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Practices as the new fundamental social formation in the knowledge society[1]

POVZETEK: Avtor analizira koncept prakse, ki je šele nedavno prišel v ospredje družbene teorije. Model družbe, ki temelji na 'pravilih' ali 'normah' je zavajajoča abstrakcija in 'praksa' bolje razloži dejstvo, da življenje v družbi ni zgolj stvar pravil ampak praktično obvladovanje namigov in pričakovanj drugih. Prostor razlage se premakne iz kulture kot determinante socialnega sistema k bolj pragmatičnemu razumevanju učinkov praks, ki potekajo. Prakse postanejo značilne enote družbenega grupiranja v družbi znanja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE:prakse, družba znanja, skupne duševne vsebine, znanost, civilna družba

The difference between the concept of practice and the concept of social norm (or models of society in terms of the following of rules), is well expressed by Pierre Bourdieu in his classic study *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (*Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*):

> The language of rules and models, which seems tolerable when applied to "alien" practices, ceases to convince as soon as one considers the practical mastery of the symbolism of social interaction– tact, dexterity, or savoir-faire– presupposed by the most everyday games of sociability and accompanied by the application of a spontaneous semiology, i.e. a mass of precepts, fomulae, and codified cues. This practical knowledge, based on the continuous decoding of the perceived– but not consciously noticed– indices of the welcome given to actions already accomplished, continuously carries out the checks and corrections intended to ensure the adjustment of practices and expressions to the reactions and expectations of the other agents. It functions like a self-regulating device programmed to redefine courses of action in accordance with information received on the reception of information transmitted and on the effects produced by that information. (1977: 10-11)

The "rules" or "norms" model of society is a misleading abstraction; "practices" is a concept that better captures the fact that living in society is a matter not simply of following rules, but of practical mastery of the cues and expectations of others, of the use of symbols, and of a process of continuous mutual adjustment. The differences are sometimes subtle, but they have meant that the concepts have played quite

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1. Portions of this paper are derived from my introduction to *Brains/Practices/Relativism*, University of Chicago Press.

different roles: role-like concepts, such as culture and ideology, can be thought of as superstructural, *Überbau*, concepts explained and determined by some other kind of fact, such as fundamental economic relations. Practice, however, is a fundamental concept. It is not explained in any simple way by a different structure, but it is itself a basic (and hidden) structure that produces visible or overt structure, according to the internal logic of the strategies it permits, and that lead to its continuation.

Conceptually, then, "practices" are a fundamental social formation of a distinct type. And we might reasonably ask why this type has not been especially important in the past in social theory, and why it is so important today. Part of the answer is this: Practices are often **not** very important to macrosociology. We can study the political and social structure of Ancient Rome, for example, without much discussion, or even knowledge, of the practices, in Bourdieu's sense, of the Romans. In part this is because our knowledge of Roman life is so limited that we are forced to employ only abstract models. If we knew more, we would need practices. However, there is another reason having to do with a fundamental change in social life itself. In this essay I hope to explain why practices have recently become important to social theory in understanding the novel social form known as "the knowledge society." But to understand this it is first necessary to understand the concept of practices, its variants, and the differences with other members of the same conceptual family.

1 Family of Practice Concepts

The family of concepts of practices, includes two large sub-families of concepts. One includes notions like frames, world views, and paradigms, and the other includes *habitus*, embodied knowledge, skills, and *mores*, among other things. I will not say much about the differences between these various concepts in the first part of the essay. What I will discuss here relates to a specific issue with all of these concepts: their status as theoretical entities. The issue, put simply, is that all of these concepts are "theoretical" in the sense that we must infer their existence and their powers from their observable effects. We cannot observe "a culture" or "a paradigm" directly. We see only manifestations, consequences, and effects. So there is an open question about what these entities really are. Are they supraindividual "external" realities, like Émile Durkheim's collective consciousness? Or are they no more than convenient descriptions of patterns that are composed of individual skills, beliefs, actions, habits, and expectations?

The issue here may be seen most simply through an example. If one were to claim, for example, that there is a "European skiing culture," and point to the evidence of certain typical behaviors of skiers in Europe that are less common elsewhere, is one describing and outcome of the various individual skills, habits, beliefs, and actions of skiers in Europe, or describing the outcome of a collective process that guarantees the pattern, holds the skiers to it, and also in some fashion assures its own continuation? This is a very deep and basic question about the nature of social reality and "the social" itself. The table that follows distinguishes the major approaches to these deep questions.

Table 1

SOCIAL	NON-SOCIAL
Cognitive/Social paradigms, Weltanschauungen, presuppositions, structures of consciousness or meaning, collective consciousness, systems of collective representations, tacit knowledge, the "rules" model in conversational analysis, the Searle of *Speech Acts*, etc.	**Cognitive/Non-Social** artificial intelligence rule and symbolic representational model without sharing of rules.
Sub-Cognitive/Social skills, **habitus**, **mores**, "forms of life" and life-world, etc. conceived as "collective," (perhaps tradition in an Oakeshottian sense, probably in Shils's sense), Kripke's rules, collective intentions.	**Sub-Cognitive/Non-Social** habits, skills, etc. as the "tacit" part of an ensemble in which there are explicit parts (activities, rituals, performances, etc.) that the individual adjusts to.

In the table, the social/non-social divide refers to what can be thought of as location: whether a practice or worldview is understood to be located in some sort of supraindividual place, such as "the social," or is no more than what exists within individual brains and bodies. Thomas Kuhn's concept of a "paradigm," presumably, is social **and** cognitive: "social" because it is "shared" rather than individual; "cognitive" because it consists of something like beliefs or premises, or frameworks for seeing that are understood more or less on the model of premises. These distinctions are not very precise, it must be said, and in many settings not much hinges on separating skills from beliefs. The families are closely related. But there are characteristically different emphases.

The "cognitive" family employs notions like rule, premise, structure of consciousness, collective representations, tacit knowledge. These usages depend on an analogy with speech, writing, or picturing: the mental content is similar to what can be directly articulated as roles, propositions, and images. The sub-cognitive or "skills" family emphasizes the non-articulable. These things may be indicated explicitly, such as the "judicial sense" of a good judge, but cannot usefully be described in terms of rules. One way of drawing this distinction is between propositional and non-propositional knowledge. Another is to say, more poetically, that the family of sub-cognitive notions is the family of things "inscribed on the body."

Like Kuhn's concept of paradigm, the most common and familiar usages in both branches of the practice family are **social** rather than **individual**. It is essential to the argument of Pierre Bourdieu, for example, that individual properties, such as dispositions, are constituted or produced by **collective** processes. The *habitus* of the participant includes dispositions, which produce actions, which produce responses in persons similarly programmed, which assure the continuation of the activity, which in turn "programs" the *habitus* or dispositions that make the activity possible. The basic point is this: practices have both a causal primacy and a kind of autonomy in relation to the

individual, what Durkheim called externality ([1895]1982), though it is often unclear what they really mean by this. There are, however, those who seem to reject this kind of objectification of collective notions who nevertheless also seek to employ notions like tradition and skill, and who also accord the "tacit" a large and significant role, such as Michael Oakeshott (1962) or Michael Polanyi ([1946]1964). For these thinkers, the content is carried in the (different) skills of the **individuals**, whose common actions constitute the "tradition." The patterns, however, are descriptive facts. These thinkers do not assume that there is any common mental content between the participants in the tradition, or, like Bourdieu, that practices are the sorts of things that can assure their own continuation. That which is "external" or "social" is simply the actions and sayings of others. "Continuation" is a result of the decisions of individuals, and not of collective forces.

The table is not a complete picture of the family of practice concepts, however, and there are several interesting alternatives. But, before turning to some alternatives, it will be useful to consider some of the issues with the concepts in these two families that the alternative concepts are attempting to avoid. The first issue has to do with psychological processes, which is a problem especially for supraindividual accounts. Actions are individual and so are brains, so there must be some individual psychological processes through which the objects-- such as practices-- operate. This relation may be as simple as the following: **language** is a real substantive normative structure beyond individuals that individuals internalize or habituate in order to speak, form verbal thoughts, and the like. Nevertheless, "internalization" and "habit" are psychological facts about the individual language user in whom something must happen. Here the structure is not causally autonomous in its operations, nor does it exist in a different collective dimension, or in an unrelated category of reality, the realm of spirit. It must exist in individual minds, as well.

The second issue is the problem of continuity or identity, which is a problem for both "individual" concepts and "embodiment" concepts. Whatever a tradition or practice is, it cannot exist **solely** in the individual because the individual dies. There is no direct continuity or transference of mental contents from brain to brain, or body to body, or mind to mind-- only continuity mediated by speech, objects, and activities. A tradition seems to be something more than the sum of such parts. Or is it? Could it be merely the name for a pattern, like European skiing, which has descriptive significance but does not point to a "cause" called European skiing culture that is the shared mental content of skiers in Europe? If the element of continuity is not mental content, what is it?

1.1 The Problem With Shared Mental Content

To say that people "share" presuppositions or practices means that they have the **same** presuppositions or practices. The usual argument for this is that people do something, such as communicate; they could not communicate unless they shared the same framework; therefore they share the same framework. This argument is similar to a standard strategy used by Polanyi and many others to argue that explicit rules are

never sufficient to explain an activity, such as science, and need to be supplemented by something tacit (for Polanyi: "tacit knowledge"). But the argument that something extra (and tacit, such as a skill) is needed to explain, for example, communication or scientific discovery, **is not the same** as the argument for a shared framework or for the possession of the same practices. The argument for "sharing" or sameness requires us to believe that there is some mechanism by which the same rules, presuppositions, or practices get into the heads of different people. But if we consider the various possible strategies for solving this problem of transmission, we soon see that it is insurmountable. The claim that the **same** practices, presuppositions, and the like get into the heads of many people requires a means of transmission that is little short of magical.

The point may be seen in a simple consideration. As anyone who has tried to write an instruction manual knows, ordinary communication is difficult, even if we use the full range of available explicit language. One version of the tacit knowledge hypothesis makes the following astounding assumption: that people can (and routinely do) obtain perfect reproductions of the tacit possessions of others. In other words, people "share" extremely complex common frameworks. Moreover, somehow they acquire these frameworks through means that are radically less error-prone than ordinary explicit communication is. Indeed, to really "share" they **must** be error-free. The means in question must be much more effective than ordinary "training," which is of course imperfect. In *The Social Theory of Practices* I concluded that there were no psychological processes that corresponded to the notion of "sharing": that acquiring the tacit possessions that people need is an imperfect training-like process that could not guarantee that people would "share" anything tacit, but could only, like training at its most successful, assure that people had certain habituated capacities to perform. Training of this sort only affects external similarities of performance: it tells us nothing about sameness of tacit possessions. Learning "from experience" is likely to produce an even greater diversity than formal training.

The "habituation" alternative to "sharing," once we look carefully, seems to accord better with what we know about the causal processes that actually operate in the world and with the known facts that practice theories purport to explain. This alternative account of what is going on when people learn to communicate, make scientific discoveries, and so forth, is more plausible as an explanation because it does not appeal to any quasi-magical processes of transmission. Individual habituation (with the term being broadly construed to include all acquired learning that is tacit), I argued, does explain the same things, and we can even make some sense of such mysterious things as our common feelings by reference to the role of rituals and performances– which are public actions not magical acts of "programming" ŕ la Bourdieu-- in inducing habits. This approach inverts the usual explanation of a tradition, for example, not by saying that its rituals are performed because people share a common framework, instead by saying that rituals are behavioral technologies that produce a certain uniformity of habits-- but a uniformity that is literally superficial, a matter of external similarity, with internal or personal consequences that vary from individual to individual. Prayer, for example, has effects on those who pray. But the effects vary from person to person.

My way of thinking about this problem is summed up in the slogan "we learn the language and the world together" I used at the end of *The Social Theory of Practices* which revised Stanley Cavell's famous saying, by which he meant that the processes of learning the one were inseparable from the processes of learning the other. I said that we should add to this that "Not only do we learn language and the world together, at the same time as we learn them we acquire habits that enable us to be more or less proficient in using both language and the world" (Turner 1994: 121). By this I meant that the processes of learning "objective," explicit, or public things were inseparable from tacit processes of habituation. My point was that the feedback mechanisms of experience that produce habituation are personal, or individual, but at the same time bound up with learning an idiom and experiencing the world.

Something important, however, does get lost in this argument, and lost on purpose. There is no place in this model for a notion of hidden purpose or collective purpose, such as Bourdieu claims to find when he theorizes that the practices of various dominant social groups "accumulate cultural capital" according to the "logic of domination." Suffice it to say that many users of the concept of practices and its variants have such a notion, and this is part of their appeal. There is, however, an objection, nicely formulated by Jon Elster, which is fatal to such theories. Elster says that to have a notion of purpose it is a minimal requirement that some sort of feedback mechanism exist by which the activity in question can be modified as a result of changes in circumstances in accordance with the purposes (Elster, 1983: 105-7). Without a feedback mechanism, Elster suggests, there is nothing to the notion of purpose, at least in the sense of a purpose that has effects on, and guides, behavior. If I have a thermostat on my air conditioner, it might be said that the thermostat has the purpose of regulating a temperature and acts to switch the power on and off in accordance with this purpose. But thermostats **have** feedback mechanisms. They are connected to thermometers. The thermometers feed back to the switching mechanism when the temperature reaches a particular point in a range. Such mechanisms can be characterized entirely in causal terms. So if having a feedback mechanism is, so to speak, an essential condition for asserting that something has an inherent purpose or a purpose of the sort that practices are supposed to have, that is, one that guides what people do, it is also true that claims about purposes of the sort made by Bourdieu-- for example the anthropomorphic notion of assuring its own continuation-- are incomplete. To be complete, they need causal feedback mechanisms and other mechanisms necessary to produce corrected outputs. The problem this creates for these theories will be discussed shortly.

1.2 Practices as a New Basic Social Formation of the Knowledge Society

One relevant question is to ask why, out of all the metaphors, concepts, and usages that have flourished in modern social theory to describe the mental aspect of social formations, has the concept of practices become such a central concept and such an important locus of analysis, one that has in many respects supplanted the earlier concepts. Practice, indeed is the most fashionable usage of the day in this large family of related concepts. What is it about the present that makes it so relevant? The answer

to this question, I will now suggest, can be understood by seeing what happens when the concept "practices" is substituted for the traditional notions, such as "culture" and "values."

What does the concept of practices have to do with social formations and the traditional tasks of sociology? If we consider the origins of the most important applications of the concept of practices, it becomes clear that there are two sources of interest in the concept. One is evident in Pierre Bourdieu's own studies of the Kabyl (1977: 16-22) where the notions of practice served to replace more traditional notions of culture.

The contrasts are striking. Under of the influence of thinkers like Talcott Parsons the idea of culture was associated with the idea of a central value system, norms, and the idea that culture was a stabilizing contributor to social system processes. Among the many epistemological and ontological points that Bourdieu makes against the structuralist version of this view of culture is the point that the standard structuralist interpretation is overly rigid. Actual bodies of practice need to be understood not, as Lévi-Strauss famously put it, in terms of the difference between hot and cold societies (1966), but in terms of their continual renewal in processes of their own reproduction. This suggests shifts in the locus of explanation from culture as a kind of ongoing, but fixed, determinant in the social system to a more pragmatic understanding of the ongoing effects of the reproduction of practices. This allows us to see "reproduction" as part of struggles and modes of distinction within society itself, and, thus, replaces **both** the static notion of "culture" and the notion of ideology.

The appeal of Bourdieu rests in part on his use of the concept of practice to provide, in effect, a replacement for traditional Marxism. The historical specifics of the case of Bourdieu are quite fascinating (c.f. Masson 2001). His career was greatly facilitated by the association he established when French Communist party dominated teachers' unions. His analysis of the function of and the class reproducing teleology of the system of education served as an extension of a form of class analysis precisely a point in the 1960s where the traditional French working class had effectively lost its solidaristic identity and more generally its social distinctiveness with respect to its mode of life and the culture it consumed. Indeed, one of the achievements of the left in the postwar period was to gradually render obsolete many of the institutions that had formerly served the working class by enabling the working class to participate in the benefits of the postwar consumer economy of Europe, which did a great deal to erode working class distinctiveness and communalism. One natural consequence of these developments was to kill the idea of a distinct proletarian ideology. The idea of a working class that was the bearer of revolutionary anti-capitalism could now be seen as an historical relic and the working class could be absorbed into the ordinary give and take of the interests of any modern liberal society-- with no need for worldview, ideology, and so forth.

Bourdieu rediscovered and elevated to central significance the fact of differences in modes of existence, but he now concentrated on the means of producing social distinctions, and on the role of educational institutions in doing so. Cultural capital, as a concept, could then replace capital, and the basic teleological structure of Marxism

could be preserved and modernized. The possessors of cultural capital oppress those who lacked cultural capital and instill in them a false consciousness that perpetuates their oppression (cf. Bourdieu 1977: 171-97), an oppression to be unmasked by the intellectuals. This amounts to an important change from "ideology." The "end of ideology" was, for earlier thinkers like Raymond Aron, an actual and tangible fact: it was simply the case that the formerly powerful class ideologies of the past had lost their relevance and persuasiveness. If "Ideology" is replaced by "practice," the concept has new life. Practice, now understood as a means of sustaining "cultural capital," thus replaced the standard Marxian notion of ideology as a means of sustaining capital. Certainly an enormous part of the appeal of the concept of practice and the idea in its vulgar form– the notion of "oppressive practices"-- depends on its value as a substitute and placeholder for the defunct notion of ideology. Thinkers such as Foucault, who opted for more radical revision of this basic teleological structure of oppression nevertheless found the dialectic of resistance and the struggle to perpetuate practices in the face of resistance to be a useful site for analysis of vaguely "critical" kind. Thus the concept of practices came to serve as a surrogate for the older tradition of *Ideologikritik*, and enabled its own continuation.

Yet this shift was not merely a matter of substituting concepts. Ideology was a concept best suited to a society of ranks, clear social distinctions, economic issues over which there were differences in interests, and political parties representing those interests. The notion of practices and resistance, in contrast, opened on to another set of issues, issues that both older views of a unitary "culture" and *Ideologikritik* had in fact glossed over and which now became more and more important, both politically, as a result of the rise of indigenous movements, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, and so forth, but also because of the recognition that these movements were correct to claim that practices were forming or constituting forces that played the major role in the production of distinctive forms of social life, despite the fact that social form in question, unlike capitalism, had little in the way of explicit "ideology" to "critique." The idea that explicit practices were written on the body or embodied rather than merely ideological formations, reproduced not merely through the traditional media of high culture, but through everyday lived experience, meant that these movements and the forms of life that they defended and celebrated could be most appropriately understood through the notion of practices.

2 Science as Practice

The concept of practices was also lent a great deal of gravity by its successful use in science studies. Ironically, the history of this body of usage involves an intellectual genealogy that leads back not to Marxism but to a liberal response to the Marxist analysis of natural science pioneered by Boris Hessen (Bucharin et al 1931, Olwell 1996) and elaborated by J. D. Bernal (Olwell 1996). Soviet analyses of science in the 1930s emphasized the role of rising social classes in producing and demanding particular forms of technical development, which were given an ideological superstructure that

conformed to the ideological demands of the rising bourgeoisie. Thus Newton was simultaneously the inventor of technical means for the bourgeois revolution and the creator of a worldview for the understanding of physical reality that coheres with the bourgeois view of the nature of social life. The base/superstructure model is preserved in the argument. For Hessen and Bernal, of course, this analysis implied that the full use of the means of production in **late** capitalism required the transformation of social relations of science in such a way that new social demands could be placed on science, and science would be brought it into the position of better serving the needs of mankind than was possible under the capitalist order. Here science was understood as technology.

The great Liberal critic of this point of view, Michael Polanyi, argued that science had to be understood (especially with respect to the process of discovery) as a strongly traditional body of practice resting on tacit knowledge and irreducible to mere technology. Liberal societies, rooted in the idea of public reason and "government by discussion," respect the seeking of truth, and for this reason have a kind of ideological affinity to science. The willingness to not interfere in the market economy has an affinity to noninterference in science as a truth-seeking autonomous enterprise. Polanyi's point was that the state could never "plan" scientific discovery nor could science be fully rationalized according to some sort of external authoritarian scheme. This was in conflict with the open-ended practical nature of science as a practice. Here the feature of irreducibility was turned against the possibility of planning and thus against one of the fundamental ideas of the left: the elimination of politics in favor of the administration of things, as Saint-Simon memorably expressed it. Science, according to Polanyi, appeared irreducibly free and "unadministerable." It was part of the world of free adherents to tradition, not the world of Saint-Simonian "things."

The tacit knowledge part of this argument reappeared, as did the idea of the autonomy of science, in the thought of Thomas Kuhn, who avoided the political aspects of Polanyi's argument. Practice figured as one of the meanings of the term paradigm. Sociologists of science such as Harry Collins, who studied practices of scientists, and especially the tacit knowledge involved in science (1985). These studies were primarily concerned with the way that practices serve to constitute objects, to establish the truth of scientific facts, at the same time that they were social, required tacit knowledge, and were irreducible to such things as methodological principles in science. These uses of the concepts practice and tacit knowledge were easily stigmatized, as Polanyi's own argument for tacit knowledge had been, as a kind of irrationalism and in one respect this was true. They focused on the aspects of the production of knowledge that were taken to be rational or true, that could not themselves be rationalized, such as skills. This was a strategy that lent itself to other applications of the "social construction of reality" outside of science, such as the social construction of categories such as the category of "disabled", child abuse, and so forth, which were seen as practical achievement rather than simple applications of truth. The form of these arguments, indeed, was to show the taken-for-granted structure of practical achievement behind the production of "facts" and "truths," and in this way was both inspired by (and cohered with) the

tradition of ethnomethodology (which could now itself be reinterpreted in terms of the concept of practice).

The problem of concern to science studies, and which turns out to be applicable to many other areas of knowledge in which activities require a great deal of unspoken, unwritten, but also **specialized** knowledge, is itself the product of a massive social transformation. The proper point of departure is perhaps the discussion of professional morality and its role in the production of organic solidarity in Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society.* In retrospect we can see something curious about Durkheim's characterization of the right kind of division of labor. He envisioned the appropriate, or non-pathological division of labor in modern society, which he of course do not believe had been achieved, in a way that is somewhat suggestive of Syndicalist fascism. It is a form in which the various professions would were governed, independently, by distinctive professional moralities which contributed to organic solidarity. This basic idea that professional morality was the link to society, was later taken up not only by Talcott Parsons, who of course elaborated it in terms of the problem of the doctor/patient role set and its governing morality, but also in the study of the phenomena of professionalization which was inspired by the Chicago School which initially concerned itself merely with occupations.

Although the human relations of professionals and the peculiar forms of the roles that professionals assumed were much discussed during this period, very little was said about the nature of the craft work of the professions, or of the knowledge of members of specialized workers. The discussion of physicians, for example, proceeded for the most part without any particular discussion about the specificity of the craft knowledge of surgeons or the skills that could not be articulated that went into such activities as diagnosis and care. The analysis of the social character of the professions, in other words, was limited to an analysis of the **social interactions** of professions, the norms governing the roles involved, and the value orientations of professions. The knowledge possessed by professionals was, in contrast, not seen as a topic for social analysis (cf. Parsons 1964: 34-68, 55).

The issue of tacit knowledge came to the fore in science studies in part as a result of something that had little to do with social theory, social formations, or social movements. The application of computer technology to professions led to "knowledge engineering": attempts to provide computerizable forms of expertise on which physicians or lawyers could either rely or which could substitute for them. Similarly in science. A famous book by Herbert Simon argued that scientific discovery itself would be modeled on computers (1977). The problem of "knowledge" in this sense in retrospect can be seen as essentially ignored by earlier sociologists and not seen as intellectually problematic. A statement by Karl Mannheim exempted scientific, or at least, more vaguely, true scientific knowledge from "sociological" explanation, leaving only error as a topic of social explanation (Bloor 1976: 8). The "Strong Program in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge" rejected this exemption. Moreover, once the professions were established and became expensive and powerful, questions about the true nature of the craft knowledge in question became more obvious as a social problem, particularly with respect to

such topics as the cost of the "craft" of health care and whether the expense of "professional knowledge" was justified.. The literature on scientific discovery seemed to provide a "practice" answer to those questions. This literature suggested, as Polanyi had earlier argued, that the production of scientific facts could sometimes be reduced to routines or even replaced by machines (black-boxed, in the phrase of Bruno Latour: "A black box contains that which no longer needs to be considered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference,"1981: 285), but not completely: skills remained essential, and irreducible to norms or rules. That answer of course extended to great many other specialized forms of knowledge which lent themselves to an understanding not so much in terms of professional morality but in terms of craft skill.

In these cases ,very often, what traditionally had been understood as social relationships were neglected as a topic, and to such an extent that the analysis scarcely resembled traditional sociological studies of occupations at all. In this roundabout way, the Durkheimian problem of **specialized occupational moralities** in the face of an advanced division of labor was replaced by a problem of **specialized knowledges** in an advanced, and moreover continuously changing, division of labor. The Durkheimian idea of professional morality seems in relation in many occupations or skills to be largely irrelevant, assuming if it does a kind of "cold" situation in which professional knowledges and professional culture is fixed, or at least unproblematic, with respect to social norms for long periods of time. The point of the specialist in science is that these forms of craft skill are typically very short lived and local. The knowledge contained in them is very often black-boxed or built into a new technology which makes the skill itself unnecessary. But this disappearing knowledge is quickly replaced at the leading edge of science and technology by new activities requiring new specialized skills.

This change obviously reflects a very wide reaching change in the conditions of work in the face of rapidly changing technology. Whereas, in the nineteenth century and even well into the twentieth century a physician would receive as a medical student a full set of medical instruments and a medical bag that could be expected to last for many years, modern medical equipment is disposable, constantly redesigned, and skills and its use need to be acquired quickly and many of the skills that one might acquire would be expected to be made obsolete by improvement in technology. Medicine, in this respect, is itself somewhat antique and traditional compared to the writing of computer programs and the employment of new complex software technology, which involves skills that are to a very large extent not generalizable skills, and moreover are quickly made obsolete by changes in the technology itself. In these cases there is highly specialized knowledge that amounts to very refined practical skills in operating, fixing, and exploiting a given technology.

This kind of knowledge is far more usefully understood in terms of notions of practice and practical knowledge than in terms of the notion of a profession. Professions, with their lifetime certification and their long processes of formal training seem indeed to be an obsolescent social form. It is for these reasons that theorists like Nico Stehr (1992) have begun to apply the term "knowledge society" as a characterization of the newest forms of the division of labor, which are dominated by the fact of the

division of labor with respect to knowledge. This characterization identifies the reason for the vast expansion of the notion of practice at the expense of more traditional colder conceptions, such as ideology and professional morality. Whatever else may be said about the knowledge society, it is a society in which specialized knowledge is important to in an unprecedented extent. The skills of an industrial worker in the nineteenth century were much more generic and the workers were much more readily replaceable than they are today, and the traditional lifetime acquisition of the status of a craftsman, such as a master mason, traditions handed down for centuries, have now been replaced by knowledge specialization whose life span may only be a few years and which is a possession of an extremely small number of people. Of course this kind of specialization of knowledge has been found in universities for at least a century. But it is obviously completely unprecedented that a similar kind of knowledge specialization should be characteristic of the daily life and work experience of millions of well paid and important people as part of the center of modern economic life.

In the face of this transformation, traditional nineteenth century usages such as professional morality and ideology are essentially useless. The idea of specialized knowledge that is not reducible to formula and cannot be deskilled without relying on new kinds of skills, the idea, that is, of a permanent frontier of highly skilled specialized knowledge is a powerful repudiation of the idea that a mere rehabilitation of nineteenth century Marxism through such notions as deskilling adequately accounts for present social processes. Concepts of practice go to the core of the problem of the skilled production of knowledge and result itself, and thus illuminate the inner workings of this novel social order.

3 Civil Society and Practices

The idea of practices as the distinctive units of social grouping in the knowledge society is not merely a successor to the older concept of "occupation" in a division of labor but poses significantly new theoretical problems. Thinkers like Durkheim had in mind the older model of the guild, and curiously enough, in some of the early Marxist writings on the role of science in society, Bernal's *Social Functions of Science* (1939), for example, the same model was employed. The idea was that the place of scientific knowledge in civil society could be managed in a civil society organized on socialist lines if scientists were organized like a trade union with a collective structure and leadership that was oriented toward collective social purposes. The thought here was that this form of organization would maximize the input of science by planning science in such a way that the planners were themselves scientists but also were committed to, and able to serve as expert contributors to, a society organized around collective goal seeking. All that was needed was to realign the interests and resources of scientists toward the collective good. Needless to say this a model in theory only. The problem it poses– how to utilize expert knowledge in society– is more central than ever.

The form of problem that dominates the present arises in connection with the notion of civil society and the idea of maximizing the potentialities of civil society. Theorists

like Jürgen Habermas assume that expanding the public's share and assuring full recognition for all participants including those whose formal rights in liberal democracy are undermined by their social position of subordination in the private sphere maximizes the potential of civil society, if appropriately guided by critique. Theorists like Roberto Mangabiera Unger seem willing to eliminate even this constraint-- for him the goal is to fully democratize discussion. The problem of practices, and the recognition that knowledge in the full sense is extremely closely dependent on full participation in very specific "expert" bodies of practice, conflicts very dramatically with these ideas. Experts in a market situation must sell their expertise and their "power" depends on their abilities to persuade others to buy it. In the public sphere, operating under the principles of equal participation in public discourse, however, the expert is so to speak merely another speaker and the credibility of the expert is formally the same as the nonexpert who must be persuaded (Turner, 2001). The difficulty is that the nonexpert must be persuaded not on the grounds that experts persuade others, because this necessarily requires initiation into the expert practice itself, but on other grounds. If this implies that, say, astrologers and global warming experts may each find that there are people who are persuaded by them, but with whom they have a discursive relation not of persuasion and de facto discursive equality, but one of cult-like adherence and cult-like respect, the implications seem clear: the goal of the older left of maximizing the contribution of science to society is significantly undermined and compromised by democratizing discourse.

It is to the credit of such thinkers as Bernal that they recognized the conflict between expertise and liberal democratic discussion as a problem. But their response to it was to accept the need for expert rule. They appealed to the model of "planning" of the thirties, and understood the need for "democracy" in the light of the Communist understanding of the process of assembling plans by the reliance on a chain of collective leadership in which the collective bodies of scientific labor would, through willing submission to the authority of democratic centralism, self-organize to serve the plan and contribute to the process of planning by bringing their special expertise to the table−not as stakeholders with special interests, but as co-participants in the building of socialism. This model is alien to the contemporary left, and especially to the project of critiquing present-day liberal democracies for failing to live up to their democratic potential. But it is necessary for liberal democracies, and especially liberal democracies engaged in the critical theory project of maximizing the potentiality of their civil societies, to construct means by which expert knowledge that is genuine has the desired effect.

Habermas argued that the maximization of discursive rationality requires the elimination of communicative barriers and authority, but he does not explain how it is possible for, for example, scientists concerned with such phenomena as global warming to justify their claims to nonscientists who cannot, because they have not been educated in the practices of this particular branch of science, to fully or even minimally comprehend the rational justification. And indeed this is precisely the implication of the notion of practices--that at the ground level of rational justification are practices, so that, specialized practices, which cannot be further justified, nor can they be rationally

scrutinized with respect to considerations of any sort of universalistic rationality. We can of course assess experts by evaluating their achievement, by assessing the social mechanisms of accountability, such as the awards and degrees that scientists have, and so forth in order to make judgments about the genuineness of their expertise. But these are not means that so to speak bring scientists into rational dialogue: they are, rather, means which treat scientists as tools.

Looked at in terms of social formations, then, we can now see the present as a time in which there is a fundamental conflict or a fundamental puzzle about the relationship between two of its most important social formations, namely representative democracy engaging in persuasive liberal discourse, or government by discussion, on the one hand, and on the other hand a balkanized knowledge society consisting of practices within which rational justification and argument is possible but which are not universalizable, not universally understandable, and not transformable into proper subject matter for liberal discussion itself. Nor is this problem going to ever be fully resolved institutionally. Although there are many solutions to the problem of expert power on the institutional realm, such as the creation of international panels on global warming and so forth, these bodies must always be subject to democratic scrutiny and control and new forms of practice typically demand new institutional structures.

One can think of the conflict here as analogous to the Marxian conflict between the means of production and the system of capitalism, because it is, like the conflict Marx supposed to exist between the market and new forms of technology a conflict between a potential, namely the potential good that derives from expert knowledge based on bodies of knowledge, specialized bodies of knowledge practice and the limitations of liberal political discourse as a means of assimilating and employing this knowledge.

The problem of the nineteenth century was the division of labor. All major social theorists addressed this problem (cf. Mueller), and in a sense it defined politics in that century as a matter of class conflict or agrarian reform. The twentieth century was an era in which two alternatives to the market, fascism and Communism, were tried, and market regulation expanded. In the case of the division of labor the conflict was between opponents who understood each other– the conflicts were over interests, and to the extent that they were over outlooks and worldviews, the outlooks were reflections of the interests. Knowledge specialists with skills in producing and understanding knowledge of particular kinds have interests, and form part of a division of labor. But the older model of the division of labor was, in theory at least, compatible with democracy. Reform, regulation, even (before Leninism) the transition to Communism itself could be accomplished through public discussion and persuasion– and if it could not, the obstacles, such as false consciousness, the culture machine, and so forth, were not products of the division of labor itself.

The new "division of knowledge labor," understood in terms of practices differs. Democratic discussion with respect to the products of specialized knowledge skills is inherently impossible. Makeshift solutions are possible, and in this respect the parallel to the nineteenth century problem of the division of labor is precise. Utopian schemes were tried but failed. Neither the market nor the command economy were ever fully

implemented. The problems became more serious the closer they came to full imple-mentation. Democratization of discourse and rule by experts are, similarly, utopias, as is Ulrich Beck's idea of the combination of the two in a kind of higher democratic and reflexive expertise (1998). But these are the utopias that are brought forward by the basic problem of the conflict between the diversity of practices and democracy. The prominence of practices as an analytic concept is deserved. The concept points the defining new social formation of the age, and a defining tension: between democratic civility and expertise.

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