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# SOCIAL THEORY *of* PRACTICES

Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions

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*To Kim*

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

Philosophy, as I think of it, is a form of atonement for past enthusiasms. This book is the product of a long struggle with myself over the ideas of tradition and practice, and particularly with the inadequacies of my own *Sociological Explanation as Translation* (Cambridge University Press, 1980). The work was originally motivated by my attraction to these ideas and my respect for, and enjoyment of, the works of Michael Oakeshott, Michael Polanyi, H.-G. Gadamer and Alasdair MacIntyre. My interest in the subject was mediated personally by the tutelage of J.P. Mayer, Edward Shils and Richard Rorty. Originally, I wished to make a contribution to the tradition of conceptualizations of 'tradition'. Instead, I have argued for its dissolution, at least in its standard forms. The petty forms of these ideas, ideas such as 'social constructionism', fall in the range of the argument I have made here as well. So does much else.

addition to the opportunity to concentrate on this project, I had the benefit of advice from two other SCASSS fellows, Göran Ahrne and Jeff Alexander. Corrections for the final draft were entered by Norma Walker.

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# Practices and their Conceptual Kin

> But I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its
> correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness.
> No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish
> between true and false.[1]

> Heidegger argues that . . . even when people act deliberately, and so
> have beliefs, plans, follow rules, etc., their minds cannot be directed
> toward something except on a background of shared social practices.[2]

Practices, it would appear, are the vanishing point of twentieth-century
philosophy. The major philosophical achievements of the century are
now widely interpreted as assertions about practices, even though they
were not originally couched in this language. The first epigraph, from
Wittgenstein, is explained in a recent book as follows: 'Wittgenstein
argues that one's convictions depend upon, and make sense only within
a largely tacit picture of the world that one inherits unavoidably as a
member of a given community.'[3] The second epigraph is from the major
English-language interpreter of Heidegger, Hubert Dreyfus, who has
chosen in his major work to account for Heidegger's central idea of
*Dasein* in terms of the concept of *habitus* popularized by the sociolog-
ist Pierre Bourdieu.[4] Wittgenstein himself borrowed the notion of
*Lebensformen* from a philosopher and sociologist, Eduard Spranger.

The vanishing point, then, is in a domain traditionally belonging to
social theory. But the use of the term 'practices' is far more widespread.
The appeal to 'the diversity of human practices', as Edward Said puts it,
is standard in the humanities. In literary criticism, feminist scholarship,
rhetorical analysis and studies of the discourse of science, texts are
routinely analysed in terms of the rhetorical practices and practices of
representation they employ. The analyses are taken to explain such
things as the construction of texts, their effects on readers and the
reproduction of distinctions, such as gendering distinctions. The term
appears in 'hard' contexts too, for example in artificial intelligence,

where it is used to describe field-specific cognitive competencies to be modelled, such as the body of legal practices that enables a lawyer to read a contract. Historians, anthropologists and other social scientists routinely use the notion in interpreting other cultures and times. 'Practice theory' is a major current in anthropological theory, where the term is used in opposition to the older emphases on belief, ritual and language.[5]

But the concept is deeply elusive. What are 'practices'? What is being referred to, for example, by Wittgenstein's phrase 'the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false'? What are 'tacit pictures of the world'? These are not everyday objects. And they are given additional, mysterious properties – they are said to be 'shared', or 'social'. How seriously should we take this language? Are there really objectifiable things that we should think of as being shared or inherited? Or are these merely figures of speech? And if so, why should we be willing to accept them as part of the explanation of anything as central as truth or intentionality? What do they stand for that enables them to play this kind of central role in our thought?

This book was originally conceived as an answer to these questions. I realized from the outset that my quarry was necessarily broader than the concept of practices. I saw that there was a large family of terms that were used more or less interchangeably with 'practices'. Among them were some of the most widely used terms in philosophy and the humanities, such as tradition, tacit knowledge, *Weltanschauung*, paradigm, ideology, framework and presupposition. The insight that the people of earlier epochs had different visions of the world is at the core of historical relativism, and at the core of postmodernism, which rejects the claims to ultimate validity of any given vision of the world or practice of representing the world. That historicism was the source of some of these usages was common knowledge. But beyond this the history was murky, and the connections between various usages was unclear.

My first instinct was to think that some clarity could be produced by systematically identifying the variant forms of these ideas. In the literature of philosophy, in addition to Wittgenstein's allusion to 'the inherited background' and Kuhn's concept of paradigm, one might cite Oakeshott's comments on traditions and what they are not, Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge', Ryle's distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that', MacIntyre's and Gadamer's uses of the concept of tradition, 'practices' in Richard Rorty, Quine's notion of a person's 'theory of the world' (part of which is presumably tacit), David Lewis'

notion of conventions without conveners, Elster's culture-specific norms that 'can exist on an unconscious or barely conscious level', and Unger's 'reasonless routines'.[6]

These concepts have affinities to one another, to be sure. Some of the concepts overlap one another or indeed are indistinguishable. But there seems to be a difference between two groups of concepts – those that are based on the model of hidden premises of deductive theories, 'shared presuppositions', and those that refer to embodied knowledge, such as skills, ingrained cultural or moral dispositions, or linguistic competencies. But many of the concepts in the family fall into neither group. Indeed, the appeal of many of these concepts rests on the fact that they neglect this distinction or trespass against it. Kuhn's notion of paradigm, like Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge, trades on the interdependence of skill and presupposition that is part of the scientist's way. The phrase 'inscribed on the body', common among French writers on these subjects, captures the duality of these concepts – discursive and corporal at once.

The list I gave above includes concepts with some current significance in philosophy. But as I have suggested, the many kindred concepts are originally from social thought, and the traffic in concepts has gone both ways. Some of these concepts were warmly embraced by 'social scientists' and employed in place of previously fashionable concepts. 'Paradigm', for example, was often used in the social sciences as a polite, legitimizing term in place of 'ideology'. Other terms were simply appropriated from or shared with social science or, in the case of tradition, with other bodies of thought, such as theology, law and politics, which had established their usages long before there were 'social sciences'. In this larger 'family' there are forms of the concepts that fit with neither the 'presuppositions' nor the 'embodiment' model. 'Tradition' and 'custom', for example, may describe a long historical series of imitative public enactments, a set of recognized legal rights, or the externals of a way of life, in which there is no element that is either presupposed or embodied.

## 'Practices' in the history of ideas

Nineteenth-century philosophy and social theory employed most of these ideas, in slightly different forms. But in the nineteenth century the concepts did not have the same range of uses. By the early part of the twentieth century, 'culture' and 'norms' were used to account for

intractable differences of moral opinion. Those whose views one previously found to be admirable or despicable could be seen to be the product of divergent social norms or a different culture. In this form the terms served to undermine, or reflected the undermining of, moral and political certitudes. By showing the historically situated character of the 'norms' in question, the language of norms raised the question of whether our own deepest convictions were after all merely social conventions. Showing the connection between normative beliefs and concealed self-interests led to the question of whether conventional morality was a kind of plot whose beneficiaries, such as the bourgeoisie, could be identified. These ideas were no less threatening than postmodernism appears today.

The terminology, and the threat, was largely confined to morals and political belief. But there were some interesting exceptions to the limitation of these concepts to morality. Sociologists in the early part of the century sometimes spoke of the *mores* of a scientific society, which indicated that they considered science itself to be a normatively governed product of social evolution. This idea plays a role in Spencer, who also contributed the idea that moral intuitions are themselves the product of social evolution. The idea that scientific modes of thinking are in some sense obligatory in modern society in domains other than science can be discerned in pragmatism, and is even to be found in such thinkers as Parsons. The evolutionism of these thinkers protected them from reflexive contradiction: the *mores* of a scientific society were their *mores*, and they were the most evolutionarily advanced *mores* available.

The logical positivists had no objections to even the most extreme forms of sociological reductionism, if it was applied to morals. For them, the fact – value distinction was a fire-wall that prevented sociological reductionism from reaching science. Cultural relativists cheerfully conceded the relativity of their own society's moral ideas and customs. But at the same time, and for much the same reasons, they did not consider anthropology or behavioural science itself to be merely another culture. The main critics of this comfortable assumption were Marxist critical theorists practising the 'sociology of knowledge' who had a view of historical development in which 'bourgeois' social science was destined for the dustbin of history along with bourgeois society. But the critical theorists comforted themselves with the thought that their own views were historically progressive and therefore would be validated by the coming revolution – however delayed it might be.

This reasoning too had deep nineteenth-century roots. The idea of historically variable presuppositions was central to neo-Kantianism, as it