

Toward a theory of social practices

Sociology



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In the article *Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A development in culturalist theorizing*, Andreas Reckwitz explores the main features of 'practice theory', a category of social theory. According to Reckwitz, practice theory is usually offered by scholars as an abstract substitute to other social and cultural suppositions, especially textualism, culturalist mentalism as well as intersubjectivism. The author begins by defining practice theory as "a type of cultural theory" (p. 3) as documented by other social theorists such as Bourdieu and Giddens among others.

In his explanation of practice theory in terms of cultural theory, Reckwitz argues that the 18th century social theory outlines three basic tenets that explain individual actions and social order. These three choices include: purpose-oriented theory, norm-oriented theory and 'cultural theories.' Purpose-oriented theory and norm-oriented theory are usually presented as divergent conceptual choices, but have both been criticized by social philosophy of the 20th century, mainly driven by culturalist revolutions. According to the author, the manner of comprehension and presentation of human action and social order is what distinguishes various cultural theorists from their classical counterparts of 'homo economicus' and 'homo sociologicus'. The homo economicus model presents action via recourse to the intentions, interests and purposes of persons, which demonstrates social order as a manifestation of collective divergent interests. On the other hand, the homo sociologicus model clarifies social order in terms of combined norms and values, portraying normative consensus as a determinant of social order. Modern cultural theories however, explain social order as a product of the interplay between combined cognitive and symbolic

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formations, which clarifies the implication of the world. Therefore, modern cultural theories tend to disown the tenets of the classical models' explanation of social order. The 'homo economicus' as well as 'homo sociologicus' models ignore the implicit knowledge layer, responsible for symbolic organization and understanding of reality.

Reckwitz further presents textualism, mentalism, intersubjectivism and practice theory as the four major forms of cultural theory. According to the author, practice theory is a subset of cultural theory. Unlike other types of cultural theories, practice theory places the 'social' in a distinct sphere. Reckwitz explains that culturalist mentalism exists in the form of objectivist and subjectivist. According to structuralism, the behaviour of humans is determined by the symbolic structures of the 'unconscious' brain.

Practice theory explains the body through a display of sophisticated and interlocked behavioural acts. As such, social practice depicts the result of training the body to behave in a given way. Bodily activities manifest routinized mental and emotional tasks. Consequently, practices are social sites, which make routinized bodily actions the site of social, thus the creation of social order. Other forms of cultural theory hold bodies as epiphenomena. Mentalism points out at the distinction between mind and body, where the mind instructs the body. In textualism, bodies are among the objects that present as symbols whereas intersubjectivism portrays bodily actions emanating from agents' constellation. The author further explores the difference between practice theory and other cultural theories on the basis of the social localization as well as the understanding of the body, mind, knowledge and agent among others.

Reckwitz concludes by arguing that practice theory eradicates the

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deficiencies in hyperrational theory and classical theories. The author argues that “ practice theory 'decentres' mind, texts and conversation” (p. 18).

Further, he asserts that practice theory ought to develop higher philosophical perseverance while maintaining its robust approach to empirical social as well as cultural assessments.

Reference

Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5 (2): 245- 265.