Imagining, Theorizing, and Academic Writing

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Abstract *The analytical vocabularies known as practice theory, or praxeology, open up new possibilities for deciphering highly specialized (artistic, literary, academic, etc.) activities, focusing on their material, bodily, affective and especially their—simultaneously situated and locating—dimensions and potentials. The paper exemplifies this with reference to academic writing. It is emphasized that 'theorizing' and 'imagining' should be understood as procedural epistemic aspects of actual writing that is only loosely connected to the production of enduring texts.*

Keywords *Practice Theory; Academic Writing; Imagining; Theorizing*

Introduction

In recent decades, the turn to practice has emerged as a new theoretical and analytical direction in (social) philosophy and the social and cultural sciences. The analytical vocabularies known as practice theory, or praxeology, open new possibilities for understanding and describing not only ordinary customs and everyday activities but also highly specialized (artistic, literary, scientific, etc.) activities, focusing on their material, physical, affective and especially their—simultaneously situated and locating—dimensions and potentials.[1] Despite their heterogeneity, these approaches have something in common. In contrast to traditional explanations of action, they do not focus on ideas, values, norms, communication, and sign and symbol systems, but rather on social practices through their situatedness, their material anchoring in

1 Cf. the following publications on the practice theory debate: Schaefer (ed.) 2016; Spaargaren/ Weenik/ Lamers (Eds.) 2016; Hui/ Schatzki/ Shove (Eds.) 2017; Jonas/ Littig/ Wroblewski (Eds.) 2017.

bodies and artifacts, and their dependence on practical skills and implicit knowledge (cf. Schmidt, *Soziologie* 24). In praxeological approaches, social action is not viewed, as in conventional theories of action, as a single isolated individual activity controlled by underlying interests, motives, objectives, values or norms; instead, it is seen as a concatenation of reproducing and continuously self-actualizing "doings and sayings" (Schatzki, *Site of the Social* 77) grounded in material and bodily realities and socially understood through shared tacit knowledge and practical knowing-how (cf. Schmidt, *Culture-Analytical*). Theories of practices thus undermine dualistic juxtapositions of action and structure, actor and institution, individual and society, and, equally important, practice and theory (cf. Bourdieu, *Outline*). They describe social practices as observable regularities produced in meaningful performances that can neither be attributed to an isolated actor nor to institutional entities alone (cf. Reckwitz, *Entwicklung*; Schatzki, *Social Practices, Site of the Soci*al; Schmidt, *Soziologie*).

From a praxeological perspective, location and being located can initially be understood as fundamental characteristics of all practical actions and realities. Practices never happen "atopos, placeless, as Plato said of Socrates, or 'without ties and roots,' as Karl Mannheim, sometimes regarded as one of the founders of the sociology of the intellectual, somewhat glibly claimed" (Bourdieu, *Pascalian* 132). The praxeological project of "analysis situs" (Bourdieu, *Pascalian* 132) aims to work out the topoi, places, and localities, that is, the bodily, material-physical, and at the same time socio-spatial localities and localizations, which are understood both as preconditions and as continuously produced results of practical actions. The critical and essential aim of these efforts is to challenge the intellectualist and universalist self-misunderstandings that are widespread in the scholastic world. Situatedness and locality characterize not only routinized, everyday social practices but also theoretical, scientific, virtual-digital, fictional, literary, and artistic practices. Praxeology provides an approach to their analysis. This means that the latter form of practices can be examined and explored accordingly as "objective activities" (Marx 13).

In the following, I consider the extent to which this locational and praxeological perspective is fruitful for decoding intellectual, imaginative, and supposedly cognitive-mental proceedings. My short, thesis-like remarks are meant to encourage discussion; they refer to examples of academic writing practices and the "theorizing" and "imagining" associated with them. After a brief sketch of the non-individualist and non-mentalistic orientation of the praxeological project (1), I sketch out the negative epistemology that charac-

terizes the practice-theoretical perspective (2) and show how this orientation results in the desideratum of an empirical praxeology of theoretical practices and imaginative procedures (3). I will then contribute observations on academic writing and the widely held ethno-theories that accompany these activities (4). I conclude by characterizing "theorizing" and "imagining" as materially integrated bodily-mental epistemic processes that are inextricably linked to situated, everyday practices of writing (5).

1. Placing *Einbildungskraft*

Praxeology can contribute to reassessing imaginative processes and procedures by exploring and elucidating the situatedness, placedness, and site-specificity of imaginative practices. In doing so, praxeological approaches strive to develop a non-mentalist analysis of Einbildungskraft, to use Kant's German term for "imagination" here, which denotes a force and its effects. Imagining is usually seen as something that individual subjects do on their own and is located in the black box of the individual's mind—secretive and placeless. The practicing-place perspective seeks to address this assumption. It calls for looking at and understanding practices of imagination (e.g., in storytelling, playing, designing, planning, reading, and writing) as shared, emplaced, and public activities (cf. Schmidt and Volbers). Such activities are—as practice-theory's critique of mentalism based on Wittgenstein's late philosophy would have it (cf. Reckwitz, *Entwicklung*; Schatzki, *Social Practices*; Schmidt, *Soziologie*)—always at the same time (routinized) bodily performances and sets of mental activities. Imagining, in this sense, would not be a secretive "inner" process but an overall public, accountable, and therefore observable (social and cultural) activity. Viewed as an ensemble of practices, imagining would have its subjects and not vice versa. "Imagining" would always be placed somewhere specifically rather than anywhere and would relate bodies to things and ideas as well as bodies to other bodies, ideas to other ideas, and things to other things.

2. Praxeology as Negative Epistemology

Widely received and discussed in the cultural and social sciences for some time now, "practice theory" is considered a style of research and cognition that is

critical of intellectualism, subjectivism, and mentalism—it has developed an analytical sensitivity for everyday routines, behaviors, and habits, for implicit knowledge, skills, and knowing how, as well as for the bodily and material aspects of the phenomena studied. Practices are generally described as an interplay of practiced bodies and their routinized modes of skill, concrete artefacts, things, and socio-material infrastructures. Although intellectual activities that are considered predominantly mental or cognitive are rarely considered in such an understanding of practices, the practice turn has nevertheless stimulated studies that investigate the acts of criticism and theorizing (cf. Boltanski) and initiated an empiricization of the theoretical gaze and gesture.

With my first thesis, I would like to emphasize a basic epistemological impulse of the praxeological project, which to me is somewhat lost in the prevailing reception of practice theory and rarely taken up—I refer to this basic impulse as "negative epistemology." By this, I mean—with reference to Pierre Bourdieu—the epistemic-critical investment of praxeology as a critique of scholastic and theoretical reason (cf. Bourdieu, Pascalian): Praxeology refers to the practical occurrences and realizations it seeks to address and investigate, initially in an indirect and negative way. It encounters the—mostly systematic—misrepresentations of practical logics and ongoing practical accomplishments with their typical and defining vagueness, resourcefulness, and creativity in the theoretical models that are designed to dissect, capture, and explain them. Therefore, the logic of practice cannot simply be positively stated and (re-)presented; rather, it is better understood in negative terms. Praxeology is initially a counter concept to the scholastic fallacies of theories that do not reflect their object relations. The distorted representations, and the intellectualistic and universalizing projections provided by theoretical knowledge and scholastic reason, are related to a privileged social position that invites a contemplative relationship with the world and its urgencies and largely exempts its holders from the pressure to take action given practical necessities. Intellectualistic positions can be understood as situated knowledge that knows nothing of the effects and limitations it owes to being advantageously situated in the scholastic world. Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges is directed against ideas of disembodied and placeless scientific knowledge and its claims to objectivity and truth. According to Haraway, the "conquering gaze from nowhere" (581) that characterizes such forms of knowledge is to be critically situated and located—especially regarding its cultural and gender-specific particularity and dominance. By doing so, scholastic forms of knowledge are revealed and become understandable, especially self-

disguising and misleading modes of knowing. The illusionary nowhere can thus be (re-) localized, empirically marked, and made visible as a particularly privileged position, a specific somewhere of "the self-satiated eye of the master subject" (586). Such connections between epistemic configurations and specifically located knowledge realities are particularly interesting from the perspective of practice theory.

3. An Empirical Desideratum

Bourdieu and, similarly, Haraway are primarily concerned with the social localization, situatedness and positionality of theoretical relationships to reality and forms of knowledge. They tackle the associated difficulties of analytically grasping the sense pratique (Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*) and the logic of practice. In doing so, Bourdieu—as his former colleague Luc Boltanski criticized—simply constructs practice as the opposite of scholasticism. This juxtaposition of "practice" on the one hand, and "scholastic" or "theoretical" reason on the other leads to a misconception: it follows from this juxtaposition that "theoretical reason" is portrayed as a distorted and projective way of seeing things that misunderstands itself. Theorists are categorized as erroneous holders of a scholastic viewpoint and position, but they are not considered and depicted as practitioners involved in the social world of academia, scholarship and in the practices of theorizing and producing theories. To go beyond this mere dramatization of the difference between theoretical-scholastic reasoning and the logic of practice, the praxeological epistemology would have to be extended to the analysis of the practices, conventions, routines, and habits (or Wittgenstein's *Gepflogenheiten*) of the production of theories and imaginaries themselves. What is still missing is an empirical and praxeological analysis and elucidation of theoretical practices, their situational and situated modes and their "scholastic" relations to the worlds and realities they project, imagine, and shape. My remarks on academic writing and the writing of theory address this desideratum. Regarding Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's historical epistemology, I am concerned with the "scientific real" (*Wissenschaftswirkliche*), that is, with theoretical practices and the forms of appearance of theoretical knowledge in the everyday practices, situations, and places of imagining, theorizing, and theory production.

4. Writing Theory

What happens in the places and the writing processes of social and cultural theory and research? How exactly does writing occur? How is it carried out and accomplished? What can be said about the *sens pratique* (Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*) and the routines and habits of fabricating academic and theoretical knowledge in sociology and the humanities? By asking such questions, the procedures, methods and techniques of "writing theory" are praxeologized, that is, they are viewed and conceptualized as principally observable and, in this sense, publicly-, materially-, and bodily-embedded processes (cf. Schmidt, *Theoretisieren, Methodological Challenges*).

At the same time, this praxeological approach emphasizes that theories should not be considered the result of unobservable and empirically inaccessible inner mental concoctions and imaginative flashes of thought, although academic writing is an epistemic practice that is closely linked to such mentalistic accounts and ethno- or participant-theories. It is interesting in this context to note an observation by Howard S. Becker that perhaps illustrates how such cultural mentalism and mentalist ethnotheories of theorizing are supported by the organization of university teaching. According to Becker, students generally find it difficult to conceive of writing as a concrete activity of concrete people. Even graduate students who are close to their teachers and professors rarely see anyone writing. Writing—the basic activity of all text-based disciplines in the humanities and social sciences—is, strangely enough, systematically concealed, relegated to private spheres, and made unobservable (see also the introduction to this collection). For Becker, this promotes the widespread assumption, idea, and ethno-theory among students that the academic texts they are dealing with have been written in one go from the introduction to the final chapter by theoretically brilliant and exceptional thinkers.

I would like to mention another observation, albeit anecdotal and unsubstantiated, about the social and cultural practices in which the epistemic activity of academic writing generally takes place: albeit linked to individualistic and mentalistic concepts and beliefs, academic writing practices are socially organized. That is, from the perspective of an analytical observer, these practices are always already in effect. Participants are continuously recruited as speakers, lecturers, and discussants but, above all, as readers and writers. They gradually acquire basic and shared practical norms and assessment criteria, and this process of acquiring specific practical competencies in academic writing is long and arduous.

The practices of academic writing are, oddly enough, taking on the character of religious exercises and retreats; they resemble an exercitium that has been enforced for years. Consider that an ever-smaller portion of manuscripts submitted to the most prominent, widely read, and highly ranked journals is published, even though the number of submissions is continuously increasing: attracting readers is apparently not a realistic goal of these writing practices. Writing *en masse* and for many years without any prospect of readership has traits of a commitment that cannot be irritated even by constant rejection. Above all, this commitment is checked in field-specific testing, valuation, and responsibilization procedures, which are carried out in reviews, colloquia, workshops, conferences, etc. Such procedures are techniques of governance that assign responsibility and are aimed at creating prudent and active self-direction in the subjects, directing them to themselves and thus simultaneously mobilizing their strengths and energies. It is about practicing a certain theoretical style, the repeatedly demonstrated ritual recognition of certain theoretical authorities, and the adherence to certain conventions, the observance of which is monitored by a few reviewers and editors. From this perspective, academic writing reveals itself as a conformist practice geared towards the preservation of cultural norms of the academic world and the protracted formation of an academic habitus.

5. Writing Practices and Epistemic Processes

Writing practices occupy the central position between "theoretical thinking and imagining" and theoretical text (ethno-theoretically regarded as the "written fixation" of theoretical and imaginative thinking), which is as self-evident as it is rarely thematized and examined as such. In a praxeological undermining of this subordination of doing and the prioritization of thinking, the aim should now be to not marginalize writing as a mere "writing down" of previous theoretical ideas, but to focus on it as an articulation of theoretical activities that is in principle observable but largely rendered unobservable. Theorizing and imagining are epistemic processes that are involved in situated and situational writing practices and cannot be separated from them. Actual academic and epistemic writing is only loosely connected to the production of enduring texts. The empirical praxeography of theoretical and imaginative knowledge practices, which I characterize in this essay as a desideratum, should therefore focus on the practical processuality and actuality of doing theory. Here, the

conditions for further writing are realized only in the moment of writing. Theoretical practitioners, like Niklas Luhmann in particular, are aware of this practical logic, processuality, situativity, and contingency of theorizing. Luhmann remarks laconically that "[s]cientists have to form sentences if they want to publish" (10; my transl.). He goes further: "In the choice of words necessary for this, however, there is a degree of randomness that is unimaginable for most readers. Even scientists themselves rarely realize this. The majority of texts could have been formulated differently and would have been formulated differently if they had been written the next day."

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