course always new to me. He would invite me to join him at a local dance hall, and I would join. The most poignant memory I have of Herbert is watching him glide across a packed dance floor, lost in his joy of dancing, oblivious to all around him, knowing that he knew he was dying of cancer, and enjoying himself all the more.

I now invite the memory of Chris Rumford into the room. Professor of International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London, Chris was not only a remarkable scholar but a remarkable comrade, who passed away in 2016, much too young, in his late 50s. Chris had a searching curiosity, and through that searching helped transform the somewhat murky backwater of border studies into a vibrant, intellectually exciting field. Among many contributions to the field, he helped pioneer the idea that Europe has “cosmopolitan borders”, meaning that, increasingly, European borders are no longer solely the purview of state action, and that they are experienced differently by people who are increasingly active in the construction of borders (what Chris famously termed “borderwork”: Rumford 2008).

Chris had a very dry, British and understated sense of humour. He loved cricket, and wrote about it in a serious, social-scientific way. Doing the funded workshop circuit, we travelled about Europe with a group of young and not-so-young fellow border scholars, who are all prominent in the field today. As a friend and colleague, Chris was generous in his way-of-being with all those he met in his path. He had no chip on his shoulder and had no need to prove himself to anyone.

## TELOS?

I now must synthesize my findings. Following Maus (2015), this chapter has attempted to trace my own practice of localized memory over the course of the ten-month pandemic-induced quarantine lockdown of 2021. It has thereby essayed to chart the space opened up by the performative “doings and sayings” of memory-work under conditions of radical isolation in my two-room flat. It is time to grasp the co-constitutive organization of my practice in relation to that space, reflecting back upon Schatzki and Miller’s originary conceptual framework.

At the level of Schatzki’s “practical understanding”, we may conclude that my own grasp of “where and how to perform” memory came incrementally, contingently, haphazardly, determined more by the chance location of items – the precise location of that photo of France on my dining table, say, or the letter from an ex-lover lying on the floor by the bay window – than from any predetermined plan or structure. Nevertheless, over time, meaning became anchored in these “accidental” objects, in turn producing a structured memory landscape that clarified and intensified a connection to my past while suturing my four walls to the outside world (or, better said, to the memory of worlds I had inhabited as a younger version of myself). The space thus created can be likened to a parallax dimension, in which places I had formerly inhabited – Cambridge, MA; Washington, DC; Peru; Tijuana; Los Angeles – infiltrate my current places of work and residence, Nijmegen/Clèves, creating hybrid formations: Tijuana-on-the-Waal; Los Angeles-am-Niederrhein. It goes without saying that, in producing this personalized landscape, the practice of forgetting words in my native English language as I write this chapter, requiring frequent interjections of their German or French equivalents, is instrumental in the production of this hybrid, multi-lingual landscape (Kramersch 2009).

If we consider teleology as a floating normative purpose, or goal, I may safely aver that, in my case, the social production of localized cultural memory lacked any superordinate teleo-affective kernel. Whether by evoking dreams that rekindle old traumas of childhood inadequacy, the exquisite ideal of endless egg yolk in a *mouillette*, the recollection of family networks spanning the Anglo-French empire, the sonic musical blasts of my youth, the wide-open horizons of my graduate school days, the broad, deep readings and passionate friendships of an earlier era, none of these pointillist souvenirs occurred for the sake of something or adding up to any coherent direction or connectivity. Although one could label this as *teleo-affective*, I rather grasp these practices as *circadian-affective*, expressive of an internal, circular movement that is nevertheless adjusted to my local environment by the external influences of objects located in my immediate vicinity. In relation to



practices of localized memory as those sketched out in this chapter, Schatzki's conceptual framework appears overly "practical", invoking a *Homo commemorialis* more attached to the instrumental parameters of spatial doings under enquiry than that of a multilingual Proustian *flâneur confinado à la recherche des espaces perdus*.

Finally, what of the vaunted "binding capacity" and "general understandings" secreted by practices of localized memory articulated, via Schatzki, at the outset of this chapter? Reflecting recently on the life of Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher Seyla Benhabib writes – against the grain of Heidegger – that, for Arendt, "the world is not the space in which we forget our being-unto-death while pursuing trivial affairs; rather, it is a space that we share with others, with whom we build the lasting institutions of public life". For Benhabib, "being-in-the-world involves being in the company of others with whom we enjoy talking and interacting. We labor to meet the needs of the body, create art and artifacts, and engage in moral and political activities" (Benhabib 2021: 26). For Arendt, the production of space is therefore inherently convivial, binding actors through shared political and normative commitments. The expansive notion of space it implies strives to move from "I" to a "we".

I join this Arendtian project from my pandemic-driven quarantine, as you, dear reader, have in Latourian fashion patiently "followed" me and my "objects", page after page, pursuing me down the rabbit hole of my most intimate encounters with the most banal and everyday of "things": bed, shower gel, razor blade, toothbrush, facial cream, kitchen sink, cooking utensil, table, working chair, books, sculptures, Excel spreadsheet, letters, music, memories, and so on. In so doing, I hope to have shown the degree to which my own subjectivity is produced in relation to a host of material and non-material, human and non-human, objects, each of which has a role to play in co-constructing a "we"/"I". But this "we"/"I" object relation is not "flat" in any sense. If for Latour the appropriate methodology of an object-oriented "experimental metaphysics" is gained through a process of "concatenation" rather than "substitution" (Miller 2013: 16), because "we do not know who are the agents that make up our world ... [and] we must begin with this uncertainty if we are to understand how, little by little, the agents defined one another" (Latour, cited in Miller 2013: 16), I have begun my practice of localized memory from the standpoint of such a radical uncertainty, my concatenated perambulation allowing me only gradually to locate the relevant "agents" and in turn determine how they define and bind to one another. But, in so doing, have I come any closer to granting "full metaphysical dignity to the buzzing multitude of objects" (Miller 2013: 11) available to me in my two-room flat? Have I confirmed that the myriad objects in



my vicinity have the capacity of “explaining themselves” while they “pursue their business” (Miller 2013: 11)? And has this led in turn to a more “general understanding”, allowing me to abstract from myself in order to identify cultural dispositions at work in the world at large?

From the vantage point of my practice of localized memory carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, I must reveal my scepticism. For my Enlightenment-derived, anthropocentric *Innerlichkeit* is a stubborn, ornery thing. *It* wrote this essay, not my razor blade or kitchen fork (and here the question of written language and the ever-present primacy of the authorial “I” over any purported “flat” ontological landscape must be immediately confronted). *It* orchestrated the concatenating conversations between the authors on my library shelf. *It* wrote the letters that have kept me tethered to the world and the world to myself. *It* interpellated those in my life who have passed away. *It* cooked that *petite omelette de fromage et champignons*. And perhaps this is as it should be. In a time of climate catastrophe and mass extinction, with a world-historical war at our doorstep in Europe, perhaps we must confer a little less “dignity” to more-than-human objects, thus taking back vital anthropocentric responsibility for the calamities at hand, both historical and present (Nussbaum 2022). This was, after all, the task twentieth-century critical social theory set for itself: to change the world (Collins 2021). This world may no longer fully adhere to twentieth-century categories of social thought rooted in the worldwide class struggle, but neither can such a world be transformed merely by tracing objects as they “pursue their business”. The space of this “world” is still socially produced, which means it is still very much a site of human love and struggle, space being the “medium and presupposition” (to use an ancient expression) of *social* relations (Gregory & Urry 1985). Perhaps, then, Schatzki’s social practicality, and more normative orientation, is to be embraced, albeit in a more rhythmic manner.

A final query: when do we stop tracing and following things around our landscapes of memory? When does a practice of localized memory reach closure? If indeed “counting your cats can be useful”, but we cannot “expect that count to ever be definitive while herding them across the open plains” (Miller 2013: 26), when and under what conditions do we stop counting the uncountable? Miller’s response: “In principle, never. In practice, we will, of course, only go as far as the available resources take us” (Miller 2013: 24–5). Schnurrie would have understood what those available resources are; after all, I am under a writing deadline to submit this chapter to my editors.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Thanks to Freek de Haan for additional references, and to the volume editors for carefully reading and commenting upon a previous draft of this chapter. This essay is dedicated to housecats Schnurrie and Siem.

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## **PART III**

### **THEORIZING NEW PHENOMENA AND PRACTICES**



## CHAPTER 8

# COUNTER-ACTUALIZING PRIVACY: FROM METRIC PANOPTICONS THROUGH BOUNDARY INTERPRETATIONS TO “VEILLANCE PRACTICES”

*Freek de Haan*

### INTRODUCING PRIVACY AS MULTIPLICITY

The question of privacy pops up all around public discourse, touching on widely different issues of surveillance, parenting, platform capitalism and abortion rights. Something to do with the violation of our bodily integrity, personal property and human dignity, it seems highly relevant. And, yet, its meaning remains empirically and analytically elusive and confused. This has the twin effect of engendering harmful miscommunications over privacy, such as when its legal expressions fall painfully short in the personal sphere, and of detracting from its political force, such that privacy is put on the defence against more sharply defined interests of efficiency, security and transparency. Practice theory, I argue in this chapter, has the potential to explain empirical difference and conceptual consistency among the many meanings of privacy and thereby improve on its ethical and political powers. At a time when “smart” technologies are massively invading our bodies, homes, personal relations and public institutions, this is essential to set limits to surveillance and maintain collective autonomy, dignity, freedom and love.

Let us first appreciate the confounding empirical variety of privacy discourse. The whole world, but American citizens in particular, felt their privacy violated after the Snowden revelations unveiled how the US National Security Agency (NSA) was indiscriminately amassing data. Similarly, there is the occasional outrage over the chilling amount of information gathered by Internet giants such as Google, Amazon and Facebook, for example, when the latter turned out to have provided user data to political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica for their covertly targeted Trump campaigning. The same word, “privacy”, is also deployed by Korean K-pop artists who feel harassed and imprisoned by so-called “sasaeng fans” (literally “private life

fans”) who intrude their idols’ homes, chase and film the celebrities wherever they go. The paparazzi middleman, that privacy violator of old, is cast aside. However, by the same democratization of media, similar privacy issues enter the lives of regular people, youth especially. Their digitally mediated oversharing of personal information leads to shaming and framing in the form of outing, “doxing” or revenge porn. There might be the more subtle kind of nudging by commercial or state actors, when, for instance, “smart city” algorithms adjust advertisements to real-time personal geolocations or automatically direct law enforcement to supposedly criminogenic areas, thereby indirectly controlling people’s information diet and subjection to surveillance. Although recent developments in China seem to bring all these examples together in rather frightening ways – the anti-terror police state in Xinjiang, the public shaming of deviants, the extreme “sisheng” fan culture, the nudging through social credits – this empirical multiplicity still does not easily add up to a comprehensive concept of privacy (and, therefore, violation).

What is it that binds these examples? How should the concept of privacy be defined to tie them together? Privacy is one of those modern liberal concepts, much like tolerance, civility or freedom, that is notoriously hard to define analytically or place politically. Can it be a mere descriptive category, simply designating a state of territorial solitude? Or is it normative, a value accorded certain economic, legal or political relations? As is so often the case, answers to these questions of definition range from the legislative, in the literal and the broad sense, to the interpretive and contextual. Legislative definitions try to locate a certain definition of privacy in nature (e.g. Moore 2010), while others either reduce it to similar legal concepts (e.g. Thomson 1975) or come up with taxonomies and typologies that comprehensively but too conveniently lump together its many forms (e.g. Solove 2005; Koops *et al.* 2016). In response, the more interpretive approaches find in privacy a typical “language-game” showing only family resemblances among different uses of the concept (Fairfield 2018), or simply resort to contextual relativism (e.g. Nissenbaum 2010). Likewise, concerns over privacy are not straightforwardly left or right in political terms, but come up in relation to any kind of state or marketplace surveillance. Socialists supposedly find the issue divisive (Parent 1983) while some critical feminists would rather do without the category entirely (e.g. MacKinnon 1991; see section below). Likewise, critical theorists often tend to dismiss privacy as a liberal non-issue better addressed only in terms of surveillance (e.g. Lyon 2002), thereby ruling out the possibility of more progressive resignifications of the widely appealing idea of privacy. All the same, actual political projects on the left, from anarchist communities to socialist nation states, have had their run-ins with privacy issues as much as any liberal capitalist or conservative polity has.

This leads us to the proposition that privacy may be something of a natural or human universal, but is also something deeply multiple. Even so, although it may be *more than one* universal state of solitude or need for personal territory, it is also *less than many* subjective meanings and particular “contexts”. Being more than one but less than many, then, there is some structure to be discerned among relations of privacy, or within what relational theories would call its “multiplicity” (after Deleuze & Guattari 1987). In this contribution, I aim to demonstrate how practice theory, conceived as such a relational theory, can be of use to empirically confront and grasp the analytical and ethico-political multiplicity of privacy while preserving a conceptual consistency across its many manifestations so that contextual fragmentation can be averted. In other words, by grounding the many contradictory but overlapping meanings of privacy in practices, we may find structure in its practice without again resorting to one specific universalism, be it of evolutionary psychology, neoclassical economics or political economy (frameworks that may indeed become a performative part of practice themselves). As such, the methodology proposed in this chapter can prove valuable to the scientific, political and ethical treatment of many other such concepts, including the aforementioned tolerance, civility and freedom (see de Haan 2022).

Neither legislating on its conceptual essence nor leaving it to contextual relativism, I want to ground privacy in *practices* of surveillance, or, rather, multiple practices of “veillance”, thereby not relegating it to political insignificance but affirming and utilizing its powerful political performativities. To this end, the chapter is built up as follows. The next section describes my general approach to practice theory by explaining the idea and logic of counter-actualization. Sections three and four follow this logic to explore the many meanings and practices of privacy that define its particular multiplicity, moving from privacy as a natural descriptive and economic category (in the third section) to privacy as a moral category (section four) and expressive event (section five) to privacy as an *effect* of multiple practices of surveillance (section six). In the final section, I conclude that understanding privacy in all its multiple utilitarian, moral and expressive senses requires a practice theory of the many “veillances” that produce them: practices of mediated social cognition that singularize, individuate and measure human relations and affects (and of which surveillance is only one).

## PRACTICE THEORY AS COUNTER-ACTUALIZATION

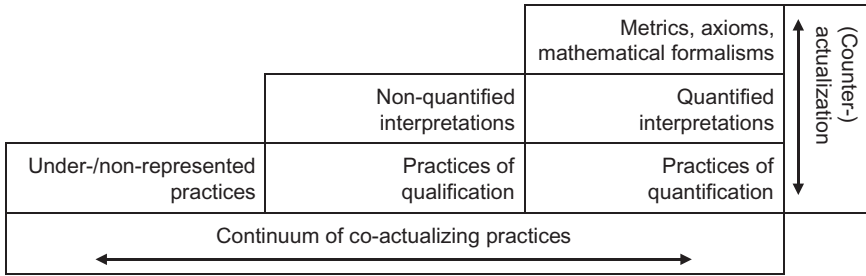
Since the present volume is about practice theory, a few words follow about the general approach to (researching) practices taken in this chapter. As an ontological category and an epistemological object, practices are understood

here through the lens of actualization and counter-actualization (de Haan 2022). The theory of actualization I propose, anchored in discussions around the so-called “speculative turn” in philosophy, combines several ontologies that are usually considered contradictory (by, *inter alia*, Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, Niklas Luhmann and Alain Badiou) in order to distinguish three ontological “layers” of reality: practices, interpretations and metrics. The “actualization” of any human phenomenon (or, rather, assemblage, including many non-human components) is posited to proceed from practices, which produce interpretations, which in turn may be translated into metrics. The first and basic layer is thus made up of practices, the ontological base of human realities. For this reason, the actualization theory can be considered a practice theory. As distinguished from interpretations, practices are considered the capacity to *do* things, to “make a living” in the broadest, more-than-utilitarian sense.

If practices designate the embodied, more-than-human and material-semiotic ways of “knowing-how”, interpretations are the phenomenological and representational “knowing-that”, which includes identities of others and self. Metrics, in turn, designate a “knowing-how-much”, a modality of practice on their own and a technological attempt at the axiomatization and quantification of a subset of interpretations (more on this below). With the risk of simplifying too much, if practices are about the “How?”, interpretations are about the “What?” (including the “When?”, “Where?” and “Who?”) and metrics are about the “How much?”. Making this ontological distinction becomes empirically worthwhile when it allows us to recognize that practice shows discrepancies with and overflows intentions and representations, but also that numbers and models do not simply follow meaning, intention and ideology. Think of how the seductive flow of gossiping has us divulge the most sworn secrets or, in the other direction, how the statistical calculations of computer algorithms constitute sublime black boxes for their subjects as well as human creators. Even so, there is an ontological order at play here; practices are the base. Just as one cannot measure anything before determining what meaningful indicator to measure, no such indicator – or any other meaning, for that matter – can be produced outside a *practice* of meaning-making and calculation. This is not to say that there cannot be practices (that is, bundles of capacities for doing things) that are not fully represented or representable in discourse. In short, practices are not just basic but make up an ever-overflowing realm of more-than-representational affects and potentials to do things differently.

These statements can be summarized in [Figure 8.1](#), which explicitly directs the following enquiries into privacy and surveillance in a very specific way. As the ontological figure theorizes how our world actualizes itself from practices to interpretations to metrics, for three reasons, my epistemic





**Figure 8.1** An abstract depiction of (counter-)actualization

Notes: Schematized here, the concept of (counter-)actualization distinguishes practices, interpretations and metrics and connects them in terms of necessary conditioning. Moving up and from left to right, some interpretations emerge from practices, and some of those interpretations are subsequently quantified as metrics. The epistemic strategy of counter-actualization moves down from metrics to interpretations to practices for the purpose of critical interpretation and reconfiguration of practice.

strategy moves in the other direction: from metrics to interpretations to practices. Apart from the first, pragmatic reason that this provides me with some initial analytical traction in what would otherwise be an unbounded soup of practices and relations, it also, second, makes for an outspokenly critical and creative strategy. Although first going from the world of metric “facts” to underlying interpretations, ideologies and interests is a well-known deconstructive and critical geographical manoeuvre, the following step – going from interpretations to practices – represents a more novel and constructive gesture that includes an active exploration of practices that move away from both hegemonic discourse and its familiar alternatives. Moreover, as the third reason, since we as scholars primarily enact the world by way of metrics and interpretations (theories and observations on paper), we can only indirectly approach the ontological specificity of practices – that is, non-representational intensities, affects and competences.

Considering these ontological and epistemological commitments, I can briefly distinguish this Deleuze-inspired practice theory from the more humanist and phenomenological approaches to practices coming from Theodore Schatzki (2001) and those inspired by his work. The difference hinges on three interrelated issues: relationality, non-humans and performativity. The first concerns the notion of relationality. In a radically *relational* approach, the substance of what we generally call “practices” are relations *between* entities: differential relations that are “exterior” to their terms. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), we can call them “affects”, understood in a very general, Spinozean sense of more-than-human capacities: dynamic relations of being affected and affecting (which, when it comes to practices involving humans, are always accompanied by affects in the narrow sense of emotions). As capacity-enhancing or capacity-diminishing *relations*, affects of joy or sadness are *not*

*internal* states of human subjects but differential vectors of evolution between human and non-human entities (e.g. cyclist–bike–GPS relations; rancher–cows–factory–farm relations; accountant–desktop–spreadsheet relations). Counterintuitively, these dynamic and immediately ethical “relations of exteriority” precede and enjoy an ontological autonomy from their scholarly or situational cognitive representation as distinct subjects and objects/phenomena. The role of the non-human is thus directly tied to the question of relationality: “human–non-human” is only a more or less performative interpretation influencing practice one way or another.

Embodying particular relations themselves, cognitive interpretations and metric abstractions attempt to code and catalyse practices (relations, vectors, affects) into certain desirable directions (perhaps then enacting a “teleo-affective structure”: Schatzki 2001). And this constitutes their performativity: restricting or expanding potential relations. For example, adding interpretations of cardinal direction or geometric data (GPS) to the practice of cycling makes it change direction, in spatio-temporal and other practical dimensions. Moreover, practices always co-actualize, redefining each other’s capacities (think of how driving with GPS is affecting our capacity to do without). As such, they always come in series or continua. Below, the continuum of practices is defined by topologies of (sur)veillance. However, reiterating the above remarks on exteriority, these are intensive rather than extensive series. In other words, non-local and virtual superpositions of capacities and tendencies rather than actual (actor) networks, “nexuses of doings and sayings”, strata and scales of parts and wholes or (geo)metric coordinates. Only by being actualized (interpreted, measured) as time and space do they become extensive and localized. Thus, practices do not happen within some transcendent spatial container. Rather, counterintuitively, any spatial whole or coordinate system has to be *performed* by cognitive and technological practices in order to exist, not the other way around. Cycling does not happen in pre-existing space but, as a practice, enacts its own multiplicity of space-time. The challenge is to understand this multiplicity as such – as, for instance, in the practice of privacy.

#### PRIVACY IN THE PANOPTICON?

Following the method of counter-actualization, an enquiry into the many space-times and practices of privacy must start from the world of metrics – a panoptic world of transparent observation, information and calculation that seems quite at odds with any desire for privacy. So-called “panoptic space”, made famous by “first-wave” practice theorist Michel Foucault, is a metric and mathematical space. Over the millennia it has uniquely evolved in between

economic practices and natural philosophy, to eventually culminate into the core instrument and regulative ideal of science and government. From the early Enlightenment onwards, although never without its dialectical opposition (about which more below), a mechanistic worldview on human society took hold. After Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith and others transposed the insights of Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton to matters of politics and economy, a mathematically sublime and utopian horizon of infinite knowledge and social improvement took shape in affinity with practices of “panopticism” (Foucault 1977). From the mechanistic standpoint, everything can be represented as objects and their motion according to divine, natural or economic laws of allocation. For Enlightened materialists or utilitarians, man (*sic*) is nothing but a body mechanically propelled by his appetites and aversions and is, potentially, as predictable and public as any other natural object will eventually be to their omniscience. At the utilitarian limit, where all is public and privacy is none, liberty becomes paradoxical and “negative”. There, freedom can mean only “absence of external impediments” to an individual’s motion (Hobbes 1996 [1651]: 86), which is achieved only by perfect compliance with the laws of motion, dictated by God, the sovereign body politic or the market’s “invisible hand”, and discovered through scientific reason. It is the “freedom” of Galileo’s carefully crafted steel balls rolling down a table according to the “law of motion”. However, elevating the average, frictionless, mathematically predictable behaviour of objects in laboratories or factories as their primary nature and essence also establishes a norm, with the peculiar result that the statistically normal becomes the morally optimal. But human standardization and normalization do not come easy. They require incessant observation, discipline and nudging. To bring human bodies and minds in line, disciplinary practices form an inclining gradient of violence and forced disclosure, with the panoptic “total institution” as their most extreme conjunction. Not surprisingly, the utilitarian ideal has seen the rise of many well-known dystopian fictionalizations along with its historical appliance (by Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, etc.).

From the perspective of utilitarian Enlightenment, then, privacy means darkness, which means friction, war, delinquency and inefficiency. Although this is rarely in unadulterated Benthamite form, it is still very much alive today as a kind of implicit horizon of technological integration, optimization and automation. Indeed, not too long ago the first treatments of privacy by economists showed similar inclinations, still echoed by today’s voices from Silicon Valley. To Chicago School pioneers in the 1970s, privacy (i.e. secrecy) was predominantly a barrier to efficient exchange and allocation, which requires undistorted price signalling across economies. As a hindrance to the accurate classification of goods and labourers, privacy of personal information (not industrial secrecy) mostly entails avoidable transaction costs.

Quite explicitly, George Stigler (1980: 629) finds privacy an obstacle to the control of workers, criminals and debtors and the “scoundrels”, “vagabonds” and “deadbeats” among them.

However, it must be noted that during the twentieth century arguments also arose for the universal utility of privacy itself. Most prominently, Alan Westin (1967) presents privacy as a universal feature of human territorial behaviour (ultimately referring back to behaviourist ethologists such as Warder Clyde Allee, Heini Hediger and Konrad Lorenz). Westin thereby stood within a discourse already more than half a century under way, problematizing the pathological overcrowding and social indifference in modern cities (partly continuing a rather questionable Malthusian tradition and *Lebensraum* philosophy). Referencing the same sources as Westin, but also careful to situate privacy among other supposedly ingrained ethics (of domination and sharing), economist Jack Hirshleifer (1980) criticizes Stigler and others by stating that our basic need and ethic of privacy (an “internalized respect for property”) have naturally evolved. To the twenty-first century, these ideas and sources are echoed by leading privacy scholars (e.g. Adam Moore 2010). By naturalizing privacy, it thus takes the *supposedly* descriptive form (as opposed to normative: Moore 2010) of territorial-proprietary behaviour, which secures solitude, intimacy and seclusion in objective space – in short, controls access – for reasons of evolutionary and developmental utility.

In keeping with this, whereas Stigler and others still considered it mostly an intermediary of primary exchanges, later economists (e.g. Hal Varian 2002) have also started treating privacy itself as an intrinsic good to be traded (“off”) according to individual preferences, trading it against other goods of service or security and in light of possible secondary usage of data. According to people’s “privacy calculus”, packages of personal information are thus relocated within abstract economic space, going for a certain price, to trading partners and then possibly third parties. Consequently, privacy infringement comes to be thought of as the dislocation of informational property (“[F]” in Figure 8.2a). It is a kind of theft of data away from its natural owner, who has not been properly “notified” and given “consent” to access (or not *consciously* so). Indeed, this is the point at which many behavioural economists find entry into privacy discourse (e.g. Acquisti *et al.* 2016), arguing how consumers rob themselves by being “biased” or “nudged” away from having their behaviour reflect their preferences (making for a persistent “privacy paradox” among internet users). I further address this issue as part of practices of surveillance (“[D]” in Figure 8.2a).

In any case, it is this liberal economic framework, with its contractual notice-and-consent forms and consequentialist ethics, that underlies most “data protection” legislation and privacy jurisdiction. However, at present this dominant regulation of data economics runs into enormous (private)

Metrics			Data (dis)location [F]
Interpretations		(Unwanted) disclosure [C]	(Undue) objectification [E]
Practices	Singularity, play (displaced) [A]	Expression, exposure [B]	Measurement, administration [D]

**Figure 8.2a** The counter-actualization figure applied to matters of surveillance and privacy; step 1: privacy violation as the dislocation of data [F]

monopoly powers (Pasquale 2012). The market for data is not just unequal because of cognitive manipulation but because it is ruled over by ruthlessly rent- and lock-in-seeking platform capitalists such as those mentioned in the introduction. On the side of consumption, serious doubts may occur about how much informed choice citizens, especially teenagers, can have in their platform use and on the basis of what type of market information. However, on the production side too, an atomized and de-unionized labour force lacks bargaining powers to “trade” against increasingly invasive forms of corporate surveillance. In highly uneven ways, then, the consumers and workers “most in need of fair information practices are least likely to have the resources to actually demand and secure data” (Pasquale 2012: 1013).

In sum, privacy in the utilitarian panopticon at best describes a situation in which the spatial distribution (even if in abstract economic space) of information reflects an optimum of efficiency and utility. Theft, monopoly and stupidity – or, more generously, bounded rationality – can disturb this equilibrium and warrant correction by policing and restitution, corporate regulation or disciplinary nudges. However, in spite of its current hegemony in public discourse, this utilitarian-consequentialist framework of privacy as legal protection against data dislocation shows obvious limitations. In practice, certain moral limits around individuals and spheres of life keep social life from being submitted to a singular economic logic.

## PRIVACY IN BETWEEN PANOPTICONS

This is the point at which a second, moral meaning of privacy comes into the picture. As social theorists such as Michael Walzer (1984), Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and Niklas Luhmann (1997) suggest, modern society does not abide by one encompassing social logic but is, instead, differentiated into autonomous value spheres, fields or functional systems of politics, economy, science, and so on. Foucault also acknowledges this in his own way: in practice, the panopticon is only the most ideal expression of a figure that spreads and mutates throughout the institutional landscape, transfiguring medicine,

manufacturing, schools, the military, and so on. Taking this multiplicity into account, none of these functional domains lays claim to the whole person – or, at least, is not supposed to from a liberal standpoint, as opposed to some radical utilitarians. From this perspective, privacy comes to denote not just an asset to be traded or compensated for but a constitutional limitation of functional systems (see Baghai 2012). Privacy, characteristically absent in the “total institution”, demands that public institutions leave personal aspects alone that are not functionally pertinent (e.g. sexual orientation at the job, telephone taps in prison, but also indiscriminate data harvesting by the NSA). It sets limits on what constitutes legitimate objects of interest for “panoptic” institutions and its infringement becomes a matter of undue objectification (“[E]” in Figure 8.2b).

The distinction of public/private thus simultaneously limits and guarantees a space of (negative) freedom in between “all-seeing” institutions. As such, it is vital for the typically modern, liberal differentiation of functional systems. In this light, Deleuze’s (1992) famous vision of the coming “control societies”, in which this differentiation of “enclosures” is substituted by an “open environment of universal modulation”, seems a bit overstated and paranoid. From a perspective similar to Luhmann, Walzer (1984: 329) already says the same of Foucault’s “disciplinary society”. However, as Walzer also notes, functional systems and their codes of money, power, truth, and so on can certainly become rather totalitarian and colonize each other and our lifeworlds. Privacy infringement in the form of undue objectification (or “reification”) may therefore also take more general forms of behaviourism, economism (commodification) and technocracy. Indeed, one historically prominent account generally defines privacy as the protection of “human dignity”. Edward Bloustein (1964: 188), from the standpoint of what may be called a moral or expressive individualism (as opposed to utilitarian individualism: see Cortois & Laermans 2018), claims privacy as individual dignity against the dehumanizing and normalizing pressures of modern mass society.

However, at this point it should be noted that not all humans are objectified, instrumentalized and alienated equally or with equal effects. It is more

Metrics		Data (dis)location [F]
Interpretations		(Undue) objectification [E]
Practices	Singularity, play (displaced) [A]	Expression, exposure [B] Measurement, administration [D]

**Figure 8.2b** The counter-actualization figure applied to matters of surveillance and privacy; step 2: privacy violation as interpretations of undue objectification [E]

often women, black people and the poor who are objects of surveillance (Gilliom 2001; Browne 2015). Beyond their control, classifications and interventions acting on those classifications impose and expose rather particular and reductive identities on groups and their individual members. Hierarchy is thus expressed both instrumentally, as being observed and controlled more than others, and discursively, by being classified as different and deviant.

## PRIVACY AS BOUNDARY REGULATION AND STRUGGLE

As the public/private distinction is further specified not just according to functional spheres but to classes and groups, this is the point at which privacy as undue objectification intersects with a third dimension of privacy: power over self-expression and the events of indignation that disrupt it (“[C]” in Figure 8.2c). Currently, this third meaning of privacy is understood primarily through theories of boundary regulation, management and struggle. However, to properly understand this dimension of privacy in its interpretive specificity, these theories need refinement through systems theory and psycho-analytic concepts.

From the above sociological theories of functional differentiation and integrity, it is only a small step towards a more general and less structured notion of privacy in terms of “contextual integrity”, as advanced by Helen Nissenbaum (2004, 2010). Inspired by Walzer and Bourdieu, she generalizes the idea of norms regimenting the flow of information between contexts of meaning, such as friendship, classroom education or banking. Privacy is maintained or violated when context-specific informational norms of appropriateness and distribution are upheld or transgressed. While allowing some change of norms, for “adequate reasons” based on “fundamental values”, the definition explicitly favours the status quo distribution of information (Nissenbaum 2004: 145). However, Nissenbaum’s brand of contextualism can also be discovered in another prominent strain of privacy theory and research. Although also inspired by (and critical of) Westin and his behaviourist sources, environmental psychologist Irwin Altman (1975) develops a

Metrics		Data (dis)location [F]
Interpretations		(Undue) objectification [E]
Practices	Singularity, play (displaced) [A]	Expression, exposure [B]
		Measurement, administration [D]

**Figure 8.2c** The counter-actualization figure applied to matters of surveillance and privacy; step 3: privacy violation as interpretations of unwanted disclosure [C]



more dynamic view of privacy (in the sense of providing a form of selective control of access to the self or to other social groups), in terms of a “dialectic” and “optimized” boundary process by which a person or group regulates interaction with others. The latter process he understands through the work of Georg Simmel instead of Georg Hegel or Karl Marx, in a rather formal, microsocial and non-teleological way. As a result, his concept of privacy takes on a rather spatialized form, as personal space and territory, and with “crowding” as the main figure of its failure – that is, a boundary regulation largely devoid of institutional structure and historical politics.

Not surprisingly, Altman’s prime heir, Sandra Petronio (2002), only reinforces this way of thinking in her much-discussed communication privacy management theory, which abstracts from Altman to encompass modern electronic communication. Here, privacy is presented as “boundary management”, whereby actors communicate personal information according to “access rules” based on a (categorically muddled) set of cultural, gender, motivational, contextual and risk-benefit criteria. In Petronio’s basic supposition, all information is believed to be owned, co-owned and bounded by individuals and groups and all dynamics are departures from (“turbulence”) and corrections back to (“synchrony”, “balancing” of) the initial proprietary grid. In other words, a supposed emphasis on process, dialectics and turbulence is ultimately subjected to a rather homeostatic spatial imaginary implied by the ownership model. As such, it comes very close to the economic approach to privacy described above, especially the modern, more context-sensitive version (Acquisti *et al.* 2016: 484). More importantly, as with Altman, Petronio’s scope never extends to the (macro) historical or political, in spite of a purported dialectical holism (observing “totality”: Petronio 2002: 18), and societal-level boundary struggles are misrepresented as simple extrapolations from dyadic exchanges (Petronio 2002: 127).

In contrast to these rather formal and spatialized models of integrity, regulation and management, other critics have emphasized structural power hierarchies and world-historical *struggles* underlying public/private boundaries. Turbulence is not an aberration from a spatial grid but an ontological, historical and political ground for boundaries-to-be-managed (cf. turbulence in the hands of Ilya Prigogine). For instance, feminist Marxist Catharine MacKinnon (1991) sees privacy (law) as a protection of domestic patriarchy from public intervention. As men are by law “left alone” in their domestic privacy, women are imprisoned by intimacy, subordinated and isolated from public recourse. A similar but postcolonial critique by Lisa Lowe (2015) traces how political economic “intimacies” between continents, marked by histories of colonial violence and racism, are foundational to theories of subjective interiority and privacy rights primarily by and for Western bourgeois men. From these critical positions, seemingly descriptive and formal accounts of



personal territory, boundary regulation and contextual integrity only naturalize and universalize what are actually historically contingent constructions with highly uneven content. They contribute only to the already rather invisible performativity of privacy ideology. As Susan Gal (2002) notes from a feminist semiotic perspective, the private/public distinction tends to hide itself in daily discourse by its indexical (“here, there, this, that ... is private”) and fractal nature (e.g. the house is private, yet within it the bedroom is again more private than the living room). But throughout its seemingly descriptive spatializations and fractalizations, which bifurcate privacy into so many “contexts”, its core ideological dichotomy and struggle are still reproduced throughout and all the more effectively.

However, as other gender and sexuality scholars have also noticed (e.g. Koskela 2018), viewing privacy (ideology) as primarily a discourse of oppressive dominance ignores many of the pleasures and transgressions inherent to its dialectics, both empirically and ethically. Therefore, defined simultaneously by power over self-expression and ideological struggle, privacy is best approached by a combination of systems theory, capturing the most formal aspects of the temporality of privacy beyond a spatial-economic imaginary (as still dominant in boundary regulation theories), and psycho-analysis, to understand its specific ideological content and workings beyond simple violence and domination.

From a systems perspective, viewing human communication as a radically temporalized system of meaning-making (Luhmann 1997) helps us grasp the distinct temporality of privacy protection and violation. The latter become not so much a matter of principally reversible displacements of lumps of matter, packets of information or property as a series of irreversible events of distinction. Whereas the violation of private possessions can be “reversed” by simply returning the property or through financial recompense, unwanted exposure is not as amenable to such rectification (cf. Bloustein 1964). Although both could result simultaneously from one and the same property infringement or data leak, the economic damage incurred from such a dislocation can be taken as relatively independent from the symbolic violence experienced from an event of exposure. Once observed as a naked body, cheater, homosexual or racist, especially when considered truthful, it can be next to impossible to undo it (depending on the severity of transgression, the intersectional positioning of the target and the memory capacity of the communication medium used).

If not entirely successful, it is this “normative” conception of privacy as concerning individuals that the foundational article by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis (1890) tries to disentangle from the “descriptive” property aspect discussed above (Post 1991). In the words of Robert Post’s rereading of the article, privacy and its infringement have less to do with “objectively

measurable ... physical space of secrecy, solitude, or anonymity” and more with “a rupture [of] socialized expectations of respect” (Post 1991: 652–3). In terms of the previous sections, the privacy of a person or group does not have to be understood through objectification and commodification but can be conceived in terms of unalienable rights and injuries “temporally bound to the life of a particular person [or group]” (Post 1991: 668) – that is, a biographical series of distinctions. However, in a general, more-than-institutional and more-than-legal sense (following Nissenbaum), privacy concerns are revealed as rooted in daily “biographical” contexts, in the street or workplace, among friends and family and on social media, personalizing situations that are just as infused by power relations as the institutional context. In fact, the reason why interpersonal revelations may be unwanted can be understood only with substantial reference to existing social hierarchies (“symbolic order”), expectations of respect and reputation (“symbolic capital”) and affects of shame and guilt.

It should be noted that the unwanted exposure of persons as subaltern and vulnerable, known as privacy violation, is more specific than a mere event of slander. An element of *self-recognition* must be involved. And, in this regard, psychoanalytic perspectives intersect with systems theory, both demonstrating how the self can know itself only through others, but the former anchoring this process in more substantial structures of feeling and ideological fantasies. The unduly realized difference of status (expectations) must be underwritten as real (or “the Real”) by the subaltern. In other words, although it is not a simple matter of voluntary choice and responsibility, the symbolic violence of privacy infringement is partly self-inflicted, since what is unwantedly revealed is a self-recognition (or, rather, self-/other recognition). The irreversibility of an embarrassing event comes from a shared acceptance of the disappointment of earlier self-/other expectations, rather than a clinging to them unchanged. As a result, privacy becomes a word for successful expectation management, if that signifies a more temporal meaning than boundary management. By losing power over self-/other expectations, including possible disappointments, and not necessarily only by the subaltern party, unwanted selections are made and the horizon of possibilities for self-identification is reduced. Most often it is supported and catalysed by intense affects of shame, also vicariously.

From an interpretive perspective, then, privacy describes the absence of unwanted disclosures, understood as (auto)biographic events of disappointment in the face of a symbolic order or an ideological “big Other” (i.e. expected expectations: what one expects others to expect). However, it is important to analytically distinguish such events as much as possible from deliberately staged plays of disclosure and symbolic rupture, which our current libidinal and moral economy seem to encourage. Indeed, disclosures can

in many ways be instrumentalized for therapeutic, economic or political ends, which suggests quite the opposite of a loss of control over self-expression. In a therapeutic context, carefully guided disclosures can, through reflection and (self-)forgiveness, counter the irreversibility of traumatic events of exposure, shame and exclusion. A temporary loss of control may even become the opportunity for personal growth. At the same time, such therapeutic disclosures have also entered the public sphere. Within a romantic “confession culture” that cultivates and rewards social rituals of authentic disclosure and redemption through public diaries, reality television or social media, exhibitions of the supposedly private and their voyeuristic enjoyment are in many ways encouraged (Koskela 2018). What in this ambiguous context constitutes transgression of the bad kind (actual loss of control, breach of privacy) requires careful ethical evaluation in terms of the practices of veillance described below.

PRIVACY IN PRACTICE: VEILLANCE MULTIPLE

As we move from the integrated panoptic imaginary to its functional, communitarian and transactional fragmentations, the question arises as to the *practices* that actually differentiate these contradictory discursive formations of privacy. What, in other words, are the pragmatic conditions for these forms of privacy and how do they relate to and contrast with each other? Here we arrive at the last step of the counter-actualization approach, when we move beyond both universalism and contextual relativism and ground both metrics and contexts into contrasting practices (“[B]” to “[D]” in Figure 8.2d) in order to rediscover a fourth form of privacy centred on our capacity for play and free human flourishing (“[A]” in Figure 8.2d).

From a practice-theoretical perspective, total utilitarian surveillance becomes highly improbable (even in twenty-first-century China; see Chin &

Metrics			Data (dis)location [F]				
Interpretations			(Unwanted) disclosure [C]	(Undue) objectification [E]			
Practices	Singularity, play (displaced) [A]	Expression, exposure [B]		Measurement, administration [D]			
Topology of veillance	Sousveillance	-	Coveillance	-	Soveillance	-	Surveillance

**Figure 8.2d** The counter-actualization figure applied to matters of surveillance and privacy; step 4: privacy as different according to practices of sur-, soi-, co- and sousveillance, revealing a fourth kind of privacy violation: the displacement singularity and play by surveillance practices [A]

Lin 2022). Indeed, as Bruno Latour and Émilie Hermant (1998) forcefully argue and illustrate, panopticism is the product of a typically Modern megalomania, of thinking one can integrate all knowledge in order to see the whole of society. And its Foucauldian critique is really just its paranoid mirror image, taking this positivist overconfidence a bit too seriously. In practice, knowledge does not integrate much; it mostly differentiates into very specific socio-technical assemblages. In order to function (to govern traffic, disease, sewage, and so on), knowledge practices have to be “oligoptic”, meaning that they see only very little and leave out the rest. As a consequence, there really is no “carceral society” seamlessly compartmentalized into functional subsystems. Instead, the modern metropolis is recognized as the fragmented and rhizomatic bundle of practices it always already was at base. In this regard, we should be careful not to confuse ontology (“rhizome”, “assemblage”) and epochal history (“society of control”, “surveillant assemblage”): society does not *become* a space of rhizomatic control, where before there was total compartmentalization. As we find with Latour and Hermant 1998 (but also, for example, Amin & Thrift 2017), it always was and always will be a rhizome, and the high-modernist compartmentalization studied by Foucault has been only one among many ways of trying to manage parts of it. By the same token, and in spite of all narratives of total information awareness, privacy is configured anew around so many oligoptic practices. What we need, therefore, is a practice theory that gives us the ethical coordinates by which we can understand and evaluate any particular technical assemblage or practice on its own terms, without drowning it in epochal totality.

It is here that the espoused practice approach also shows itself as a radically *relational* approach. Practices, as relational configurations, should be viewed as preceding and producing their “terms” – that is, any identities of subjects and objects and the hierarchies and interiorities within and between them. Preceding these interpretations are practices of assembling, sensing and seeing (“regimes of visibility”, one could say: Deleuze 1988). Counterintuitively, then, the relational practice of surveillance produces its own classes of object, subjective interiorities and kinds of privacy, including the kinds described above. However, at this point we need to make a distinction between topologies other than of surveillance, including practices of social cognition we may call “coveillance”, “soveillance” and “sousveillance”. Generally speaking, the term “veillance” denotes a range of practices that singularize, individuate and measure human relations and affects (Figure 8.2d). These practices are not just visual but multisensory and technological. In human relations, contrary to non-human primate groups, which have to negotiate structure incessantly, regimes of social sensation are made more durable by technological mediation such as clothes, architecture and communication media (Strum & Latour 1987).

Quite fundamentally, then, by enrolling whole networks of non-human allies, veillance in its many multisensory and cognitively distributed forms and practices is what makes society happen.

In what follows, four modes of veillance are distinguished. The prefixes “sur”, “co”, “soi” and “sous” do not describe an ontological hierarchy or equality (the veillances are all distributed and “flat” in this regard) as much as they conveniently name the various knowledge/power regimes that result from specific relational practices. Each of the subsections below explains a mode of veillance in terms of its disciplinary practices, affects and virtues. Each is also shown to give rise to its own kind of privacy concerns. As many aspects of surveillance and coveillance have already been covered, most attention goes out to relations of soiveillance and sousveillance.

### *Surveillance*

Reiterating the movement of counter-actualization but from a practice perspective, we first encounter relations of surveillance. These are indeed most familiar, studied in their countless guises by surveillance studies after Foucault and Deleuze. We can summarize this mode of veillance in terms of its discipline, affects and virtues. The disciplinary and normalizing effects of modern surveillance have already been discussed as issuing from metric and administrative practices ranging from outright violent enforcement to the softest nudging of subjects into docility. The general aim of the utilitarian sciences that inhabit institutional ecologies is to avoid the former and work towards the latter, most “advanced liberal” practices of “governance at a distance” offering mass service and security (Miller & Rose 1990). In terms of affects, above all, this means tapping into people’s inclinations towards habituation (just clicking “Accept all”) if not addiction (gamification), as well as their strong desires for convenience, which might come at the price of feeling alienated as consumers of culture (the subject of much romantic criticism). Similarly, as we learn from Marx, factory and office discipline comes with a boost in productivity but also a multiply alienated labour force. Mentioned as well is the way these joyful and sad affects are unevenly distributed along class, gender and racial lines. That said, we should not forget the progressive virtues of modern utilitarian economy and governmentality. Repressive of abnormality and ecologically blind though they might have shown themselves, they have also inspired some genuine movements of human emancipation and a promise of rational order by universal welfare programmes (e.g. the American New Deal). This includes the familiar civil and legal appeals to privacy in its “negative” and proprietary forms, as to rights to be “let alone” and to protect one’s data.

### *Coveillance*

Coveillance we may conceive as oriented towards the construction of groups, expression of reputations and exposure of identities. Through practices of hanging out and helping out, but also bullying and scolding, coveillance imputes emotions of belonging and shame. As such, it is the practical condition for the above-mentioned normative privacy. Baboons, we could say, practise coveillance in its most naked form, constantly watching and assessing one another, with not much to go on besides the most recent bodily behaviour. What perhaps most closely resembles this regime is the coveillance among children and teenagers especially. As largely bereft of the economic capital, embodied or objectified cultural capital and “weakly linked” social capital that mark class relations between adults participating in fields of competence (“functional systems”), they have little more to make themselves stand out among their peers than their reputation (“symbolic capital”; see Balleys & Coll 2017). As practices of coveillance are about the distributed enactment of recognition and reputation, privacy features as the capacity to influence this expression of self within the relatively naked (“personal”) symbolic order. This includes interpersonal control and the discipline of literal nudity, in bathrooms or intimate (online) interaction, but mostly concerns the expression and outing of a “true” self among significant others and the imagined big Other, at school, in the workplace, on Facebook or – when famous, such as a K-pop artist – mass media. In all cases, it is about what persons themselves also recognize they *are* with regard to gender, sexuality, class, race and, on a meta level, authenticity, as opposed to how well they function in spheres of competence and what they do or did not do and might feel guilty about. Coveillance thus reinforces interpersonal social hierarchies through practices of intense shaming, but also affords expressive privacy through careful rituals of outing, solidarity and belonging.

### *Soveillance*

If coveillance draws out a contrast with surveillance, what we might call soveillance can be situated between the two. As much “social” practice as any, the reflexive subject, mentioned above in relation to psychoanalysis, is embodied by practices of self-watching or broader “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1997). As a practice and not a metaphysical individuality, modern selfhood emerges at the intersection of surveillance and coveillance (seen as socio-technically distributed practices). Just as society is a product of surveillance technology, the modern self is a product of soveillance. As the interface of normalization and recognition, the self takes shape at the juncture where

many utilities and expressions overlap, blur and interfere with each other in practice (emotions instrumentalized; personal assets fetishized). And this we find reflected in the disciplines by which the production of modern selves or self-care is enacted. At one end of the spectrum there are the hyper-rationalized self-disciplinary practices we today refer to by the name of the “quantified self”. The latter attaches the body to an assemblage of sensors via smartphones, watches, vehicles, refrigerators and software apps such as Fitbit or Sleep Cycle, which monitor heart rates, calories, brain waves and many other life metrics. As a practice of self-surveillance, the quantified self thus monitors, normalizes and optimizes all its most daily activities, from walking and exercising to eating, sleeping and even meditating and praying (which of course brings up discussions of authenticity and alienation around such activities). However, at the other end there are practices of deep, hermeneutic introspection, whether through private diaries, meditation retreats or psycho-therapeutic sessions.

Both these utilitarian and expressive practices of *soveillance* have their intertwined roots in early modernity. Of course, the personal diary and psychotherapy certainly have their precedents in the ancient past, such as the confessional practices of Saint Augustine or the Catholic Church. However, it was only with the invention of the printing press and the Reformation that reading and writing became the silent and individual practice of introspection that characterizes the expressive side of modern *soveillance* (De Palma 2019: 86). At first the creatively written autobiography found in modern diaries evolved out of a haphazard intertextual mix of practices, including spiritual bookkeeping by puritan families but also personal embellishments of “utilitarian documents” such as financial records (Walsham 2016). In this tradition, we might also place Benjamin Franklin, the American governor and personification of Max Weber’s accumulative “spirit of capitalism”. Meticulously counting his daily scores on 13 virtues (temperance, frugality, sincerity, etc.), he was perhaps the first quantified self. In contemporary spirit, the inventor of the panopticon, Jeremy Bentham, suggested measuring individual utility by heart rates.

In terms of affects, modern power assemblages such as the panopticon do not replace but, rather, transform identity-oriented shame into an action-oriented and consequentialist “calculus of guilt” (cf. Wüschner 2017). Moving into the utilitarian direction, guilt transforms shame by calculative practices, first through debt (Graeber 2011), later through many other panoptic arrangements (Foucault 1977). Excessive, violent and repressive events of shaming (*coveillance*) are quantified, proportioned, rationed and transfigured into a more constant and productive pressure to normalize and optimize (surveillance). Along the way, self-optimizing humans experience self-esteem, but also guilt when deviating from the norm, seeming to “lack autonomy” and



“burdening” society. Many desires for privacy seem to arise from this latter feeling, as the release of medical information, social assistance or high salaries may reveal people as an unnecessary cost to society. Thus, as also suggested above, *soveillance* can transform shame into guilt through therapeutic and technological rationalizations. Its technologies offer ways to proactively “self-include”, as opposed to self-negate (in shame), yet at the price of feeling guilty (“never doing enough”) and, of course, in the face of highly uneven and intersectional structures of classification ossified in the institutional ecology of surveillance practices. However, moving from *coveillance* (self-)shaming into the direction of *surveillance* (self-)guilting is not the only option here. Indeed, there is another more transgressive vector, which either enjoys to play with privacy through exhibitionism and voyeurism (staying firmly within its symbolic order) or upsets it altogether by creative subversions. The latter we may term practices of *sousveillance*.

### *Sousveillance*

The word “*sousveillance*” describes a seeing “from below” (*sous*) that Canadian inventor Steve Mann first explained as an “inverse surveillance”, whereby the surveilled gaze back and collect data about their surveillers using wearable devices (Mann, Nolan & Wellman 2003). However, considering the ontological premises above, we have to be careful not to make the meaning of *sousveillance* be a simple reversal of existing surveillance relations. It should be noted that the original panopticon was always meant to “invert” or, rather, generalize the gaze, so that any member of the public could occupy the place of the sovereign gaze (Foucault 1977: 207). Likewise, a “synoptic” inversion of the panoptic gaze, in which the one-to-many gaze is simply mirrored by a mass-mediatised many-to-one visibility of the powerful. The so-called “synopticon” (Mathiesen 1997) is, at best, a hybrid of *coveillance* and surveillance, on the one hand, subjecting the rich and famous to a risky economy of notoriety and authenticity, while, on the other hand, being just another panoptic apparatus collecting viewership ratings and seducing consumers with ads. Proper *sousveillance* should mean a line of escape from the other regimes, if only momentary, and a joyous prehension of “unity in multitude” by a multiplicity of singularities (cf. Hardt & Negri 2009).

Another way of expressing this is to say that *sousveillance* is at once a practice of freedom and of love, which points to the need for a fourth kind of privacy (“[A]” in Figure 8.2d), one that secures “breathing space” and a “capacity for play and free human flourishing” against its displacement by surveillance (Cohen 2012). As a “freedom practice”, *sousveillance* goes against the most totalitarian colonizations of everyday life, be they overtly



violent or smoothly manipulative. Here, privacy chimes with discussions of human autonomy and the closing off of potential serendipity. Think of the “playful trickery” crafted by black slaves within the US plantation system, finding ways of sabotaging its slave patrols and escaping its extensive administration and control by masking their race, status and gender (Browne 2015). *Sousveillance* is necessarily a creative practice, since any kind of routine behaviour will soon be incorporated into the surveillance regime, which is geared to detect and adapt to such regularities. In the present we can find this creativity in technologically savvy cop-watching practices such as the German “Cop Map”. Framing the racialized surveillance of police as itself a threat to justice, it allows users to report its presence on a live map (Harju 2020). Not just an outrageous inversion but a subversion of policing practice, it advances marginalized matters of concern through inventive technological and discursive intervention. In this regard, Steve Mann’s lifelong tinkering and provoking with wearable cameras is an absolutely pioneering freedom practice. But *sousveillance* may also hack us out of the softer totalitarianism we find in the many “smart” environments that are creeping into our daily lives. Tactics of obfuscation (e.g. VPN apps hiding IP addresses) and trickery (e.g. adversarial AI producing deceptive data to fool other learning machines) also resist the algorithmic automations that nudge us into predictable behaviour and try to “gamify” all forms of play.

However, we could say that these tactical retaliations are only a precondition for practising love, in the precise sense that it creates space for the flourishing of singularity and the care for unity in multitude (cf. Hardt & Negri 2009). Love, which has been cleverly defined by Luhmann (1997) as Ego taking Alters experience as a motive for action (as opposed to economic *laissez-faire* or political “conduct of conduct”), we could redefine in practice-theoretical terms as making singularity – isolated, identified and classified by the other veillances as quirky, embarrassing and dysfunctional – the object of our care and playful practice. In relations of romance, family and friendship, but also larger events of commoning and festival, the anarchic practice of love puts our identities and relations to the test, whether by demanding presence with the other’s most singular and puzzling sorrows or by daringly joking about our myriad differences and inner contradictions. As the opposite of the convenience/pressure of normality under surveillance, the sense of belonging/exclusion under *coveillance* and the self-esteem/guilt by *soiveillance*, *sousveillance* will be as inconvenient as love can be, but always in a joyful – that is, capacity-enhancing – way. It is a practice of slowness, and requires hesitation, sustained attention, presence in discomfort, suspension of judgement. It brings forth a no less relational and mediated but more spiritual proximity that is anathema to the techno-managerial distancing of surveillance.

## CONCLUSION: VEILLANCE MULTIPLE, PRIVACY MULTIPLIED

The picture of privacy that emerges as we counter-actualize it is (more than) one that is grounded in (less than) many different veillance practices. It remains a multiplicity, but we now understand its pragmatic dimensions, such that its many meanings come to stand in ontological relation to each other. What I have shown is that a systematic tying together of the many concepts and discussions of privacy, rooted in seemingly incompatible discourses (rationalistic, interpretive, pragmatic), requires a method of counter-actualization, following and keeping intact a thread from the panoptic world of data and optimization to the dialectics of moral and political boundaries and to the veillance practices from which those metrics and interpretations emerge. In particular, this last, eminently practice-theoretical step is an antidote to the wanton megalomania of techno-managerial “smart city” positivists, though also to the suffocating paranoia of its critics (cf. Latour & Hermant 1998). Panopticism becomes grounded in a pragmatic “oligopticism”, studying not epochal social totalities (“control society”) but a multiplicity of very restricted socio-technical assemblages, all of which actualize their own variations of veillance and degrees of freedom. An array of virtual intensities, effects and competences, approached through counter-actualization, thus becomes the primary object of a radically relational practice theory. In this regard, we could think of the different distributions of veillance to always be in a relation of superposition. Their basic reality as expressed in the above figures, more basic than their resultant positions of power and property (i.e. interpretations of *the* powerful watching over *the* powerless, or vice versa), is a fundamentally uncertain and performative one that may be directed one way or the other but can always be actualized in creative ways not predetermined (see Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, Chapter 5 in this volume). And this is where a practice theory of privacy and surveillance may intervene, as an intellectual and ethico-political tool to make us not oversee objects of manipulation but find the situated means of producing a maximum of collective utility, dignity, self-knowledge, freedom and love.

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## CHAPTER 9

# PRAXEOLOGICAL FIELD RESEARCH: ANALYSING THE CO-PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL PHENOMENA AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

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### INTRODUCTION: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH WORK BETWEEN REALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

For human geographers, empirical research plays a fundamental role. When researchers go out into the field, they often realize, as we have experienced in our own fieldwork, that the research subjects (i.e. interview participants, informants, etc.) take certain things as given facts, which, in academic discourses, are identified as socially constructed and contingent. In interviews, for instance, interviewees refer to various phenomena that they identify as components of (their) reality. Ultimately, their perspectives also influence their actions and, accordingly, shape social relations – relations that researchers aim to analyse. From a praxeological perspective, therefore, researchers recognize a cycle of construction, corresponding actions and reproduction of relations.

However, with this realization, researchers encounter a dilemma. They have to accept the assumptions of their subjects of research in one way or another, not only because empirical interest demands that different perspectives are heard, or even reflected upon, but also because researchers have to describe their field of investigation and research subjects. Consequently, they need to restrain from immediately questioning the existence of a reported phenomenon. However, researchers also need to be aware that social facts are not given as reported by research subjects but socially constructed. If they explain the construction of a particular phenomenon by merely describing its reproduction, they are reifying the phenomenon. This would mean that researchers tacitly accept the status of certain social phenomena as existing facts.

This dilemma can be seen in research that engages with “the market” – an issue that is often taken for granted despite extensive criticism. Critical science rejects the neoclassical assumption of an abstract, independent and equalizing market (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Massey 2013). Nevertheless, in general, the market is still assumed as a given fact, not least in academic reflections themselves (Berndt & Boeckler 2009). However, approaches in discourse and performative research show that concepts have an impact on practices and processes, and thus in turn shape social phenomena such as the market (MacKenzie, Muniesa & Siu 2007; Cohen 2017; Aspers 2007; Ouma & Bläser 2015). When researchers look at how a particular state of affairs is constructed through the performances of participants, they ultimately adopt a social-constructivist perspective. The focus is on the production of a state of affairs, but this state of affairs nevertheless remains a “*matter of fact*”. Researchers can describe this state of affairs reconstructively – that is, in its social production – but it is inevitably reified in their description (Desmond 2014).

Our experiences as researchers “in the field” have shown us that research subjects have their own individual attitudes to conventionalized ideas of a subject matter that concerns them. Ultimately, then, researchers face the dilemma of choosing between a view of the social construction of a phenomenon and a view of the reality of its existence. Empirical researchers can subsequently alternate between a constructivist and a realist view, but this is accompanied by considerable methodological difficulties and problems when formulating results.

Praxeological approaches claim to address such dichotomies. In the following, we seek to examine whether they offer a solution to the problem described above. With the concept of practice, the dualism of individual activity and social structure can be overcome by identifying “supra-individual ... ‘patterns’ in the ongoing activity of individuals” (Geiselhart, Winkler & Dünckmann 2019: 27, own translation), which individuals carry out more or less automatically. How these patterns are understood is of great importance. Are they ontologized (i.e. seen as the smallest identifiable units of the social that exist as very specific patterns) or can they be regarded a framing of diverse activities? In the first case, they exist prior to the subjects, who merely perform them, and changes in practices occur only by chance through iteration. In the second case, practices allow subjects some leeway, within which they can act individually to a certain extent or even have some *agency*. This tension becomes even clearer turning to larger social contexts. With his concept of “large social phenomena”, Theodore Schatzki (2016a) represents a practice-ontological perspective. He specifically addresses the challenge of praxeological research to conceptualize larger contexts of human activity. However, as we demonstrate later, Schatzki’s concept – which is becoming

increasingly influential in human geography research (Schäfer & Everts 2019) – has some limitations.

Schatzki defines large social phenomena as “spatially extensive, consisting in a far-flung constellation of practices or arrangements” (Schatzki 2016a: 6). In this vein, he attempts to understand social phenomena (e.g. markets) as a complex interaction of various patterns of activity and material arrangements. Schatzki’s concept thus constitutes an ontologizing description of the essence of a state of affairs and remains blind to the effectiveness of the identification of social states of affairs or phenomena. Accordingly, the notion of “large social phenomena” continues to be trapped in the methodological contradiction between realism and constructivism.

Building on this critique, we argue in the following that phenomena are both constructed and real at the same time: they are constructed in their essence and real in their effects. With reference to Bruno Latour’s distinction between “matters of fact” and “matters of concern” (Latour 2004), we provide an alternative analytical perspective for empirical, praxeological research in supra-individual matters. On this basis, we develop an explorative terminology that aims to facilitate practice-oriented field research. This chapter is structured as follows. We start by briefly outlining theoretical approaches to social practices. Then we critically discuss Schatzki’s concept of large social phenomena and relate it to the phenomenon of the market. We show how Schatzki’s concept contains a danger of reification. In the third section, we outline methodological considerations on how an alternative approach to the consideration of supra-individual facts can succeed using the analytical categories of range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability. We develop these categories along empirical examples from alternative economic projects that attempt to escape market production and distribution relations, thus making the borders of “markets” visible. The anonymized examples are taken from a research project whose methodology is oriented towards practice theory (Schmid 2020). Our examples serve to illustrate the methodological considerations of this chapter. To conclude, we collect various considerations for future empirical studies and theoretical options to follow up on.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Theoretical background of social practices*

Over the last 20 years, praxeological perspectives have experienced a spike in interest, initially identified by Theodore Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike von Savigny in 2001 as a “practice turn”. However, the notion of a “turn”



obscures the fact that, even in preceding decades, praxeological theorizing was very prominent and influential, and was associated in particular with names such as Pierre Bourdieu, Hubert Dreyfus, Anthony Giddens, Bruno Latour, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Charles Taylor and Theodore Schatzki (for an overview, see Geiselhart, Winkler & Dünckmann 2019). A key tenet of praxeological perspectives is that they do not presuppose structures and actors – classical points of reference of various social theories – as the origin of sociality but as social forms that themselves need to be explained. Praxeological perspectives, in other words, do not determine in advance “from which structural properties or intentions of action sociality emerges” (Hillebrandt 2014: 11, own translation). Instead, they assume that social phenomena such as markets or the state are themselves products of ongoing human activity (socially constructed), while at the same time also affecting these activities (real in their effects).

Practice theories thus, on the one hand, aim to offer an alternative to the ontological primacy of a social totality, as for example in systems theory or functionalism, and, on the other hand, do not grant the individual a social-ontological primacy, as in neoclassical economics, methodological individualism (Werlen 1999: 33) or symbolic interactionism (Schatzki 1996: 9). Practice-theoretical approaches pursue a fundamentally processual understanding of reality. Social phenomena are understood in their historical conditionality and genesis, and thus as contingent yet at the same time material processes. The aim of our praxeological view is therefore not to reify practices – that is, to establish them ontologically as entities. Epistemologically speaking, praxeological approaches can thus be understood as an attempt to overcome the opposition between constructivist and essentialist positions. Instead, they propose a concept of practices with which the fundamentally processual character of social reality can be grasped.

### *Schatzki's practice ontology*

An important name in recent praxeological theory formation is Theodore Schatzki. He has developed a specific way of thinking that can be described as an *ontological* practice approach. Schatzki (1996, 2003, 2010) understands practices as a bundle of activities: “doings and sayings” through “practical understandings”, “rules”, “teleo-affective structures” and “general understandings”. For Schatzki, practices are the central aspect of social life. In their interconnectedness, they constitute the field of the social (Schatzki 1996: 198ff.). A strong point of Schatzki's theory is the fact that it breaks down the social into terms that can be easily operationalized. Whereas some praxeological approaches tend to analyse practices in terms of their effects and impacts (e.g.

disciplining of the self in approaches inspired by Michel Foucault), Schatzki sees “social practices” as the smallest unit of the social. What is expedient about Schatzki’s approach is that he makes social practices manageable as empirical categories of analysis, and also offers a perspective on their integration into larger arrangements.

In his more recent work, Schatzki addresses the question of how his theory can be used to think about larger contexts of the social, developing the concept of large social phenomena (Schatzki 2016a, 2016b). According to Schatzki, this was a reaction to the criticism that his theory of practice can be applied only to micro-phenomena. “Some theorists say that practice theory applies best – or even only – to small social phenomena” (Schatzki 2001: 4). According to him, a concept of what large social phenomena is in general is missing. Schatzki develops such a concept:

Social phenomena differ in the continuity, density, and spatial-temporal form of the practices, arrangements, bundles, and relations among practices, arrangements, and bundles that compose them. Two important features of this plenum, and thus of social phenomena, are density and size (others are duration, shape, and qualitative complexity). [...] Size, meanwhile, is the small-large spectrum of spatial extension. A “large” social phenomenon is one that is spatially extensive, consisting in a far-flung constellation of practices or arrangements. (Schatzki 2001: 6)

This description altogether reifies social phenomena and implicitly calls for them to be empirically assessed in terms of these properties (density, size, form and complexity). Large social phenomena are thus explicitly measured according to their size, which is understood quite materially as spatial extent, just as density is understood as the degree of penetration of the Euclidean space. Thus, for us it seems that this definition aims to establish social phenomena as entities in praxeological thinking.

### *A critique of Schatzki’s concept of large social phenomena*

The fact that Schatzki regards his thinking as a fundamentally ontological endeavour may seem strange against the backdrop of relativism in the context of the cultural turn. But in fact, as already mentioned, his nominalism is beneficial in proposing categories that can be useful for orientation in empirical research. In the following we argue that this ontological endeavour of Schatzki’s loses its strength when he turns to “larger” contexts of the social with the concept of large social phenomena.

First, it is questionable whether a specific praxeological concept of large social phenomena is needed at all. In our opinion, praxeological approaches are certainly capable of assessing significant things or “big issues”, such as Giddens with the concept of resource availability, Bourdieu with lifestyles or Foucault with practices of self-discipline; these authors describe significant phenomena that exert a strong social influence beyond the individual. However, Schatzki attempts an ontology of large social phenomena. In our opinion, this also implies the search for such phenomena. Empirical research then runs the risk of obscuring practices (that is, selling) and describing phenomena from which they are thought of as resulting from instead (for example, the market). This is particularly problematic when the resulting phenomena (markets) are detached from their performative production and reified as social fact (the market). A praxeological analysis would have to ask instead whether conventions of practices in local contexts are so encompassing and powerful as to prevent individuals from discovering niches and employing individual forms of activity.

Schatzki (2016a), on the other hand, calls for starting from large social phenomena and explaining them causally. According to him, “the complexity of the action chain nexuses involved requires the provision of overviews” (Schatzki 2016a: 22). Even if Schatzki does not think of a strict form of causality of compelling exclusive effects but understands causality only as an influence of some kind, this is reminiscent of rationalist or intellectualist efforts to depict and explain society.

In summary, what remains is a terminology that, starting from large social phenomena, seeks to fathom their change by means of a series of conceptualizations. However, this corresponds to what Schatzki himself criticizes as scalar thinking. The analysis should not be based on predefined hierarchically ordered spheres, from micro to macro or local to global, each having specific characteristics (Martson *et al.* 2005). Accordingly, a “flat ontology” – one that does not assume different “layers” of reality – is needed to break through the effects of naturalizing such scale ontologies, such as the view that discourses on “global” matters disempower individuals as subjects of action (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Schatzki views social phenomena as entities. His terminology is of a self-contained nature and suggests a certain stability that emerges and eventually fades away despite constant change. This stands in contrast to the empirically ascertainable simultaneousness, contradictory nature and multiplicity of practice, in which phenomena are always diverse and unspecific in their demarcations and identities. In this sense, we propose approaching empirically emerging phenomena not with a term such as “large social phenomena” but with a question, namely whether they are “big issues”.

## IS IT A “BIG” ISSUE? POSSIBILITIES OF ANALYSING SUPRA-INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Based on a praxeological understanding, the aim is to characterize an empirical phenomenon in its position between structure and action and thus to explore the limits of its conventionalization and institutionalization. To this end, the empirical dilemma of constructivism and realism formulated in the introduction is addressed. For the definition of empirical phenomena, we use Latour’s concept of the “quasi-object” as a guide.

### *Quasi-objects: matters of facts and matters of concern*

According to Latour, practice is characterized by the emergence of hybrids. For the explanation of a phenomenon that is also perceived as satisfactory in the social context, neither the explanation of this phenomenon based solely on the natural sciences (realism) nor the explanation based solely on cultural sciences, which explain this phenomenon as a product of human action (relativism), is sufficient. Although science vehemently strives to separate these perspectives, such hybrids of nature and culture emerge millions of times every day. Latour calls such hybrids “quasi-objects” (Latour 2008: 70). Quasi-objects are real because they have been constructed beforehand. They open up two possibilities of critical understanding regarding the appropriateness of construction. The treatment of quasi-objects is difficult for social scientists because “they too ‘see double’. In the first denunciation, objects count for nothing; they are just there to be used as the white screen on to which society projects its cinema. But in the second, they are so powerful that they shape the human society, while the social construction of the sciences that have produced them remains invisible” (Latour 2008: 53). The concept of quasi-objects refers to the empirical necessity of investigating two effects at the same time: on the one hand, the cognitive antecedence of concepts; and, on the other hand, the experiential facticity of the phenomena denoted by these concepts. Praxeological concepts help to make this double movement empirically tangible.

The double praxeological movement of a realist and a (de)constructivist description can be operationalized empirically as long as no claim to representation is made. The quasi-object that emerges in empirical research should not be treated as a “matter of fact” but as a “matter of concern” (Latour 2004). Accordingly, researchers interrogate a state of affairs to determine whether and to what extent a nameable object of social context constitutes “a big issue” for the subjects of research, and the extent to which they adjust to this object, adapt to it and contribute to its persistence or change. The praxeological

abolition of the subject/object dichotomy requires a consideration of the mutual co-production of research subjects and objects (market and market participants). In empirical research, the researcher is thus confronted with the question of *how* the context under consideration emerges in the current, situational setting.

How do certain ideas about and ways of dealing with the phenomenon in question arise or develop in the field of study? Only when certain communicative obligations for statements about a state of affairs are established do corresponding practices related to that state of affairs make this state intersubjectively recognizable; a *phenomenon* seems to exist. By being given a name, it emerges as a social reality. The repeated successful performance of certain practices by the research subjects finally testifies to the appropriateness and feasibility or viability of the ideas of this state of affairs, whereby these ideas are finally established. However, this creates the illusion that there is a closed, essential object (matter of fact) behind the various ideas surrounding the situation. In particular, the fact that it appears under a certain name causes its reification as an object. However, in general, it is not recognized that each individual concept (and each individual practice related to it) only reduces the object to certain partial aspects and produces it. These partial aspects correspond to the way that the research subjects are influenced by given conditions (concerns).

It is therefore not appropriate for empirical analysis to try to fathom out the essence of objects of social life. That would be reifying the object as a matter of fact. Rather, it makes sense for researchers to develop an idea of the edges, margins or boundaries of (quasi-)objects perceived as socially relevant, as they are fixed by the affectedness of the research subjects (concerns). In the following, we attempt to describe such demarcations as an ascertainment of the range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability of phenomena.

We return to the example of the market to illustrate the development of the proposed concepts. By means of vignettes from fieldwork on initiatives and organizations that try to evade or change market-based practices, we are able to carve out the edges, fringes and boundaries of the (quasi-)object "market". The anonymized examples are taken from a research project with a practice-theoretical orientation in its methodology. The project, which was conducted between 2015 and 2019, explored the role of civil society organizations in transformation processes towards a post-growth economy, drawing on the city of Stuttgart as a case study (Schmid 2020). Twenty-four organizations, ranging from companies and associations to projects without legal form, were studied, all of which pursued an explicitly social or ecological objective, which for some required changing the general economic framework to reach their objectives. The research design was primarily ethnographic, supplemented by interviews. The vignettes given below are to be

read as a summary of the observations made and documented in the context of the field research. Although the issues described in the vignettes are taken directly from the project, the way the observations are formulated and presented is adapted to the purposes of this chapter. Reflecting the purely illustrative character of the examples, a separate methodology section is not included. Details on the research project and its methodology can be found in Schmid (2020).

By no means do we assume an autonomous subject who decides rationally within the depicted situations. However, we see individuals as not fully determined by societal imprinting. The attentive reader will realize that we place emphasis on saying that individual action is to be understood as more than a reaction on perceived influences. We do not describe humans as rationally analysing the world, but as emotionally and practically involved subjects who, in their understanding, try to catch up with the world's dynamics. We see subjects in co-production with societal condition developing attitudes towards the world by which they have a small amount of leeway using their cognitive abilities to form their individual personalities. Accordingly, when we talk of subjects deciding about specific options, it should not be understood as a matter of free will but as the situational power of individuals to make a difference, which they bear thanks to their idiosyncratic life experience (Allen 2008).

### *Range*

Range refers to an area of influence in the sense of the impact and extension of a phenomenon perceived by the research subjects. On the one hand, the researcher can initially think of this in terms of spatial extension and, accordingly, designate the area in which the influence of a phenomenon reaches into the practices of the research subjects. Researched persons thus try to determine the range of a phenomenon affecting their activities (e.g. the market) as precisely as possible in order to then locate themselves either inside or outside the assumed conventions of this phenomenon (price competition). For example, they may choose inside when it seems pertinent (because other providers offer lower prices), outside instead if, for example, competition becomes too powerful, regulations restrict certain activities or certain practices are not considered meaningful within the scope of the phenomenon. In this context, conventions refer to assumptions, doctrines and, in some respects, also “common sense” – that is, what “one” thinks or what is not questioned. In determining the range, those involved (market participants) thus anticipate the limits of the phenomenon and apply practices by way of trial in order to test this construction for its efficacy. If this fixation on range

succeeds on a communicative level, then the phenomenon emerges for the research subjects. As a result, the planned projects are then recognized as either feasible or impossible by the participants.

Accordingly, the participants will shape their adjusted practices partially outside certain conventions, but without rejecting the conventions altogether. This ascertainment of the phenomenon's range opens up a niche for the research subjects that is characteristic of their activities. The discovery of this niche can be experienced as a pleasurable drive and is often retrospectively transfigured as a founding myth, such as in the "myth of the garage" (in feuilletonistic terms, see Schmieder 2014). Driven by the will to solve a problem, a creativity of action can unfold (Joas 1992). The transgression of the range originally taken for granted can become a pioneering experience. It is the creative element of practices – the movement "outside the box" – that can be described in the context of the "active life" (Arendt 1981) as a pleasant or successful experience (Dewey 1980 [1934]).

It is not only the quasi-objects (phenomena) that need to be determined with respect to their range. For a practice (e.g. economic activity) to be successful, its range must also be determined. The limitation or containment by the quasi-object (market) must be captured and measured step by step. This can be found in everyday expressions on the part of the research subjects, such as "Let's start small first" or "Let's agree on a few principles first". The subjects, here, might associate a "ground" and a pragmatic territoriality from which something "emerges". In collaborative activities, the subject wants something to proceed from, to establish an influence and to bring about the most far-reaching consequences possible. However, this can succeed only if restrictive influences are minimized, such as if subjects position themselves as far as possible outside the range of similar, already established practices. An example of this is economic niches.

Range, in this sense, refers to the experience of creation and exploration as something that extends outwards into the world. It is about undergoing setbacks, experimenting and experiencing the joy of practical success. The final joy is the fact that something emerges or succeeds, and the research subjects finally believe they have understood why this is so, consolidating an experience (cf. the "flow" experience: Csikszentmihályi 2004; Dewey 1980 [1934]). It increases the perception of the scope arising within the applied practices and can be felt affectively as satisfying and liberating. This effect of the truth of confirming self-efficacy can be reflected in "communities of practice" in spatial, moral and aesthetic terms as a special or creative atmosphere (for instance, in the sense of an "industrial atmosphere", according to Alfred Marshall; see Ravix 2012).

Experimenting with different practices helps the participants to objectify the boundaries of a phenomenon, which in the case of the range can be spatial, aesthetic/metaphorical or moral/legal. The scope of a phenomenon is



always the occasion for diverse speculations, which can be mastered only metaphorically. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that capitalist market dynamics are often described with the metaphor of the “invisible hand”. The metaphor serves as a quasi-magical element of objectification. The economist Jens Beckert (2016) has pointed out the power of imaginary images and narratives in market activity. From a legal point of view, the scope can be either prohibitive – that is, restricted by prohibitions, taboos, paternalism – or permissive by legalization (proverbially, by the “long arm of the law”) or extended.

Socially, the potential boundlessness of a phenomenon’s range is countered with institutionalized demarcations as enclosures and borders. The fear of a phenomenon spreading unhindered and unnoticed has always been a horror scenario, prototypically embodied in the famous butterfly effect (Lorenz 1995 [1972]), which in principle expresses nothing other than the impossibility of coming to a rational assessment of the scope of phenomena or of one’s own actions. This explains the surprise of the research subjects (“I would never have guessed that it would come to this”) when they are confronted with the unexpected consequences of their actions. In the age of global digitalization the biological metaphor of “virality” (Sampson 2012) inverts precisely this fear into an opportunity for a phenomenon to spread beyond existing conventions, initially almost invisibly, only to suddenly appear on the scene with high popularity.

Subjects often have an astonishingly clear understanding of the possible range of a phenomenon, which is by no means based on previously described attempts to sound out a concrete range (e.g. “market penetration”, “benchmark analysis”). An as-if attitude (Beckert 2016: 10) can then be detected among the research subjects. Beckert (2016: 9) has referred to this as “fictional expectations”. This is relevant to market capitalism in that risks are taken that are not actually calculable. It is not mere risk-taking in the sense of “We’ll see what happens”, but, by means of weighing up and calculation, uncertainties are (supposedly) contained. The predicted range presents itself here as a “bubble”, which can then burst in a critical culmination – that is, in a crisis (on the sociology of bubbles, see Tapia 2004, Goodnight & Green 2010 and Abolafia 2010).

This train of thought can be illustrated by a concrete empirical example from research on alternative economic practices.

*Paul, a social entrepreneur and tinkerer, develops, constructs and sells durable, repairable and, as far as possible, fairly traded lamps. They stand in contrast to the premature obsolescence and the cost externalization of conventional products. A largely functional prototype already exists. Through a social network, he is in*

*contact with Andreas, who is working on the development of self-sufficient houses. Paul sees his own interests reflected in Andreas' project. Inspired by the undertaking, he offers his support and takes over the installation of lamps for the prototype. In the course of this cooperation there are neither contracts nor an exchange of money. Rather, the relations between the participants and projects are characterized by voluntary giving and trust. Although both projects are legally formed as for-profit companies, the practices of cooperation move them (at least partially) outside the range of the "classical" market.*

In this example of socio-ecologically oriented enterprises, exchange relations can be observed that are based not on the exchange of equivalents (practices of bartering) but on voluntary giving, on the intrinsically motivated participation in the project of others and, above all, on trust (practices of giving, helping, cooperation, etc.). In the example given here, the research subjects have learned to position themselves outside the reach of the formal market. Formally, the above example can be analysed as a transition from the exchange of equivalents to voluntary giving. By shifting from practices of exchange to practices of giving, the research subjects evade the legal, moral, rational and material range of the market phenomenon. The protagonists of the example enter relationships with each other without the conditions and supports of legal frameworks and thus move outside the reach of bureaucratic practices (which, in Schatzki's terminology, could be described as part of the "large social phenomena" state). Morally, the research subjects do not address each other as service providers and service users, whereby the latter could repay their "debt" by means of money, but as parts of an undefined community in which support, instead of work, is given (rather than sold) according to need and possibilities (similarly, members of family circles also relate to each other largely outside the reach of practices of exchange of equivalents). The researched subjects also move outside the market rationality of earning money. Instead, the focus is on participation and support of common goals or the simple fact of doing something together. Finally, the protagonists elude the range of the market as a mechanism of resource allocation. Since it would have been difficult to remunerate cooperation financially, it is only by acting outside the practically assumed range of the market phenomenon that cooperation as such becomes possible.

The practices observed take place on the border of the "classical" market and are in constant motion. The quasi-object of the "classical market" also invades the practices of alternative economic organizations. This does not necessarily follow specific patterns but can occur abruptly – for example, when organizations need liquidity in the short term and temporarily

withdraw from exchange relationships that are not, or only to a limited extent, mediated by money. In this case, they tend to focus on more classic market-based forms of exchange. Thus, there is a shift from practices of giving and free cooperation to practices of money-mediated exchange. At the same time, key practices of grassroots organizations, such as repairing, self-making or sharing (of knowledge, artefacts, etc.), extend into spaces that are significantly shaped by practices of market-based production, consumption and exchange. For example, the increasing spread of repair practices – especially in the context of so-called repair cafés and open workshops – is reflected in the shifting, modifying and adaptation of global value chains, such as in the case of the (modularly constructed) Fairphone. Practices of donation also enable conventions of what is assumed to be “classical market formality” to be broken. However, they can also give rise to new phenomena, such as the donation markets of humanitarian aid (Silk 2004).

With the analytical category of range, researchers can thus ask how it happens that research subjects determine and shape the material, discursive and moral boundaries of a phenomenon. Instead of assuming the market as a given and thus reified phenomenon, the view proposed here focuses on how far the practices of money-mediated exchange of equivalents associated with the phenomenon of the market extend into actual empirical contexts. It may also be of interest to follow alternative forms of economic interaction and to examine how far the practices of sharing, giving and helping extend into other social contexts. In this way, the boundaries and margins of quasi-objects become visible as a “matter for concern” without establishing them as a “matter of fact”.

### *Supporting capacity*

Supporting capacity is understood as a perspective on the momentous impact of practices. For the researcher, this raises the questions of what the phenomenon demands of the research subjects for them to utilize its momentum and how far it will take them if they engage with it. What does it mean when someone gets involved in a phenomenon (e.g. taking on a responsible task or a new professional position) and, regarding reciprocity, what does it mean for other people? Such phenomena affect the sphere of morality and ethics and politics.

The supporting capacity of a phenomenon can further be described as its transformative impact. Does the phenomenon bring about change or transformation to those involved? Sometimes it is necessary to “grow into” certain tasks, or personality development is expected in order to take on certain tasks. This involves, for example, leadership tasks or the assumption

of a sworn activity, such as the Hippocratic oath. The scope of phenomena of life and death is shown in practices of assisted birth or euthanasia or in practices of accident prevention. By means of such practices, the transformative power of the supporting capacity becomes particularly clear. This applies similarly to practices of investing venture capital, which may be mitigated by “business angels”, who, by metaphor, are indicated as having metaphysical supporting capacity.

The supporting capacity is also about the practical creation of meaning. Making sense of a phenomenon is practical because it is directed towards a goal and serves as a teleo-affective orientation. For things to be achieved, a thought that carries or an orientation towards a “lighthouse initiative” is necessary. Let us use an analogy as an example: to get to the other shore of a frozen lake in winter without going around it, the density of the ice cover has to be tested. To determine the carrying capacity, the target’s carrying capacity must be determined. In the same vein, all explorers or inventors assess the supporting capacity of a phenomenon. If it seems to be a dangerous game, they do not venture too far out or they show courage, “take heart” and admit the openness of the outcome. Doubt, indecision and disbelief endanger the scope of an undertaking. In research practice, therefore, the question arises as to whether models or interpretations are sustainable for those involved. The decisive factor here is what is considered “fundamental”, “solid” or “profound” by the research subjects. Concepts, plans and interpretations are “struck off” in terms of their viability. This is equally true when, for example, the scope of the market is doubted. “Market viability” describes the fixation of the scope of a product or prototype.

The supporting capacity of a phenomenon is an important aspect in narrative practices that accompany and motivate alternative economic organizations, such as the saying “Think global, act local”. The execution of practices (taking place in concrete places) is assumed to have a broad capacity in terms of its impact on phenomena that are assumed to be global (e.g. climate change, biodiversity and famine). The supporting capacity can also illuminate the somewhat contradictory tension between decentralization, regionalization and localization, on the one hand, and addressing global issues, on the other. Self-sufficiency practices, for example, make it possible to become (more) independent of public infrastructures. In most cases, the aim is to minimize the costs associated with supply – that is, to distance oneself from money-based exchange practices that ultimately require participation in labour market practices.

Let us look at this through a scene from our empirical material.

*Together with Paul, the above-mentioned group around Andreas is pursuing the goal of closing resource loops through the construction*

*of self-sufficient houses, which allow basic need satisfaction with less in the way of resources. The project is about decreasing the dependence on public infrastructures and thus increasing the control over the provisioning of basic supplies (water, electricity, heat, food, etc.) that they mediate. Andreas himself has been living in the prototype for a few months. Ever since, his everyday practices – cooking, eating, showering, repairing, relaxing, reading, communicating – take place largely outside market relations. Self-sufficiency allows Andreas to withdraw from many market-based practices and the global value chains associated therewith. Alternative economic practices allow him to fulfil a significant fraction of his everyday needs. However, legal regulations extend into these relations of alternative economies and self-sufficiency. Andreas faces legal disputes with local authorities, which want to enforce regulations that say that all dwellings must be connected to the public water supply and sewage system, which his house is not.*

*Alex, a student in water management and sympathetic to the project, is currently dealing with exactly these regulations as part of his master's thesis. Together with Andreas' group, Alex hopes to set a precedent by measuring the water quality of the in-house ecological sewage treatment plant, which will be carried out together with the health department. Such a precedent could have a considerable impact and be exemplary for the possibilities of other supply practices.*

Seemingly limited to local settings, the practices of the research subjects, here, are of relevance primarily through their *absence*. Global markets depend on the mass performance of corresponding practices. State bureaucracies, meanwhile, consolidate these practice relations, making them the norm and a quasi-natural condition. The limitations of these practice relations remain largely invisible until alternative practices question their supporting capacity. Possible precedents for the successful suspension of these restrictions (e.g. by challenging common perceptions of hygiene in public provisioning) can then, in turn, unravel considerable consequences.

With the analytical category of supporting capacity, researchers enquire about the effects of phenomena and where the practices associated with them lead to. The focus is on how far and where the practices take the research subjects. In our case study, alternative care practices have a high impact, not only because they support the subjects in the satisfaction of their everyday

needs but also because they are meaningful for them. A move away from market- and state-based care structures arises from the understanding that these are not sustainable in the long term.

At the same time, a close connection with the analytical category of supporting capacity becomes clear here. In the dynamics of the empirical contexts presented, the supporting capacity of alternative supply practices is called into question by the involvement of bureaucratic control practices. The research subjects do succeed in organizing parts of their everyday supply of energy, water and food in a technically and economically sustainable cycle. However, this in turn is destabilized by the supporting capacity of bureaucratic control practices. Even without legal enforcement of the regulations, the alternative supply practices of Andreas and his team is undermined by the fact that they could be stopped at any time.

### *Exigency and notability*

With the analytical categories of exigency and notability, researchers ask about the importance and urgency of phenomena. The focus is on the level of significance and priority with which certain things occur in the empirical contexts under investigation. In our case study, paid work, which is otherwise largely pushed into the background, suddenly comes to the fore as urgent. This prioritization in turn reveals moments of supporting capacity and range. Market exchange relations reach deeply into the practices of the organization and impose themselves, revealing limits of supporting capacity. Since market-shaped practices do not sustain the protagonists, as they allow solely for the implementation of cooperative and non-extractive practices to a limited extent through competition and cost externalization, it is only possible to escape them only to a certain degree.

It can also be observed that certain phenomena “come across as relevant” to researchers, such as when a financial gap opens up an exigency that demands immediate reaction. Necessities arise that “by themselves” appear to be notable. In an empirical example, this is shown as follows.

*Sarah, Asaf and Kim are engineers who support Andreas and his team mainly with respect to the automated regulation of water, electricity and food cycles. Like Andreas, they are also enthusiastic about the project and see it as much more than a formal work assignment for their engineering firm. They write invoices for some of their work, whereas other work is considered a friendly turn that is carried out in their leisure time. Andreas and his team are happy*

*to get support from different people – first from Paul, then also from Sarah and her colleagues – as funds are always tight. At the same time, Sarah, Asaf and Kim have to ensure the operation of their engineering office, so friendly turns can be provided only on a limited scale. In October, they realized that there was a financial gap because of advance payments, outstanding invoices and projects that had not yet been completed. The fact of this financial gap required immediate prioritization of better-paying contracts, so support was temporarily stopped.*

The exigency of a phenomenon requires urgent attention and reorientation. Closely related to this is notability. By the term “notability” we refer to relevance that has already been prioritized. Notability has to do with power in so far as prioritization is mostly done by means of hierarchizing practices. It is powerful because it requires social organization and it often comes to the enforcement of notability under a lack of time. This is why children, for example, are unsuitable market participants because they cannot yet distinguish well between different relevances. The practical handling of notability can be learned. This is of immense importance for research processes: exigency imposes and reveals itself but must be practically transformed into notability. Notability refers to the fact that it can be handled as a thoroughly countable quantity. This is what the to-do lists and software applications for project management tell us.

In the approach of alternative economy organizations, determining notability often plays an important role for survival. Organizations are often confronted with the contradiction that money can be earned by participating in practices that do not seem desirable to them (for example, because of their social or ecological impact), which in turn is needed for the organization to exist. At the same time, practices involving helping and supporting cooperation, internalization costs in production, purchasing products certified as organic/fair trade, etc. often mean increased costs that can be compensated for only to a certain degree. In this field of tension, hybridizations, compromises, trade-offs, and so on can be observed. This can be seen, for example, in organizations that cooperate with wealthy corporations (whose practices are otherwise criticized as exploitative) and, in turn, use the financial resources that are generated to cross-subsidize operations for individuals or organizations that are less wealthy and have a socio-ecological orientation. Coming back to the empirical case: confronted with the notability of paid work, the project of Andreas and his team in turn appears to be a possibility to escape the phenomenon of the “market” and to practise other forms of economic activity through the supporting capacity of alternative supply practices.



## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Our examples of transition initiatives have shown how the market mediated by practices can be concretized intersubjectively in different ways. By regarding our research subjects' affectedness as real, we can explain why the object that triggers affectedness is constructed in a certain way. Transition initiatives need to establish new boundaries for their markets that are both intelligible and can be experienced by all stakeholders (e.g. customers, authorities). A new experience is created that is given a name (Dewey 1980 [1934]). In order to consolidate this new state of affairs, it is necessary that all participants not only understand it but also consider it to exist from their perspective, engage with it practically and regard it as important emotionally. A new market (such as for repairable light bulbs) must not only be understandable but must also function practically as far-reaching, supportive or notable – though, in any event, it must be experienced as influential, relevant and therefore important.

This brings us to revisiting the starting point of our consideration in this chapter. Social phenomena cannot be described in practice-ontological terms. They emerge from small to large, not as facts but as “concerns”, as small and big “issues”. Therefore, they cannot be nominally reduced to structural properties. They can be grasped praxeologically and phenomenologically in their appearance or occurrence, but cannot be traced back to ontological principles. Accordingly, we are very critical of the concept of large social phenomena proposed by Schatzki. Phenomena are never of the same nature, but unique in every case. They may emerge in a similar way. However, what is conclusive is not the ontology that establishes the essence of phenomena once and for all but the consideration of various processual aspects that underlie all features of phenomena, such as the processes by which range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability are experienced and conceptualized by research subjects. In social praxis such fixations of range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability are carried out millions of times every day. Activities of concretizing the range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability of a perceived or asserted phenomenon are empirically ascertainable procedures that represent human transaction in the world. They are co-products of conditions and the researched subjects whereby the phenomena can also be recognized as non-human actors. In a praxeologically conclusive manner, these activities are neither intentionally individualistic nor structurally determined. Rather, the limited scope of the subject becomes clear, in which it creates wriggle room by experimenting within everyday limitations. Lived experiences drive the development of an individual's attitude towards the world, and, by repeatedly engaging in unorthodox practices that are sometimes incomprehensible or seemingly irrational, individuals eventually arrive at a position at which they have the power to make a difference.

With this open, explorative vocabulary, we do not solve the dilemma raised in the introduction, but we do enable researchers to reflectively engage with the phenomena they are investigating in terms of their range, supporting capacity, exigency and notability. In this way, the cycle of concept construction, corresponding actions and renewed reproduction of relations can be questioned and dissipated. We also hope that the usefulness of our proposed analytical categories will be examined, refined and, if necessary, complemented in further practical-theoretical field research. Our explorative research also suggests that a praxeological theory of economic niches can be developed alongside such concepts as the market.

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## CHAPTER 10

# A PRACTICE FOR THE “PERPETUAL PURSUIT OF UNKNOWABLE NOVELTY”

*Peter Ache*

The topic at stake in this chapter – the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty – relates to the capacity of the planning profession and related fields to define futures or, more daringly, utopias for spatial development. In the broad field of planning, actors from a highly complex spatial governance system are necessarily working on techno-scientific material futures. For these futures, they are designing and developing homes, cities, infrastructures, and so on. In doing so, planners create living environments for current and coming generations; we can consider this a standard of all planning efforts. However, with “utopia”, I point towards different kinds of futures, the ones that prompt the more daring questions or the ones that work on “mankind’s imperfections”. With utopia, the issue at hand is to build a “house that meets our needs”, as Jenny Andersson (2018: 12) formulates it using a quote from Lewis Mumford (1922). The “unknowable novelty” in the chapter title (citing Harvey 2012) is used as a placeholder for utopia(s).

Any future is unknown, including techno-scientific futures. The fact that classic utopias, following Thomas Moore’s *Utopia* from 1516, were not short of describing rather concrete future states of any kind depended on the small geographical scale of societal knowledge at that time. In the sixteenth century the “non-place”, which “utopia” translates literally, could have been somewhere out there waiting to be found! The situation changed considerably from the moment that narratives of “proof” or “evidence” became unavoidable. It started with explorers such as James Cook, who journeyed the globe in the eighteenth century literally uncovering unknown places. Nowadays, almost everybody has the capacity to scan the planetary surface for absent or present utopias, be it on an aeroplane or in the digital world (Koselleck 2000: 131ff.). The little surprising consequence for our modern times is that current utopian thinking must find some other hidden territories, such as the deep sea (creating a new Atlantis), or focus on extra-terrestrial terrains, such as the Moon, Mars or beyond (Selke 2022).

In everyday life we continue to have a love/hate relationship with utopian thinking. In professional terms, planners surprisingly often have a practical working relationship with the future, either loving it for the ideas and motivating dreamscapes or hating it for the promises rarely met. My point of reference here is my own research on vision-making processes (Ache 2017). When interpreting these probing exercises into future(s) and the achieved results, the visions published in official documents are rather a repetition of the “real” and certainly not “moments of experiments in dialectical utopianism” (Lefebvre 1991; Pinder 2002). This resonates with an infamous quote from the German political landscape: “Wenn sie Visionen haben, gehen sie zum Arzt” (“If you are having visions, consult a physician”). This statement is the reflection of a former hard-nosed politician (the Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt), which coins instrumentality and reliance on certainty and order (probably not only in the German political system) in the spirit of “We need to get things done”, which does not include building pipe dreams or dreaming about castles in the air. But that is, of course, the *real* element in politics (the eponymous *Realpolitik*), which has its own reason for existence.

From such a real-political perspective we can look at futures, but only those that are practical in the sense of design or designability. Historically, *Realpolitik* has been closely connected to the upcoming of futuring techniques in the 1950 and 1960s, notably promoted by the RAND Corporation (est. 1948) after the tormenting experience of the Second World War. On the one hand, from a cultural and historical perspective, the aftermath of the Second World War had moved apocalypse from the sphere of a heavenly threat to something that human beings could bring onto themselves and others; a more technical, “realistic” idea of the future would seem to epitomize an argument about the desacralization of the future (Andersson 2018: 31ff.). On the other hand, if human beings held the keys to the impending destruction of the universe, the only possible hope of salvation was to change humanity itself and somehow restore a sense of the future in human beings (Andersson 2018; Mumford 1946). The idea of changing humanity itself – that is, transforming humanity with all means, including those of the built environment – is bringing a core belief to the fore, namely that modern liberal societies are built on the ideals of independent and free individuals and their pursuit of happiness. With such a belief there is no place for a planned transformation, understood by many as a *controlled* transformation, endangering that acquired freedom.

To state it clearly, it is certainly not a suitable idea for the spatial planning profession in modern societies to set out on a project of transforming society as such. However, when looking at the societal challenges resulting from a so-called “poly-crisis”, the house that humanity needs to build as a society to accommodate events such as climate change and biodiversity collapse, as well as the need to end (casino) capitalism, demands new ideas towards different

futures. It requires, as is suggested in this contribution, the development of a "dreaming capacity". Such a utopian dreaming capacity includes an element of educating desire. Ernst Bloch (1985 [1954]: 5) calls this "educated hope", but it is also the education of responsibility. And, finally, planning utopia includes the "creation of hope", following the words of the late John Friedmann (2002).

This brings us to the question: what is the planning practice under concern in this chapter? To begin with, "there is no planning – only planning practices," a reasonable claim developed by Ernest Alexander (2015) in an article in which he points towards the immense variations in planning practices. These practices, as Alexander argues, deserve different theoretical and conceptual foundations to ultimately create a reasonable body of planning theories, which was his main concern. To elaborate the argument, Alexander starts off with a reference to the system scientist Geoffrey Vickers (1968), stating that "planning is what planners do". This means that there is no planning "as such". There are many planning "practices", depending on the exact objective of planning interventions. With relevance to the current chapter, one such practice belongs to the "guidance of future action" (Forester 1989), or even "controlling the future": "Planning is the attempt ... to control the future by current acts. Instead of discovering his fate in the future, man plans to make it in his own image. But the present may be reluctant to give birth to the future" (Wildavsky 1973: 128). In view of the scope of this book, it is possible to comment on the "practice" topic in two ways. First, planners "do" planning – that is, they establish in their daily operations a practice of planning that includes many elements from material to social (for an overview on a global scale, see, for instance, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe [UN ECE] 2008). Second, on a regular basis planners do look into the future with their planning instruments, methodologies and processes. They often create techno-scientific futures, most prominently with iconic projects, such as the eco-city of Masdar City in Abu Dhabi.

However, it is not sufficient to engage with how planners look into the future. What is crucial is not just that the present might be reluctant to give birth to the future but that the future likewise might be reluctant to appear in the present. In this chapter I develop an argument towards the following question of the practice-theoretical discussion conducted in this book: if there is neither a pre-existing object of enquiry nor individuals perceiving it, but only contingent superimpositions of capacities or possibilities, how can we actually practise "utopias" or "future(s)"? The rest of the chapter consists of three sections. The next section provides an overview of some contextual and historical aspects of futuring "the urban". This is followed by a section on strategizing and visioning, looking into the practices of vision-making and strategy formation in city/regional contexts. Finally, the last section discusses and reflects on how practising utopia bears on the debate on practice theory.

In the end, more than giving answers, this contribution proposes asking better questions in urban and regional planning. Better questions might enable us to create different future-oriented practices to elicit the novel answers needed for our societies to strive and survive.

## FUTURING THE URBAN: CONTEXT

Enacting futures is a recurring task in urban planning. No matter whether the discussion revolves around abstract plans, mostly developed in elaborate processes, or whether the future consists of material projects, the spatial planning profession has been working on futures in the past and continues doing this at present (for a visual history of the future, see Dunn, Cureton & Pollastri 2014). Rosemary Wakeman (2016), a professor of history and urban studies, has produced an interesting volume on utopian projects. She uses an intriguing title for her synthesizing contribution: *Practicing Utopia*. Wakeman's reflection on utopias stemmed from her own interest in "new towns", created in the second half of the twentieth century. Wakeman's account shows that "new towns" and other utopias manifest a global phenomenon, including both elaborate but still abstract ideas and concrete cases of materialized projects. An idea such as the "plug-in city" by Peter Cook and the architectural collective Archigram from the 1960s, which is based on modular and highly mobile structures and components that constitute a city, sounds quite far-fetched. However, one can jump into current times and draw a line with a very practical dimension of our modern cities. Without "plugging in" – that is, without connecting to the ubiquitous networks of power, mobility, communication and information – no urban society would currently be conceivable. Moreover, most of these networks are solidly grounded on problematic carbon consumption (Neckel 2022). Communication networks especially build a ubiquitous backbone of antennas and so-called base stations, without which the hypermobile modern lifestyle would be inconceivable. On the material side, cases of built futures, or even utopias, include Chandigarh in India, Brasília in Brazil, Tapiola in Finland, Irvine in the United States and Halle-Neustadt, a socialist reform city from German Democratic Republic (GDR) times in East Germany, all of which were designed as model cities for societies in the making. Today we might experience these places with very different perceptions. Suffice to say that, in most cases, the actual reality of those historic utopias is often quite daring and dire, as vividly accounted for by, among others, Stefan Selke (2022).

Yet there is more to these utopias than broken promises and unmet desires. In terms of novelty, these new cities – each in its time – echo a statement made by David Harvey: "The question of what kind of city we want cannot



be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationships to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire" (Harvey 2008: 23). And, even more interestingly, Wakeman (2016: 4) suggests that "we seek to change ourselves by changing the city!" Echoing Bloch (1985 [1954]: 2), who holds forth that, "primarily, every human lives by striving for the future, the past comes later, and the real present is almost not there at all", we could ask: does establishing a different city with new artefacts then offer the potential for novel material practices? Do new cities, besides new concepts and designs, create different bodily experiences and affects? Presumably so!

In this context, it is also interesting to see how, in her reflection on utopias, Wakeman (2016) points out the role of critique. New towns have not just been partial experiments but, instead, have been attempts to create "urban totalities". New towns stood for new lifestyles (or at least ideas thereof), working from the assumption that structure defines societal agency. Such a physical determinism clearly met a critical perspective. Across political systems, eastern and western, the new towns represented state spaces conceived by elites with ambitions to set society on the "right" foot. Despite their "heavy modernity", Wakeman (2016: 298, referring to Zygmunt Bauman 2000) argues that the impressive aspect was and is their quality as "visionary dreamscapes". Being a dreamscape implies, overall, providing a critique of what society at that respective moment was missing, an aspect that resonates well with Bloch (1989 [1964]: 12): "The essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present." Further, Wakeman (2016: 19) formulates the position that "utopia is a fundamental aspect of humanity, and that utopian projects spur people into bringing about a better future". And, finally, quoting Karl Mannheim (1954: 236): "The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing; he would be left without ideals, and would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it."

Returning to the debate on practice in this book, what can be critically discussed is the role of the specific planning practices, including their "super-imposed capacities and possibilities", that helped to shape those utopian dreamscapes in material ways. These practices fundamentally criticized what was seen as contingent flows of mainstream planning projects that created only repetitions of the same. Echoing Wakeman's view, these utopias were also literally stepping out of (housing) boxes and attempting to create different living environments, at least compared with the state of play of their times.

Currently, "futuring", in the urban context as well as in other fields, continues to be of great importance. Given the circumstances and current conditions of modern hyper-accelerated capitalist societies, issues such as sustainability, resilience and social/spatial justice still call for action. Despite being long-standing challenges, despite accumulated knowledge and despite

political agreements, action and change appear inhibited by many comfort zones that societies lovingly embrace. One has only to think of society's addiction to unrestricted consumption, paired with "welfare", sustaining continued economic growth.

Today's dominant view of the urban society "in the making" can be seen from prominent examples that throw a light on urban futures, including eco-cities such as Masdar City, the SMART city Songdo (South Korea) and new capitals (Egypt, Indonesia, Azerbaijan), or metropolitan city regions such as the Beijing city region (China). All present techno-utopias of some kind. Notably, the United Nations' idea of Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo being woven together as an "endless" city corridor is a political utopia in the sense of bridging different systems (United Nations University [UNU] 1996). Dominance in ideas and practices stems from the close relationship that frequently exists between such new technology-driven utopian designs and political or economic power. A recent example in this context is Neom in Saudi Arabia (Selke 2022: 130ff.): the "dreamers of the world" (marketing slogan) would come together in a place that is largely financed by a state fund, overseen by industry, which is presented in the board of the development project. Neom is managed by a Saudi Arabian prince, a political key figure of the entire project. A coming version of such a technologically supported power play might be identified with a "new kid on the block", the "digital twin". The digital twin is the fully digitized image of a city (or even the globe, in the case of a recent EU initiative) that can be completely manipulated in all its dimensions, in real time, with concrete measures (Fraunhofer IESE 2021). Not surprisingly, the city of Singapore is among the forerunners of this development.<sup>1</sup> Using the vocabulary of Helmuth Plessner (see Ernste 2014 and Chapter 11, by Ernste, in this volume), the virtual city in the form of the digital twin brings a version of an "eccentric positionality" to the material city. At the same time, the virtual city presents a material place and a non-place. We return to this "eccentric positionality" in the final section.

But what about utopias? Wakeman refers to the architectural historian Françoise Choay (2005), whom she quotes defining a utopia as a "mechanism to fathom, record, and spell out insoluble social problems. It is a kind of preliminary to political commitment and social transformation" (Wakeman 2016: 299). Wakeman goes on: "Yet despite the never-ending search to find a built form for changing society, Choay accuses urban theorists of jettisoning the social and political dimension of utopian production and concentrating solely on a spatial model" (Wakeman 2016: 299). In my view, smart cities and new towns are both a critique *and* a reproduction of mid- to late twentieth-century society. This has resulted in a major tension between "visionary

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1. See [www.nrf.gov.sg/programmes/virtual-singapore](http://www.nrf.gov.sg/programmes/virtual-singapore).

dreamscapes”, on the one hand, that somehow promise a way out from serious societal problems (i.e. the sustainability challenge) and, on the other hand, the need to make a devil’s pact with the powers that be (i.e. to make the sustainability challenge happen). Such is a lasting, formidable challenge.

## PRACTISING STRATEGY AND VISIONING

I now delve further into how the contemplation of and strivings for the future take shape in planning exercises of many kinds. Future visioning has its strongest connection with strategy-making, as illustrated by many national and regional examples. To name a few, rather prominent exercises range from the Le Grand Paris 2007 competition in France to the “National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment” (Nationale Omgevingsvisie) in 2019/20 in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties [BZK] 2020). These strategic exercises try to combine the latest theoretical, methodological and planning techniques to outline visions for the future development of specific places and territories. The visions are mostly embedded in strategy documents, which have a function in the respective formal and informal contexts of planning or strategy-making. The strategic visionary function can of course be directly executable, or, equally, delusory – something I touch upon further down. Whatever the case, visions embedded in documents are performative, for professionals and for the layperson, as discussed in this section.

Within processes of futuring a city, a region, a metropolitan space or a countryside, the process of formulating strategies encompasses several relevant dimensions. These can be identified using practice theory and some of its key elements. The empirical basis for analysis in this section is three-fold. First, there is participant observation of a major visioning process (Ache 2011). Second comes a successive analysis of vision documents from cities around the world (Ache 2017). Third, there is a recent survey of 31 cities in India with populations of over a million regarding their vision and strategy documents (Kesar & Ache 2019). The latter two already indicate one aspect: that the *practice* of visioning exists at a global scale and in a comparable fashion. Part of a globally established practice in planning seems to be the standard format of planning visions. That standardization results from shared professional and academic knowledge related to the futuring of the city. There is also the influence of globally acting institutions, such as the UN or Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which promote and circulate visioning and strategizing as part of a changed governance culture (UN 2019; OECD 2015). In doing so, these organizations ultimately promote a renewal or transformation of local practices.

When analysing the respective planning documents, one can identify a new *material* dimension of the visioning practice: that of the metropolitan region, large city region or regional city. One example is how, in the case of “Le Grand Paris”, ideas extended from central Paris to the Atlantic along the river Seine (Ache 2011). On the one hand, such strategic perspectives are based on the attempt by planning actors to define a realistic city-regional context that represents most of the relevant dimensions of a “relational space”. On the other hand, the aspect of “relevance” is defined by the agendas underlying the respective planning contexts. Such agendas can usually be described as bringing together all potentials and creating an opportunity space that has the capacity to respond to known challenges but, even more so, has the capacity to respond to unknown and upcoming challenges. As such, these new spaces and their material dimensions supersede classical structures such as cities, towns, regions and other constructs developed in earlier periods. Suffice to say that these structures already had history on their backs, and, to stay within the conceptual trajectory of this book, these structures were the result of a set of different practices that were relevant in the formation of previous strategies.

Moreover, within such processes of strategy formation, settings of distributed actors and institutions can be found, all with their respective set of strategies as practices that culminate in the one shared idea of how to pursue a “globally attractive” space (for instance, a “metropolitan space”). Such a nested set of practices, in line with the practice-theoretical notion of “site ontology” (see Introduction), is entertained in various contexts with key actors coming together, checking their mutual worldviews, harmonizing them and returning to the actions within their respective institutional setting of responsibility (on the role of conflict in practices, see Schapendonk, Chapter 6 in this volume, and Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, Chapter 5). It is interesting to see, in fact, how comprehensive this landscape of institutions and actors often is. In strategic planning sessions, there are often several hundreds of representatives coming together in the negotiation of a programmatic vision for development. What is not discussed here is some resulting critical perspectives, such as the uncoupling from democratic processes that happens or might happen in these settings (Allmendinger, Haughton & Shepherd 2016).

A last aspect in this city-regional context relates to the routinization of planning practices: by literally working on the vision, the participating actors also develop a *bodily experience of practices*, on site and during the action, in sync with all other actors. In addition, these actors also bring back the “routine” and its outputs to the home organizations and spread the news there. It is not by coincidence that one can see this as “infection” (a more drastic version of being “*affected*” by an idea or vision). The sets of meetings and workshops can be seen as “massaging the message” (with reference to

McLuhan 1967) into the participants – although, of course, this may give some of them an itch.

Summarizing these empirical findings, futuring the city or region is representing not just a single model practice but, instead, should be understood as a nexus of practice(s), as formulated by Allison Hui, Theodore Schatzki and Elizabeth Shove (2017). What does this nexus entail? Focusing on the prominent central element, the vision itself mostly comes in the form of a statement of what is to be achieved in the future, and is accompanied by semiotic-imaginary artefacts, often using smooth and round figures for visual expression. First, the chosen formulations – and, with them, the expressed reflections of current and future challenges – are rather informative regarding the shared worldviews of the participating actors. This includes, across institutions and actors, ways of interpreting and seeing the world and the relevant future state thereof, which thus often tend to be rather similar. Second, the diverse methods applied to anticipate future states, including the specific socio-scientific technologies and tools, constitute an expert practice often guided by legions of consultants trained in specific tools and techniques. A special aspect of this part of practice is the presence of others, mostly a multitude of stakeholders and experts, and at times also laypersons, in specific settings and locales. In the set of examples analysed, the number of actors present during such an exercise can reach up to hundreds of participants. This is often complemented by attempts to use further participatory methods to engage more “outsiders”. In addition, frequently meetings are taken out of the normal office context and are sited in more hands-on locations. Working processes, for instance, use “world café settings” to clearly reference the “world” as a welcomed guest at the table. Preferred settings and methods are the “round table”, an epitome of open thinking and change of direction. The shape of the round table presents a reference to a wholeness, even alluding to the globe. It is highly likely that many graphs and figures that accompany such a vision have a circular and smooth quality for the very same reasons.

A last aspect of the processes of exchanging ideas and knowledge is the physical dimension; being present in such a setting implies being affected and affecting others simultaneously. Schatzki (2017: 128) formulates the following regarding the physical aspect of practices:

[A] practice is a repeated action: the practice of X exists when actions of X-ing have been sufficiently repeated to be recognisable as X-ings. The crystallization of repeated X-ings as the practice of X also coordinates with the development of knowing how to X in the bodies of those who X (Bourdieu’s habitus). In addition,

actions, in the locales in which they are performed, for instance classrooms, stores, kitchens and airport terminals, are usually performed as part of combinations or sequences of actions. When each of the (types of) actions involved is a practice, the resulting bundling of practices in locales are called nexuses of practice.

The last point of this formulation offers an opening to strategy, which is often bundled with vision-making in planning contexts. Such strategizing starts with a twofold challenge. First, visions often chart “horizons” of future states that shall be reached, including the norms to guide the actions. Then, second, a step back is taken to identify the building blocks that construct the pathway towards that horizon. In a way, this is a recursive production process of a future – or a utopian perspective. Strategizing renders the future available for implementation and organization, calling upon the distributed capacities and resources of the participating institutions and actors.

Martin Kornberger and Stewart Clegg (2011: 156ff.) come to similar conclusions, especially regarding the dimensions of performativity and affect. They highlight three aspects from their analysis of strategy-making. First, strategizing is *performative*, constituting its subjects and shaping its objects. Second, strategizing must be understood as an *aesthetic performance*, whose power resides in the simultaneous representation of facts (traditionally the domain of science) and values (the realm of politics). Third, and consequently, strategy is a socio-political *legitimizing* practice that aims at mobilizing people, marshalling political will and legitimizing decisions. Further, Kornberger and Clegg (2011: 157ff.) provide an additional lesson from their analysis: strategizing and organizing are complementary practices, adding to each other. Strategizing means problematizing futures, albeit with an abstract notion of time. Strategizing is often not disruptive; strategizing is genealogical, by looking back to look out, often using a naive optimism that glosses over historical fault lines. Strategizing also entails experimenting and learning, applying “big picture” thinking and grand gestures (see below). And, finally, strategizing is mediation in the literal sense of a “medium” becoming the message.

Within this context, one impactful observation relates to Kornberger’s (2012) comments on “big picture” thinking. Kornberger frames “big picture” thinking in an interesting way. This starts with a view of strategy as a combination of theory and theology. The latter, theology, is closely connected to a core aesthetic form found in strategy: the big picture. The big picture, in Kornberger’s view, is the representation of a desirable future. Strategizing is a social activity that must be performed to be effective, and the big picture is an essential ingredient of that. In so doing, strategy provides the script and props for a convincing performance of the future in the here and now (Kornberger



2012). Yet the big picture is just an image. To elaborate this, Kornberger uses Bruno Latour for this argument. The big picture is a "panorama" (Latour 2005) that does not show the entire world but, primarily, attracts our attention to it while blocking us from its overwhelming view. "While we are fully immersed in the image that leaves no space for alternative projections, what stares at us is only a small glimpse of the many possible futures" (Kornberger 2012: 94). Accordingly, the big picture breeds passivity. The big picture stands in the way of radically alternative views to the present. Rather than being a "new" future, it presents a projection of a manageable future into the present, transforming the present incrementally instead of embarking on utopian pathways. The big picture is an inverse relation between future and present. In broader political terms, most of the big pictures found in the study of vision-making processes (Ache 2011: 2017) laid out a neoliberal path into the future, oriented and operating with markets, market actors, competition and the exploitation of techno-scientific opportunities.

In summary, what becomes clear is that vision-making exercises and concomitant strategy formulation found a kind of alchemy to vividly picture a future place as a utopian "not pre-existing object" while, at the same time, developing "contingency and capacity" mainly tied to the present. The latter has the potentiality to transform that very present, yet in strongly controlled and managed ways. The future is still out there, of course, but the gospel of a vision as included in strategy's big picture transforms the actual practices towards a manageable and designable "future in the presence".

## PRACTISING UTOPIA?

So, how do planners genuinely plan for utopia – that is, the truly different, non-existing place? How do planners create the effective and radically different utopias that are so urgently needed? This last section focuses on dimensions that are related to two central concerns: the absence of conflicting views in vision-making, and a potential role for "affects" in this context. Drawing on the work and ideas of Plessner (de Mul 2014; Ernste 2014; Lefebvre (2003 [1965]; Pinder 2002) and practice scholars (Hui, Schatzki & Shove 2017), this section seeks to pose better questions rather than to generate answers.

Summarizing the previous sections, this chapter has until now worked with different terms: future(s), utopia, vision. This ambivalent terminology highlights an uncertainty within the field as such. Since the appearance of "futurism" in the Cold War period, the "future" has been conceived of as something that can be designed, mainly as techno-social endeavour (Levitas 2013). This future is open, and a vision is the attempt to put a dot on the horizon that represents unknown novelty. Utopia is a not yet conscious affair, a



not yet become reality, a latency of “something”, as expressed by Ruth Levitas (1990: 19). However, the triangle can be used as a toolbox to identify degrees of ambitions while actively “futuring” the city, region or metropolis. Thinking about futures brings in all the various technologies and methods available to sketch out possible developments. It is a frequent practice to develop possible future-cityscapes. Vision, in the sense of having an “idea”, is but a first step towards a more elaborate view on the future. What do actors want to have (Mumford’s house that meets our needs)? And, finally, utopia is still out there as the most critical alternative viewpoint allowing a comparison with possible developments. The line of analysis and argumentation is not going to become any more concrete than that, with the exception that, not only in the view of Bloch, utopia needs to become a political project with a social transformative ambition. Otherwise it is no more than ideology. The utopia has the ambition to achieve something better, something missing (Levitas 1990) – to which I would add a spatial perspective on future cities.

From the conceptual and empirical account so far, the conclusion emerges that radically different worldviews are not the intended outcome of strategic planning exercises. Instead – and this brings it closer to the core of practice theories – the element of harmonization and repertoires for/of actors is the dominating aspect. The learning outcome of vision-making and resultant strategy formation is to become an active part of the choir that spreads the gospel, and, through this, to make the actual vision of non-radical, incremental change performative.

This brings this chapter to the kind of questions that need to be asked. Resulting from my own research (Ache 2017) on visioning processes and in terms of an interpretation of observations, the visions expressed by participating actors in officially published documents are rather a repetition of the “real” (Pinder 2013), or realism, and are definitely not experiments in utopian thinking. The element of vision-making is no more than a normalizing discourse (Pløger 2004; Huxley 2002). However, what is needed instead is a process whereby we move from a minimalist consensual solution of antagonistic behaviour to the co-creative attitude of adversaries (see also Landau-Donnelly and Pohl in this volume). In sync with the utopianism formulated by Henri Lefebvre’s and David Pinder’s interpretations thereof, the vision process should, rather, be challenging the “closing of political horizons”. We should be more aware of the conflicting lines in future sketches and try to use these as a starting point for creative processes. What I call for is a function of estrangement and disruption of the taken-for-granted nature of designable futures (and, with that, present reality; see Levitas 1990).

To induce disruption, Pinder (2013) provides five propositions, based on Lefebvre’s work. First, we should uncover the desires and dreams

that underpin conceptions of urbanism today. Second, we should “transduce”, as Pinder (2013: 43) puts it, from given reals to possibles. Third, the focus should be on everyday life and its critique. Fourth, experiments and inventions are significant. Fifth, and final, “demanding the impossible is as realistic as necessary” (Pinder 2013: 43). Pinder thus makes a very important point: we tend to see exercises that try to formulate visions for future development frequently as consolidating and comforting, and also utopian in the sense of being non-consequential. However, looking back into the writings of Lefebvre and other scholars and artists of his era, it is about time to take these exercises seriously. We should really benefit from the enormous amount of resources (human, time) going into the process. In a way, reformulating another claim of Lefebvre, there is a right to utopianism and vision-making, with the aim of creating what might be called moments of experiments in dialectical utopianism. How do we, in the words of Harvey (2012: 7), “create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but [also] conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of the unknowable novelty”?

In line with this, practice theory delivers several messages. First, as Andreas Reckwitz (2017: 121) argues, “[p]ractice theory indeed presupposes that practices constitute social orders and as such are undergirded by a structure of social reproduction and repetition. Yet at the same time, practices also always harbour the potential for novelty, surprise, and experiment, which can modify or transform the practice from within.” What is needed, accordingly, is a shift in practices away from an orderly context and potentially reproductive realm. There is a requirement for practices to “surprise”, or maybe “irritate” and “stir”. Provocatively, following Daniel H. Burnham, I would even dare to ask: how can we create the renewed dreamscapes that stir the blood of people?

Second, this takes us to another core aspect of practice theory, namely the roles of affect and desire, in combination with a concern for the role of conflict, as was outlined before. Reckwitz (2017: 121) describes affects as things that “are not per se anarchic and disruptive, but rather among the main ingredients in culturally standardized, routing bundles of practices. However, there is always the chance that new and different acts of affecting will emerge from within social practices and explode their normality.” Could it be an option to establish different ways of affecting that help explode the “normal”?

I see a connection between the role of affects and affecting, and Bloch’s call to start dreaming again. It is not a dreaming that just builds castles in the clouds, a leisurely and idle exercise of compensatory nature. The educated dreaming (*docta spes*) is focused to “teach desire, to desire better, to desire

more, and above all to desire in a different way” (Thompson 1977: 330). Such a dreamscape of desires might, ultimately, provide the disruptive force that breaks through cultured routines. Coincidentally, the often loathed cities, especially the metropolitan gigantic cities, might be the right place to do so. Huib Ernste (2014: 253–4, emphasis added), in his discussion of Plessner and eccentric positionality, offers the following interesting perspective, which I quote extensively:

The law of utopian position shows that the idea that the human being can live in perfect harmony and stability within its own niche ... The inherent discomfort with the actual embodiment and objectification of human life urges us to *continue acting, to become creative and to search for new possibilities. The special attractiveness of cities seems partly explainable on the basis of these anthropological insights, as the vast potentialities and contingencies of cities, at least in some respects, seem to come closer to what has been described as eccentric positionality.* It almost seems as if modern urban life provides a partial realization of what we would otherwise only experience from our eccentric positionality. Does urban living indeed strive towards an eccentric existence?

Ultimately, Ernste (2014: 254) warns against the attempt to create an eccentric city. The above-mentioned objectifications of human life are bound to fail, and utopia remains a place not reached. Following the logic of Plessner, Ernste argues how humans will get stuck searching for that. We are bound to simultaneous positions, natural and artificial; immediate and mediated; utopian and concrete. However, in everyday life, the law of “mediated immediacy” implies that, as soon as limitless possibilities become reality, they acquire an independent and unpredictable autonomy that resists human’s freedom (de Mul 2014: 27). In everyday life, traditions and habits rule, and practices endure. As the law of utopian standpoint predicts, humans keep oscillating between possibility and reality, between eccentric homelessness and a centric longing for a home (de Mul 2014: 28). But, within that oscillation, we can potentially find the utopian pendulum: on one side, eccentrically striving for a different life scratching on novelty; on the other side, creating moments that affect actors in their immediate experiences of that novel life. A utopian pendulum that occasionally creates conflicts between actors and their expectations, but that should lead us towards “something”, or at least to a latency of something. Somewhere out there, there might be a “good city” (Friedmann 2011), with a fully affectionate environment that we can build together as human – and more-than-human – beings.

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## CHAPTER 11

# THE PRACTICE OF PRACTICE THEORIES: A CRITICALLY REFLEXIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE

*Huib Ernste*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the edited volume *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny 2001) was published, claiming a comprehensive reorientation in social sciences and humanities after the linguistic turn (Alkemeyer 2015: 7). Instead of looking only at the linguistic aspects of social practices, a shift in focus towards the mediating role of the embodied/material aspects and towards the performative aspects of socio-spatial practices was suggested. In doing so, practice theories have tended to turn away from the intentional, willing and acting subject, which the traditional theory of action had conceived (Bedorf 2017). Now, more than 20 years later, practice-theoretical approaches have certainly arrived in social scientific and human geographic research (Everts, Lahr-Kurten & Watson 2011; Hillebrandt 2014; Schäfer 2013; Ernste 2012, 2018; Schmid & Smith 2021). Practice theories help scholars include aspects of their daily practices, which were long neglected, in explanations of human actions and societal development. It helps researchers get a grasp on the complexities of everyday practices in the wake of said practice. Some scholars, in their application of the practice-theoretical approach, also tend to take other post-structuralist streams of thought, such as posthumanism, aboard. The use of posthumanist thought in combination with practice-theoretical approaches raises the critical questions: to what extent is posthumanism compatible with practice theory, and in what sense do these combinations help to develop practice approaches further. Or, rather, do they only reinforce a one-sided understanding of what a practice-theoretical approach entails?

The focus on the posthuman, or the turning away from the human subject as the main thrust of practice theories, might also be problematic:

The historical and conceptual breadth and diversity of approaches, currents and disciplines that contributed to the prominence of

practice-theoretical thinking is thereby reduced in a problematic way. The concept of praxis is primarily profiled, it can be observed, in a delimiting manner: as a critical antithesis to theories and approaches that – from a praxis-theoretical perspective – show too strong an emphasis on the subjective, the individual, the mental. (Alkemeyer 2015: 8)

Practice theories assume mental categories such as knowledge and reflection not to be an attribute of individuals but of a practice (Reckwitz 2003). In this way, Thomas Alkemeyer (2015: 8) continues:

[M]ateriality (as opposed to the “mental”), the body (as opposed to the “mind”), activity (as opposed to “contemplation”) and performativity (as self-steering tendencies opposed to “mere application”) come into view. This forms the typical profile of practice theory: “practice theorists”, Schatzki explains in the programmatic anthology, “conceive of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki 2001a 11).

But, instead of a real “turn” in the way of thinking, this shifts the emphasis only to factors and concepts that might have been left out in the past without really overcoming the dualisms it intended to overcome. It addresses the issues from the other side in a similarly reductive way. As such, this shift deserves to be critically scrutinized, and one needs to question the positionality of practice theories in the debate as well as its criteria and normative judgements. In some fields and practices of practice theories these critical debates and reflections indeed take place (Jaeggi 2014; Schmidt 2012; Kalthoff, Hirschauer & Lindemann 2008; Boltanski 2011; Alkemeyer 2015; Bedorf 2017; Nassehi 2006), but in others they seem rather absent (Reckwitz 2009; Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). In this sense, I fully agree with Alkemeyer (2015: 10–11) when he states that the *practice* of practice-theoretical approaches should arm itself against potential encrustations and dogmatisms through critical self-reflection. Even when we fully support the practice-theoretical proposition (that the classic assumption of an autonomous, rational and knowledgeable subject should be relativized, and that the embodied/material aspects of our thinking and actions should be emphasized), we should not avoid the constructive debate about how the classic conceptualizations of human beings and subjectivity could productively be understood in different ways, as was also intended by Allison Hui, Theodore Schatzki and Elizabeth Shove (2017). Instead of eliminating subjectivity and the classic conceptualization of the human being, we should rethink it from a critical perspective.



According to current practice theories, subjectivity can emerge solely out of practices. But that seems possible only if something, such as an organism, is already somehow given; otherwise, one would attribute divine powers to a practice enabling a creation out of nothing (Alkemeyer 2015: 12). Similarly, this emergence of the subject from a practice can be taken seriously only if human subjectivity is more than a sheer executing body. One might think that these aspects are too detailed and insignificant to argue about, but this relationship between the human being/human subject and its environment, situation and situational practices is core for human geographic thinking and debate, and cannot be neglected.

Human geography as a discipline went through many different phases and paradigmatic changes, which always reflected the historical and geographical societal realities of those times (Cresswell 2013; Livingstone 1992; Peet 1998). For a long time geographers have been fascinated by the natural world and its enormous diversity. Understanding the influence of these diverse natural conditions on human life and human practices was seen as the core disciplinary endeavour and ambition. The way human beings jointly coped with these manifold circumstances was seen as the basis of our evolutionary cultural adaptation to these diverse conditions. From there on, human geography was focused not just on our adaptation to our natural habitat but also on how we related to, were determined by or contributed to the cultural settings and structures of these situations. Not just the (non-human) materials of the natural conditions but also the creative (human) cultural aspects were seen as determining. More and more, the role of human action and human agency moved into the centre of attention in geography. As a typical modernist motive, the make-ability of the world around us, and the celebration of human reason as the basis of our scientific/technological progress as means for the final siege over nature, became the dominant way of thinking. And, indeed, until the current Covid-19 crisis, this had a huge fascination and provided us with the hope that we would be able to overcome these situations. We also experienced the downside of many human accomplishments in the form of the enormously destructive and violent powers of these technologies, but also of some of the colonizing and discriminating cultural powers in modernity. As a reaction, the much more structural and deep-seated normative views of early modernity were replaced with more critical, disenchanting and nuanced views of late modernity (Berman 1988; Best & Kellner 1991; Eagleton 1996; Rosenau 1992; Taylor 1991). However, the cultural make-ability or social constructivist sentiments were also developed further into what is often described as postmodernity, for which almost no limits to the imagination, nor to the assumed potential realization of a utopian world, were set. In the face of the twenty-first-century atrocities of human injustice and conflict as well as of the awareness of the Anthropocene's effects on

nature and culture, it is only in newer forms of post-structuralist thinking that a renewed interest in the material aspects of our (post)human existence emerges, in an attempt to escape from the pitfalls and limitations of the supposedly all-encompassing powers of human beings and activities. This explains the sentiments of the current posthuman thinking in our discipline and among the practice theorists among us. However, given the political urgency of these societal issues, it is also dangerous to neglect a critical and scientific reflection of the conceptual frameworks we use to address these issues. To avoid ending up being entangled in an ever-oscillating wavelike movement in which we move from overemphasizing one aspect over the other to overemphasizing the other aspect over the earlier one, we need to be critical about some movements, such as critical posthumanism. To avoid any misunderstanding, this critical stance against new critical movements is not a kind of reactionary repressive reaction but, rather, an attempt to avoid the repetition of earlier mistakes, and an attempt to constructively reflect on a meta level about these movements, to keep them moving and to bring them forward in a conceptually more consistent and sustainable way. Before we can delve into the depths of the theoretical conceptualizations of the relationship between human beings and the physical (non-human) aspects of their existence and activities, let us first address the nuanced differences in which the posthuman is conceptualized.

What is true for human geography in general is also true for the application of practice theories within our discipline in particular. In addition, there is a strong belief that we should rethink – in the words of Schatzki (2001b: xv) – “agental humanism” by looking at practices from a posthuman perspective. On the one hand, this is based on an epistemological ambition to increase the explanatory power of practice theories to grasp the complexities of today’s socio-spatial practices, even though this is often presented as an ontological argument (Schatzki 2001b, 2016).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is a more normative and critical urge to get rid of the exclusionist and hegemonic conceptions of the human being in everyday practices. In this way it attempts to turn the practice-theoretical approach into a less descriptive and more normative and critical social theory. It is this latter critique I would like to focus on when assessing how the posthuman is conceptualized in the framework of the current practice theory approaches.

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1. The debate about the distinction between ontology and epistemology and the purpose of the “ontological turn” (Paleček 2022) in this argumentation goes beyond the scope this chapter. However, it is telling that, for example, Silvia Gherardi (2016), as one of the prominent proponents of the practice theory approach, consistently discusses practice theory not as an ontological but as an alternative *epistemological* endeavour (see also Feldman & Orlikowski 2011).

## WHAT IS POSTHUMANISM?

Posthumanism is one of those many “posts” we know from social theorizing that tend to describe a new way of thinking by defining negatively what it *is not*, instead of describing positively what it *is* (Jansen, Leeuwenkamp & Urricelqui 2021). They describe themselves “in contrast to” or as “opposition against” and, as such, are a product of the political ecology of social scientific theorizing. Especially in the framework of current mainstream social constructivist thinking (Berger & Luckman 1967; Gergen 1999) in human geography, we self-evidently cannot avoid defining meaningful concepts without referring to these differences (Derrida 1982a [1968]). Meanings are not naturally given, but result from the complicated relational network of differences (Lyotard 1984 [1979]; Derrida 1982b [1968]; Landau, Pol & Roskamm 2021), and of the political economy of meaning-making. Even so, it does make a difference if we define them as “posts-” or as assemblages of different aspects borrowed from a multitude of perspectives and approaches. There are no simple definitions of what we mean by “posthuman”, and many different terms are used to describe the diverse opinions and positions with respect to the posthuman. In a broad sense, there is some consensus about the distinction between transhumanism and posthumanism, the latter of which can be subdivided into technological posthumanism and critical posthumanism (Loh 2018). Both transhumanism and posthumanism take the traditional conception of human being as a starting point.

Transhumanism is mainly interested in enhancing, optimizing and improving human capabilities to form our world. Science and technology are seen as promising tools to extend the power of the human being. This reaches from modest technologies – such as spectacles with which we overcome visual deficiencies, or running blades used in para-athletics or my diabetes monitoring system helping me to keep my blood sugars within range – towards the speculative imaginations of cyborg creatures with superpowers as we know them from movies and comics. If we extend these conceptualizations of the enhanced human being from the individual human being to the human community, we might also include all kinds of technologies, such as parking allocation systems in smart cities, all other kinds of flow-guiding tools or directive gears, public transport systems, self-driving cars, more institutional/organizational “techniques” such as healthcare or educational/training systems, smart houses, garbage-recycling systems, high-tech weapons or drone warfare, the internet as global outreach to knowledge and information, and so on – all of which help us deal with and gain power over our environment. The conception of what makes us human is thus not questioned but is thought further. All these instruments and tools help us to transform our current human being into the “Human Being 2.0” or “X.0” as a further step

in the evolution of human beings. Moreover, with Human Being 2.0 it is still the human being who is in charge. If we are using a practice-theoretical lens, these enhanced human capabilities are highly relevant in our daily practices. Technology is of growing importance, and might even be seen as a powerful actant in how we practically deal with today's challenges.

Posthumanism, in contrast, does not want to extend and enhance our traditional understanding of human being, but asks if the hitherto used conceptualization of human being (which is characterized by typical distinctions such as culture versus nature, subject versus object, human versus animal, life versus death, civilized versus uncivilized, intelligent versus unintelligent, reflective versus instinctive, rational versus irrational, open versus closed, agentic versus structured, cognitive versus affective, etc.) should be questioned, and possibly be redefined. In posthumanism, one does not try to enhance well-known human capabilities and characteristics but attempts to overcome them and replace them. This implies a totally new definition of what it means to be human.

In technological posthumanism (Badminton 2003: 11; Herbrechter 2013 [2009]: 10, 19; Nayar 2014: 2–5; Philbeck 2014: 174–6), one tries to invent a new, superior artificial superspecies that could replace humanity. Think of robots taking care of the elderly, artificial intelligence and algorithms making human beings obsolete. These posthumans would be able to think, take decisions, show affect and love (or, alternatively, maybe make the need for love, creative thinking or reproduction superfluous). The typical things that humanity values, seeks or assumes to be a human right may, from this perspective, become redundant. However, one might ask how this “redundancy” is defined? How can we judge “redundancy” without a pre-given value criterion? Even in technological posthumanism, there seems to be an implicit “humanistic residue” determining the objective for further development (Loh 2018: 11). The difference between transhumanism and technological posthumanism, therefore, becomes rather gradual. The technological tools and features with which (in transhumanism) the human being equips and enhances itself also transgress the usual limits and qualifications of the human being, and therefore redefine what is seen as human (Sorgner 2016; More 2011; Rothblatt 2011). However, for certain, in technological posthumanism, technology becomes much more than just a means and turns into an aim and purpose in itself. In practice, this approach tends towards what is called a singularity, “a movement defined by the belief that a technological singularity – the creation of superintelligence – will likely happen in the medium future, and that deliberate action ought to be taken to ensure that the singularity benefits humans” (Grossman 2011). These technology-oriented forms of posthumanism do indeed relativize the role of the human actor in daily practices, and certainly need to be taken into account when

we try to understand today's society from a practice-theoretical perspective. However, critical posthumanism suggests a rather different take on the role of human beings in practice research.

In critical posthumanism (Barad 2007, 2012; Braidotti 2016; Herbrechter 2013 [2009]; Nayar 2014; Wolfe 2010), technology, including cultural and institutional "technologies", is certainly a characteristic of human activities, which, in large part, also determines the way we understand the human being and how we as human beings understand the world around us. Progress in developing these technologies and cultural assets allows us to overcome the limitations and categorizations of what, in essence, was supposed to be typically human. As such, critical posthumanism is less interested in constructing a new model for the human being and rather more interested in the deconstruction of the hitherto essentialized criteria for being human. From this perspective, on the one hand, the prefix "post-" is more justified, as it negates and questions hitherto used categorizations, instead of positively defining a new humanity. On the other hand, one could ask why this deconstructive tendency makes sense and what purpose it serves. It is here that we see how a glimpse of what is supposed to be a "better" human being implicitly flashes up. A very open characterization of what is human is preferred, above all, limiting and excluding categorizations. As such, critical posthumanism is rooted in a typically human emancipatory motive: a motive to gain power over or to overcome suppressive powers. Furthermore, this version of posthumanism therefore does not break loose from what we believe to be typically human (Barad 2012: 30; Braidotti 2013; Wolfe 2010). The deconstructive intentions of critical posthumanism are a continuation of the post-structuralist tradition, while at the same time they extend this approach away from critiquing the mainly linguistic structured realities towards a critique of both linguistically and materially structured realities (Barad 2012; Braidotti 2013; Wolfe 2010). As mentioned above, the critique can take the form of showing alternative possibilities, or can serve the purpose of judging and expressing selective preferences for one of those options. The latter, as I show later in greater detail, is indeed the practice of critical posthumanist analysis when said analyses contrast dystopian and utopian posthumanist realities (Hayles 1999), notwithstanding their claim (Badminton 2003) that they want to refrain from positively formulating a better alternative. This judging, and therefore labelling and categorizing, character of critical posthumanism is also exemplified in the ethical and political implications they connect with critical posthumanist reflections.

Karen Barad (2015) in particular brings the normativity of this deconstructive endeavour to the point. According to her – and I cannot agree more – every kind of knowledge, irrespective of whether it is natural or social scientific knowledge and irrespective of its ontological or epistemological insights, is highly political and normative (Barad 2015: 207). Criticism per se is a creative

and responsible task. “It is not exhausted in a blanket denial”, as the rather negative connotation of the prefix “post-” in “posthumanism” suggests. As Barad comments in an interview with Jennifer Sophia Theodor, “The acting individual has responsibility due to the structure of being, which is always already shared with a counterpart or bound to a counterpart” (Loh 2018: 158). This reflects the call for responsibility advocated by Hans Jonas (1984), Iris Marion Young (2011) and Emmanuel Levinas (1992). Similarly, another prominent proponent of critical posthumanism, Donna Haraway (1985: 35), notes that every questioning of categorizations and [b]orderings by necessity establishes new differentiations, for which one needs to be accountable and take responsibility. Janina Loh (2018: 159) quotes her from an interview with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (1991: 4), when Haraway states this:

Politics rests on the possibility of a shared world. Flat out. Politics rests on the possibility of being accountable to each other, in some non-voluntaristic “I feel like it today” way. It rests on some sense of the way that you come into the historical world encrusted with barnacles. Metaphorically speaking, I imagine a historical person as being somehow like a hermit crab that’s encrusted with barnacles. And I see myself and everybody else as sort of switching shells as we grow. [...] But every shell we pick up has its histories, and you certainly don’t choose those histories – this is Marx’s point about making history but not any way you choose. You have to account for the encrustations and the inertias, just as you have to remain accountable to each other through learning how to remember, if you will, which barnacles you’re carrying. To me, that is a fairly straightforward way of avoiding cynical relativism while still holding on, again, to contingency.

The normativity of the critical posthumanist tradition shows in its declared goal not just to rethink but also to overcome the classical humanistic definition of humanity, in the form of the idealizing capabilities or attributes such as “responsibility” (compassion, empathy), “freedom” (autonomy) and “reason” (rationality). In this classical conception of human being, the special abilities of the mind and soul in their relationship to the materiality of the body and the world around us play an essential role. Both the mind and the body have their limitations and require continuous learning and care to yield full humanity. Critical posthumanism has the declared goal to overcome these limitations, not just by extending them through technological tools or by replacing the human being with some kind of mechanical superintelligence, but by achieving emancipation from the idealistic definition of the human being in favour of a more inclusive definition of human being and a (related) more open worldview.



In the emancipatory endeavour to create a more inclusive humanity, critical posthumanism explicitly opposes the philosophical anthropological tradition, which is accused of essentializing these humanistic traits. Loh (2018: 149) even states that overcoming philosophical anthropology is the fundamental objective and driving force of critical posthumanism. Strangely enough, the critical posthumanist movement also acknowledges that it is still very much rooted in the humanistic values described by this philosophical anthropological tradition. Nevertheless, these critical posthumanists do not discuss the diverse positions of the philosophical anthropological classics, such as Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner and others, in much detail (Fischer 2006). Critical posthumanists are also not very explicit about the specific humanistic values and how these determine the normative framework of their new “barnacle”. Nevertheless, in their deconstructive diligence, they first roughly construct their philosophical anthropological “other” before deconstructing it. One may question if the construction of this “other” does justice to it, or whether this might be a kind of strawman one seeks to fight.

Until now it has been easy to feel sympathy with the emancipatory ambitions of the posthumanistic project. But, at the same time, we also need to critically scrutinize this approach to make sure it stands on strong feet. In this contribution I therefore formulate a constructive critique of critical posthumanism, or a “critical critical posthumanism”. I do so by first (section 3) going into the idealizing aspects of dystopian and utopian qualifications made in the framework of critical posthumanism, in search of their (posthuman/) humanistic roots. I then (section 4) point to a philosophical anthropological approach, which was largely neglected by critical posthumanist thinkers and does not seem susceptible to many posthumanist critiques, and might even formulate a positive and constructive alternative to posthumanism in which the relation to humanistic values is much clearer, although, in accordance with critical posthumanist thinking, these values cannot be essentialized. Finally (section 5), I show that both post structuralist deconstructivism and this specific philosophical anthropological approach are not in opposition to each other but do indeed cut into the same notch, by taking a *true* utopian standpoint, and how this might also help us to rethink the role of the actor or the subject in our practice-theoretical research.

## POSTHUMAN UTOPIANISM

Critical posthumanism seeks to create a more inclusive world, and a less exclusive categorization of the human being and the human worldview. The usual labels used to scrutinize these categorizations and worldviews are “utopian” or “dystopian”, but, as a subtext of these labels, one might also say “good”



and “evil”. As such, these categories are mutually exclusive and incommensurable. They formulate *concrete* criteria and attributes that qualify them as such. In their explicitness, they are positioned and placed in reality. If we have a closer look at the meaning of the word “utopian” or “utopia”, we note that it implies a state of affairs that is *not* a concrete situation at all. A utopia is a non-place, a no-(hu)man’s land, an unreal imagination, on which we tend to project many good attributes and qualities; it is a blueprint for a better society, but only a blueprint and not a reality. In the same way, a dystopia is an unrealistic imagination, a nonexistent situation that represents all those things we find abhorrent or unjust. As such, they indeed must be mutually exclusive. But how can these explicit, exclusive categorizations serve as the dreamt inclusivity of critical posthumanism? Are these critical posthumanist utopian thoughts not mistaking their imagined utopia with a real situation? Are they not essentializing their much-sought-after inclusivity in such a way that it actually becomes exclusionary? What is utopian to one person is dystopian to the other. So how can utopia be defined? Aldous Huxley describes the dystopian attributes of a technical utopia in his book *Brave New World* (Huxley (2006 [1932])), and, similarly, George Orwell in his book *Nineteen Eighty Four* (Orwell 1949) depicts the monstrosities of a similar kind of dystopia caused by the utopian but oppressive fetishism of centrally managed communal values. We do not even have to go that far back in time. The Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis (2016) describes a concrete and *real* Dutch utopia in the form of the Dutch village Nagele, in one of the polders regained from the sea: Nagele was subdivided into seven small boroughs, each with the same distance to shopping facilities, the church and the school. When you have seen one of them, you have seen them all. In Nagele, everyone was supposed to be equal and happy. The design of the village had the objective of making its inhabitants better people. Nagele was supposed to be egalitarian – a kind of socialism without oppressive equalization and only with moderate differences. Everyone enjoyed the same conditions, which should make them happy.

You could sense this at each street corner. No house was higher than the other (Figure 11.1). There were inclusive values, which we also recognize in critical posthumanism. This enthusiasm for a seemingly better world is, of course, highly appreciated and supported, and can be recognized in the endeavour of critical posthumanism. When I showed the picture of this real utopia at the photo festival GRID in Amsterdam, where I presented an earlier version of this chapter, it provoked laughter in the audience. How could we ever think *this* to be utopian? Today we consider this to be a ridiculous idea. Indeed, what this example shows is that these kinds of imaginations of real and concrete utopias are prone to fail. Notwithstanding the high expectations, Nagele did indeed fail, as every “utopia” must fail. Currently, the municipality that Nagele is part of would rather discard Nagele in its entirety and



**Figure 11.1** The realized “utopia” of Nagele

Source: Rijkswaterstaat/Afdeling Multimedia: [www.archieven.nl/nl/zoeken?mivast=0&miadt=2606&mizig=269&miview=gal&milang=nl&micols=1&mizk\\_alle=nagele](http://www.archieven.nl/nl/zoeken?mivast=0&miadt=2606&mizig=269&miview=gal&milang=nl&micols=1&mizk_alle=nagele).

turn it back into an agricultural area. All traces of Nagele would then disappear. This shows that it is impossible to make utopia concrete and real. Every utopia carries its dystopia. They do not exclude each other but are inherently intertwined, and show themselves simply to be different perspectives on the same situation. This is also a relativizing lesson to be learned from the real utopian posthuman designs for a better future.

If we acknowledge this, can we then maybe still design a more flexible and adaptable utopia? The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys and his design of New Babylon (1959–78) recognized this inherently dystopian aspect of each fixed utopic design and tried to take it into account. The New Babylon he was initially imagining was a community

designed for an awakening “new [hu]man”, freed from nature by the wonders of technology, freed from all functional constraints and able to spend his whole life travelling, adventure and creativity: the ideal of *Homo ludens* (the playing human being). The old way of life, the *ora et labora*, would be replaced by a fully mechanized and artificial world in which nature and time had been eliminated creating freedom for everyone.

(Kennedy 1995: 9)

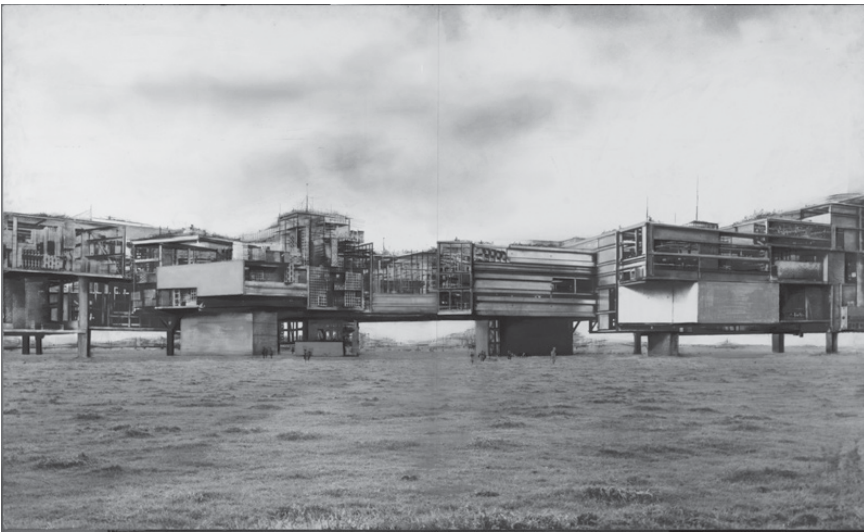
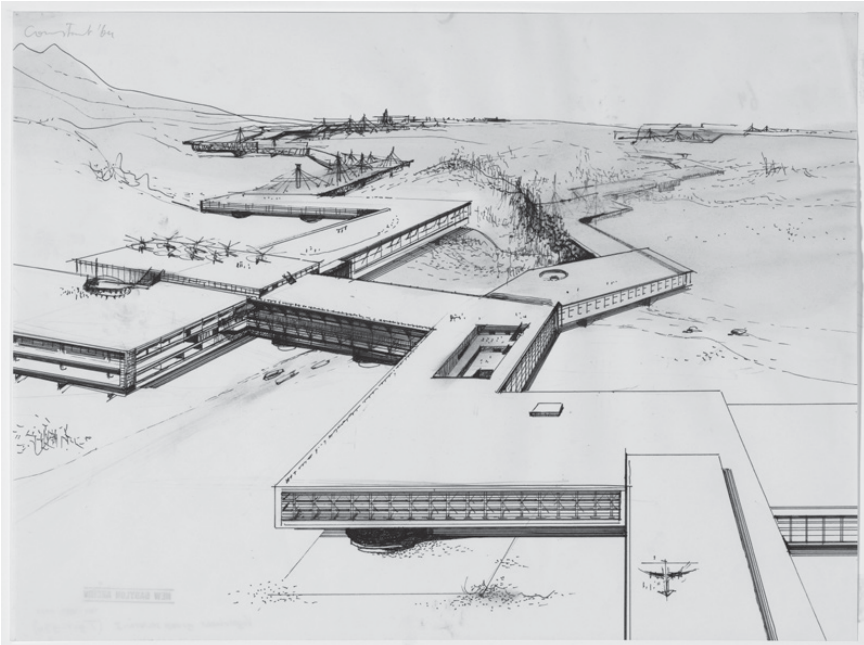
In this vein, and taking into account that the ideal place for such a community cannot be a single fixed ideal utopian place, Nieuwenhuys designed chains of buildings and rooms providing space for all kinds of purposes, swarming through the landscape (Figures 11.2a and 11.2b), in which the users and inhabitants could roam from one temporary utopian place to the next. The original idea of housing, in which the inhabitants are more or less pinned down or “homed” and definitively placed in exclusive spaces, in his view, needed to be overcome. To Nieuwenhuys, there was no final and definitive utopian home. Instead, the inhabitants should be conceived as nomads, constantly on the move, roaming around, in perpetual search of an even better place – the “next” better place.<sup>2</sup> Each specific part or building in this string of buildings would therefore differ in functionality, form and atmosphere.

After initially depicting his designs in the form of 3D models, Constant Nieuwenhuys shifted to depicting these diverse spatial experiences, which represented the New Babylon in the form of paintings. While doing so, he noticed that the inhabitants he depicted were somehow also a bit lost, isolated and uneasy in this labyrinth of compartments and emergent new utopias. In his painting “Terrain Vague” (1973), his utopian dream of a happy society seems to have again turned into a dystopia of homelessness, into a nightmare of an evil society (Heynen 2002). Thinking through and working through his utopian imagination, he came to realize that it is impossible to objectify and make even this evolving and emergent utopian idea concrete. Every actualization and objectification, every spatialization and historization, every containerization of humanity contingently pins us down in a certain way, excluding other possibilities and alternatives. This could also be true for the critical posthuman reconceptualization and redesign of our human being.

Although the categorizations with which critical posthumanists conceptualize their utopias are slightly different from the ones used in this example, the main thrust of overcoming discriminatory differences and transgressing the borders of the dualities we use in describing ourselves and others are, in certain respects, similar. Even though, in the first instance, the posthumanist ambitions arouse fascination and support for a better world, they also seem to fall into the same trap by assuming that they have found the Holy Grail on Earth instead of recognizing that they may have made a few steps forward while at the same time creating setbacks, new dubious differences and exclusions, which make our qualifications of a better future rather ambivalent and situational. It is important to acknowledge the situational, historical and

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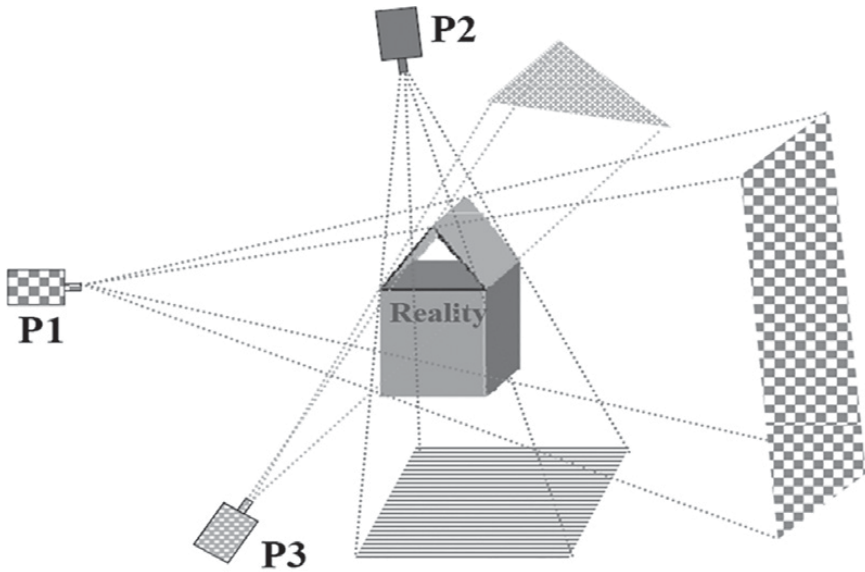
2. Strikingly, these ideas seem to parallel current mobility approaches (Sheller & Urry 2006; Adey 2017), as well as the nomadic subjects of the posthuman thinker Rosi Braidotti (1994).



**Figures 11.2a and 11.2b** View on New Babylonian sectors: 1971 (above) and landscape with sectors, 1964 (below)

Source: <https://stichtingconstant.nl>.

geographical perspective we have on our current and future world, and therefore also on alternative futures. This situational perspectivism is illustrated in [Figure 11.3](#), borrowed from a presentation of a fellow geographic thinker, Peter Weichart (2000: 488).



**Figure 11.3** Positioned perspectives

Source: Weichhart (2000: 488).

Irrespective of our positioning and perspective, we are never able to design an all-comprising utopia that does not exclude other perspectives or positions. In the same way, we cannot design a utopian or (post)human self in concrete terms, because, as soon as we make it concrete, we are positioning ourselves and assume one perspective while neglecting other positionings and perspectives. Utopian designs are inherently incomplete and insufficient. These are the kinds of utopian designs that I would like to describe as real “utopian” designs, in which I explicitly put the attribute “utopian” in quotation marks, as they are by necessity ambivalent and dystopian as well.

Neglecting this critical view on critical posthuman utopias, especially in our current societal situation, is shown to be dangerous – particularly as these real “utopian” designs are not separable from our current societal situation and position. In the twenty-first century we seem to live in times of many limited truths and “alternative facts”, and in a time when digital means of communication sometimes lead to amplifying distinctions or intolerances concerning our differences. In extreme cases, this also leads to different versions of what is nowadays described as identity politics, populism, cancel culture, new tribalism and the emergence of illiberal democracies (Žižek 2018). In this respect, academia is not that different from society in general.

Especially when real “utopian” models with high moral stakes are put forward, they can easily become rather dogmatic, rigid, intolerant and exclusive,



and insensitive to their inherent limitations, contradictions and dystopian aspects. This is rather detrimental to the potential positive effects of the utopian, difference-transgressing efforts they start from. When I recently listened to a highly inspiring podcast<sup>3</sup> about posthumanism, the provocative question was raised whether one could imagine a posthuman capitalist society from a critical posthumanist perspective. Without hesitation, this led to an absolute and categorical “No”. The utopian and dystopian cards seemed to be shuffled already, and clear and new [b]ordering and excluding categorizations made up. I was baffled by this blunt answer, although I have always been a committed opponent of the often acclaimed utopian force of the free market (see also Achterhuis 2010). Can one be so explicitly rejecting if one strives for a maximization of inclusiveness? I then was intrigued with what they actually mean by “more inclusive”. Of course, I would immediately agree with many of their qualifications and inclusive ambitions, which also inspire my thinking and doing, and I would under certain circumstances also support their forceful expression and performance, as one sometimes needs to shout out to be heard. But, at the same time, I also became aware of how exclusive and dystopian some of these ideas are. The occasion of said podcast also did not seem to be an exception. Societal debates, including academic debates, seem to get rougher and less respectful and increasingly contain a certain degree of “wokeness” from both progressive and conservative sides. That word seems to dissect society in “right” and “wrong” in a morally absolutist way, without any in between, and these distinctions are expressed and performed with harsh claims and emotional disqualifications (Korf 2022). The left-wing critical thinker Bernd Stegemann (2021) describes this “anger culture” as detrimental to constructive and progressive debate. Pippa Norris (2020) repeats, albeit in a somewhat more nuanced way, the same argument for the academic debate as well. This does not come as a surprise, since we cannot assume academia to be insensitive or separate from the societal Zeitgeist. It is also part of the critical posthumanist argument that we should not confine ourselves to cognitivism, and we should allow more space for our corporeal emotions, irrespective if they are love or anger, laughter or crying (see also Plessner 1970, about laughing and crying), but it does make a difference if this leads to blunt categorization and exclusions. This exclusionist tendency seems to confuse the real “utopian/dystopian” character of our [b] orderings with the undetermined character of a true utopia, which acknowledges the contingency of our current situation, judgements and opinions and always tries to transcend these towards an even more inclusive future. This

3. “Kritischer posthumanismus mit Janina Loh. Neue welten – der utopie podcast” [“Critical posthumanism with Janina Loh. New worlds – the utopia podcast”]: <https://neuewelten.podigee.io/7-6-kritischer-posthumanismus-mit-janina-loh>.

is where I would have expected more from critical posthuman thought and action. Utopia, as I understand it, is at best a desire, a tendency, a driving force, an imagined objective, an Archimedean or God's eye viewpoint, a view from nowhere. It is a desire not for a concrete real utopia, with its inherent dystopian aspects, but for the all-inclusive but unlocalizable utopian non-place. Utopia is indeed by definition a non-place, and should not be confused with specific actualized and objectified designs for a better future. Utopia therefore must by definition be undetermined, unspecific and virtual if it really wants to be transgressing, inclusive and comprehensive. The utopian standpoint is "somewhere" as well as "nowhere". The real drive and desire behind utopian thinking are focused on a target beyond our real (contingent) "utopian" designs and positionings. At this point, the rather neglected philosophical anthropological point of view comes in again. Instead of being the opposed "other" of critical posthumanism, which critical posthumanists believe should be overcome, or in today's terminology maybe even should be "cancelled", this philosophical anthropology might appear to be one of the strongest proponents of a critical posthumanist approach, and may be even be more radical in its critical endeavour than critical posthumanism.

#### THE FORGOTTEN PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF HELMUTH PLESSNER

Instead of being the "other" or the "enemy" of the deconstructive approach of critical posthumanism, the version of philosophical anthropology I suggest here can be seen as aligning with many aspects of the critical posthumanist endeavour. Concerning its conception of a utopian standpoint, philosophical anthropology might even be more nuanced and constructive in a more practical sense than critical posthumanism. Many of the linguistically oriented deconstructive approaches, such as Michel Foucault's discourse-theoretical approach, are not so much about the denial of anthropological features of the human being as the historicization and dynamics of its representations (Seyfert 2012: 66–7). No single discursive formation of human beings can fully grasp the continuous becoming of human beings. They highlight only those aspects that seem to change in the face of what, at that moment, seems societally prudent. However, certain aspects change more rapidly than others. The psychological, sociological, linguistic and ethnological aspects seem more volatile than the biological or other more corporeal aspects of humanity on which philosophical anthropological reflections tend to focus. Following Hans Driesch (1909) and Henri Bergson (2001 [1889]) in both aspects, being human is not seen as rigidly essentialized but, rather, as dynamic and undetermined. The driving force behind these changes is neither an external societal



power play nor purely an internal autonomous force of life (*vis vitalis*). It is not just an empirical object, which can be described and categorized from the outside, but, at the same time, it is also an enabling unobjectified subject. According to Hans-Peter Krüger (2019: 487–8), the human historical temporality (and geographical spatiality) emerges in between the human being as an empirical *object* and the human being as a transcendental *subject*. The human being “spontaneously and unconsciously alienated himself as a subject in objective relations, from whose appropriation he was to emerge again individually and collectively as a subject becoming conscious of himself”. It is this constructive differentiation, which Bergson and Driesch conceptualize as “interval” or “suspension” or “interruption” (Fischer 2006); the in-between or difference between stimulus and response.

The philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner (2019 [1928]) uses the concept of “border” to address this, while Foucault and Gilles Deleuze (1988 [1986]; 1993 [1988]) use the term “fold”, which they derive from Gottfried Leibniz. These borders or faults are not seen as absolute and insurmountable distinctions of alterities but, rather, as open and liminal. In any event, each differentiation also includes its contingency and its transcendence. In all cases, they all address the uprooting of what we usually understand as classical anthropological essentials. According to Plessner, the human being is, on the one hand, historically and geographically, materially and socially positioned – in his terms “centrally positioned” – but, on the other hand, also already beyond himself and *eccentrically* positioned. As such, for Plessner the human being is essentially inessentializable, or, as he denotes it, the human being is the *Homo absconditus*. In this respect, one might say that the concept of human being and human life as Plessner conceives it is posthuman before posthumanism. However, this point of view clearly pertains to the difference between diverse forms of life in our world. Plants, animals and human beings in certain respects do indeed differ. It is also telling that Plessner ideally typically addresses the specific (dynamic) qualities of human being without positioning the human being as superior to or better than any other form of existence. Posthumanism in his terms would imply that every categorization and essentialization of being human needs to be relativized and thought of as a continuous becoming and repositioning, not because human beings are equal to any other kind of being but, rather, because it is an essential attribute of human beings that they cannot be essentialized. They cannot find a final home and are, at the same time, also eccentrically positioned beyond where they are at that moment. Irrespective of how one describes their current position, this position cannot be described as a real concrete utopia, or as an ideal home, as human beings simultaneously have a true utopian standpoint, beyond any qualities of our current situation. “[F]or behind every determination of our being lies dormant the unspoken possibilities of otherness” (Plessner 1999 [1924]: 109).

Helmuth Plessner describes the typical human eccentric positionality by means of three fundamental anthropological laws: first, the law of natural artificiality; second, the law of mediated immediacy; and, third, the law of the utopian standpoint. Through the eccentric positionality, we human beings lose our natural position and pre-given relationality with the world, which creates the need to enhance ourselves artificially and causes us to lose our direct relationship with our surroundings and with ourselves. This implies that human beings experience it only indirectly, mediated through our current bodily existence and expressive positioning, which is not necessarily or fully intended nor of our choosing. We experience ourselves from a neutral utopian standpoint as essentially contingent and as inherently “deconstructive” beings, which are in constant need to (re)construct ourselves. Heinz-Ulrich Nennen (1991, 1995) even describes the human being as *Homo discursivus* and traces this special human trait back to evolutionary principles. Instead of assuming a new real and concrete ideal utopian home, the utopian standpoint Plessner is presupposing is much more radically inclusive, as it does not attempt to define or concretize this utopian standpoint but assumes it as an inherently transcendental point of view without any attributes or exclusivity. It is a true utopian non-place, or in-between place or place in the nowhere. It defines a specific human openness to everybody and an openness to everything, or to any kind of “other”, irrespective of the kind of nature. This is a strong and radical inclusivity, which goes far beyond the usual critical post-humanism, which does not seem to reach beyond designs of concrete and real utopias, and which does not seem to be aware of the inherent dystopias and contingencies related to their (central) positionings or their convictional “truths”. These presumed restricted real utopias of critical posthumanist positionings always create new dystopian exclusions. However, the utopian standpoint, which Plessner describes as typically human, defines an inclusive “Mitwelt” or shared world as a condition of the possibility to take the perspective of the other, to adopt the moral principle of including and recognizing others as if they were oneself (de Mul 2019: 79–80; Heidegren 2021) and the moral basis for dialogue. In this way, it also relativizes our centric positioning and our autonomy to determine our fate (Lindemann 2014: 96–104). It is not just “bonding” but also “bridging”, as Plessner (1999 [1924]) describes it in *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism*.

At the same time, this typically human eccentric positionality also brings us further away from “home” and makes us constitutively homeless, resulting in a utopian hope to transcend this tragic aspect of the human predicament and to find a blissful home (Plessner 2019 [1928], as quoted by de Mul 2019: 81). This characteristically human, radically inclusive utopian standpoint does not disqualify the attempts of critical posthumanism to establish a concrete, more inclusive conception of human beings in our everyday life.

Instead, it conceives of these attempts as necessary and unavoidable, and as one side of the dual aspect of our being human. But, precisely because the human being *dialectically* emerges in between our centric and eccentric counterparts, these attempts are both from a centric perspective positive positionings and from an eccentric perspective an inherent failure. So, they are positive attempts to deconstruct and overcome hitherto exclusionary categorizations in our everyday life attempting to create a real and more inclusive *real* utopia, while at the same time they are by necessity also creating new dystopian exclusions, seeking new deconstructions searching for even more or different kinds of inclusiveness. Certainly, this kind of philosophical anthropology cannot serve as the “other” of critical posthumanism, but, instead, might serve as enlightening critical posthumanism, making more explicit the rootedness in humanist conceptualizations of critical posthumanism, taking the differences in the different forms of being and living in this world seriously, instead of dealing with the world only from a narrow-minded *real* utopian point of view.

#### HOMO ABSCONDITUS AND PRACTICE THEORY

The attempt of practice theories and of critical posthumanist approaches to do away with the conceptualization of human being and human actions as a genuine source and power for everyday human practices seems to foreclose the reflective and relativizing power of human beings. Human beings, according to Plessner, cannot be essentialized and definitively positioned in specific situational practices. It is an essential attribute of human being and human activity that it *cannot be essentialized*. There is an inherent human dialectics involved, which, even in stable situations and practices, creates a continuous “crisis” and experience of contingency, opening up possibilities of critical reflection on every kind of supposedly utopian practice – or, put in other words, of supposedly successful pragmatic ways of dealing with the circumstances. It creates a continuous driving force for new actions and for further change. Although practice theory as we know it has made great progress with respect to conceptualizing the *centric* way of how we as human beings deal with and immerse ourselves in or emerge out of the practices in our surroundings, it cannot fully explain the driving force towards change, other than referring to the external changes in the circumstances (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012). Therefore, the description of practices, instead of human beings, as reflective and capable of moral judgements about a possible better future practice is not convincing, because in the end reflexivity, also in its diffractive guise (Gullion 2018), and moral judgement can be associated with the eccentric positionality of human being only if one wants to avoid

the reification of reflexivity and moral judgement. It is the eccentric positionality of human beings, as coined by Plessner, that potentially enhances the explanation of change and further inclusion, and may suggest an enriched conceptualization of the reflexivity of human beings and human practices. In this way, practice theories do not simply perpetuate the dualism with an inverted sign, and human beings are not just passive carriers of social practices but actively take part in the reconfiguration of social practices – not as all-knowing rational decision-makers separate from the situation in which they act, but as living and acting organisms that position themselves and are positioned in the framework of a (local) practice, aware of the contingency and the necessary failure of their pragmatic attempt to fully cope with the situation. From this point of view, there is no such thing as a pragmatic successful adaptation to or harmonious participation in a social or political practice (see Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, [Chapter 5](#) in this volume), and there is no utopian situation but, rather, only a dialectical relationship to practices. Human beings can therefore also not be pinned down to their specific position, role and identity within a specific practice, as they are always already *beyond* that practice. In the same way, socio-spatial practices will co-configure and co-construct these positionings and identities. The ambition that through a practice approach one can fully explain what is going on in a specific situation (by looking at the specific configuration of different elements of such a practice, and recognizing certain patterns, which are described as a social practice) is much too optimistic. It is clear that social interaction does not always lead to a consensual situation, and often is better conceptualized in an agonistic way, in which different contrasting positionings cannot always be resolved but result in tensions and differences that need to be endured and respected and might lead to future changes. In the same way as I argue, we also need to conceptualize the human being in an agonistic way (Honig 1993; Mouffe 2016), in which there will always be a tension between the centric and eccentric positionings within a practice. This also implies that there is never a perfect fit or full “recruitment” of the human being into a practice. Human beings are therefore always also a source of misfit, irritation and agential source for change within social practices. This fills in what it means when Davide Nicolini (2012: 4) and Andreas Reckwitz (2002: 256) speak of being human as a carrier of practices and as an agent within practices. This is more than just an almost automatic behavioural reaction to changed circumstances, but a truly reflexive way of dealing with internal and external tensions and differences, with the never-disappearing dystopian aspects of each imagined utopia for a situation or practice, and with the relentlessly unknowable aspects of being human in our daily practices. As Andreas Hetzel (2005: 234) expresses it metaphorically, theoretical unfathomability makes it impossible for any human being to smoothly fit

into any community of practice. This conceptualization of the human agent in social practices can therefore be described as post-foundational, as Ernesto Laclau (2002) assumes.

In the direction I have laid out here, practice theories could be developed further in such a way that they serve not just as a framework for describing and understanding the complexity and dynamics of practices but in a way that could much better serve as a framework for both internal and external critiques of practices and for the design of better practices. It would also consistently radicalize the emancipatory potential and avoid hasty conclusions about the utopian or dystopian aspects of these practices and situations, and thus also help build bridges between seemingly opposing positionings and practices.

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## CHAPTER 12

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

*Friederike Landau-Donnelly, Hanna Carlsson  
and Arnoud Lagendijk*

Dear reader, dear practitioner, dear practice.

You might have read this whole volume. You might have selected to read individual chapters because you were intrigued (or put off) by titles, keywords, themes. You might have skimmed, smiled, frowned, yawned, googled something while reading this book. You might have felt inspired, curious, enlightened, bored, uncomfortable, tired while reading. In drawing this experience to a close (even though you are always invited to return to this book, reread, repeat, reuse, reinterpret, criticize and/or forget about it), in this concluding chapter, we aim to position the conceptual contributions of the book vis-à-vis future directions for spatial research, theory and practice.

So, what has this collection offered? How will future reflections and analyses of practices change when we consider renewed notions of the multiple agencies, properties, conflicts and materialities that co-constitute practice and place? In light of the utterly diverse chapters in this volume, the question “What now?” cannot have an unequivocal answer but is necessarily multidirectional. In line with some of the utopian thinking undergirding this book (see Ernste, [Chapter 11](#) and Ache, [Chapter 10](#)), we want to highlight possibilities and alternatives for future-oriented practice theories and thus unleash new, hybrid, assembled, unorthodox and/or unruly pathways practice theories could go forward with.

Along the lines of the book’s three parts, we review further avenues of reflection on practices, and practice ontologies. Through empirically grounded research on practices, the present volume might have provided insight into how practice theories can better account for power struggles and inequalities in sites and nexuses of practices. For example, through research on women’s boxing, deportation activism, international development and struggles for new career evaluation criteria in Dutch universities, Carlsson ([Chapter 2](#)), Schapendonk ([Chapter 6](#)), Munas and Smith ([Chapter 4](#)) and Lagendijk and Wiering ([Chapter 3](#)) have demonstrated how

practices emerge and manifest temporarily in socio-spatial reality, but also how they are constantly precarious and prone to change. For researchers with transformative research agendas, these invigorating outlooks of practice theory might provide an analytical tool to examine how social change can occur, even in institutions with long histories of perpetuating exclusion and inequality.

For a more poetic, ethnographic reflection on practices, the volume has drawn attention to nuanced engagements with the different modes of “the political” that permeate everyday life (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, [Chapter 5](#)). Unpacking auto-ethnographic practices of everyday life, the book has grappled with the complexities of routine, helping us cope and remember but also move forward and change (Kramersch, [Chapter 7](#)). Taking an essayistic approach, Ache ([Chapter 10](#)) reflects on debates in planning and on what a practice perspective can offer researchers seeking to investigate how utopia can materialize in planning practices. From accounts such as these, further theory-building exercises of practice might be more situated within intersecting logics of conflict and complexity, showing how practices always emerge in already contested spatial contexts.

Last, in terms of reflecting on the shortcoming of canonized practice theories, and terms connected with it, the book has proposed new vocabularies of understanding practice. Examples include [Chapter 9](#) by Geiselhart, Runkel, Schäfer and Schmid, which offers methodological tools to study large phenomena inspired by the work of Latour. Ernste ([Chapter 11](#)) draws on Plessner to critically reflect on the role for the human subject in practice theory. The contribution by de Haan ([Chapter 8](#)) pulls together insights from Deleuze, Latour, Luhmann and Badiou to set out a practice theory of counter-actualization, applied to the case of privacy and surveillance. Rather than offering one direction for practice theory going forward, these chapters provide different roadmaps towards multiple discoveries.

The twofold ambition set out in the introductory chapter was to contribute to the spatialization of practice theory on the one hand, and to enhance the use of practice theory within geography and spatial theory on the other. Have we met this aim? Regarding the former, spatializing practice theory, various chapters have made engaged efforts to apply practice theory using rich geographical notions such as “site”, “space” and “connection”. In our view, this is how far our ambition could go. Studying and storying what happens within and across sites historically and geographically assists us in underlining the pragmatic and engaged focus of practice studies. Regarding the latter, enhancing practice perspectives in geography and spatial theory, many chapters have used practice vocabulary to shed light on practical questions and quarrels about power, politics, conflict, discourse and transformation. What is important here is the immersion into practice. Our call was, and is,

not that geographers should apply “more” practice theory. Rather, what we sought to emphasize is that a practice-attuned lens can be instructive when applying and elaborating geographical (and other) theoretical concepts in our empirical work. This certainly warrants more thinking and elaboration, and we invite scholars to practice this forward.



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