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Practice and Economic Geography

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Abstract

Economic geography has over the last decade become increasingly interested in the role of practice, conceptualised as the regularised or stabilised social actions through which economic agents organize or coordinate production, marketing, service provision, exchange, and/or innovation activities. Interest in practice is most clearly manifest in a growing body of research concerned to conceptualise how the regularized social relations and interactions linking economic actors (e.g., entrepreneurs, firms) shape the nature of economies, industries, and regional development processes. However, an emphasis on social practice faces significant challenges in that it lacks conceptual coherence, a clear methodological approach, and relevance for public policy. This article critically assesses the idea that practice-oriented research might or should become a core conceptual or epistemological approach in economic geography. In doing so, we identify at least four distinct strands to economic geographical interest in practice: studies centred on institutions, social relations, governmentality and alternative economies respectively. We then argue however that this shift towards practice-oriented work is less a coherent turn than a development and diversification of longstanding strands of work within the sub-discipline.

KEYWORDS: ***economic geography, practice, social relations, methodology***

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, economic geographers have drawn extensively on ideas, concepts, methods, and theories from sociology, cultural, and science studies. To a large extent, this shift reflects the so-called cultural turn in human geography that began in the late 1980s (McDowell 1994; Crang 1997; Thrift 2000) and, more recently, a growing interest in relational theories for economic and social organization (Amin 2002; Sheppard 2002; Bathelt & Glückler 2003; Yeung 2005a; Murdoch 2006; Jones 2009). Cultural and relational approaches in economic geography have been driven in part by a dissatisfaction with individualist (e.g., neo-classical or rational-choice theories) and structural (e.g., institutional) approaches to the study of economies and industries, particularly their ability to conceptualize the social processes and power relations that constitute and transform real-world economic geographies. By focusing on the contextually situated social *processes* where agents and structures co-constitute one another, and where power flows in often diffuse and subtle ways, cultural and relational scholars have sought meso-scale or middle-ground (i.e., between individualist and structuralist) explanations for phenomena such as innovation, agglomeration, livelihoods, regional development, and/or global market integration.

In the context of this shift toward culture and relationality, economic geographers have become increasingly concerned with the role of social practices in economic activity (Bathelt & Glückler 2003; Jones 2003; Glückler 2005; Grabher 2006; Murphy 2006). Practices are the regularised or stabilised social actions through which economic agents organize or coordinate production, marketing, service provision, livelihood, exchange, and/or innovation activities. These routinized, institutionalised, or widely legitimated

formal and informal social interactions are critical for economic processes not only because they help to organize, structure, and reproduce economic activities, but because they help actors transmit power to one another and to interpret, manage, and/or derive meaning from, and establish identities in, the world. Practices are thus social and spatial forms that situate actors in relation to particular identities, meanings, forms of knowledge, and institutions and embed economic actions and relationships within and between particular places and times. For example, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002) show how the ritualized and tightly, but often informally, regulated practices of currency trading help to constitute and reproduce global financial markets and the identities of traders. Similarly, the everyday practices (e.g., marketing, negotiation, regulation, caring, strategising, consulting, and production) carried out by actors such as households, firms, states, and industrial communities can play a key role in enabling (or preventing) improved livelihoods, industrial innovation, regional growth, wealth redistribution, and/or market internationalization (e.g., Amin and Cohendet 2004; Gertler 2003; Raco 2003; Glückler 2005; Smith and Stenning 2006; Palmer & O'Kane 2007; Pain 2008).

Economic geographers have become interested in a wide range of different forms of practice in the economy including: the managerial and knowledge creation practices relied on in particular industries and transnational firms (Amin and Cohendet 2004; Glückler 2005; Jones 2005; Faulconbridge 2008; Pain 2008; Palmer & O'Kane 2007), the governing practices of elites and states seeking to control and direct economies (MacKinnon 2000; Larner 2005; Rose-Redwood 2006; Traub-Werner 2007), and the alternative and/or 'ordinary' practices that constitute 'non-capitalist' economic forms such as cooperatives, informal livelihood strategies, or unpaid labor (Lee 2006; Smith &

Stenning 2006; Gibson-Graham 2008). As a concept, 'practice' has thus emerged (albeit somewhat ambiguously) as a central element to economic geographies informed by a 'cultural economic' (e.g., Hall 2006), 'institutional' (e.g., Gertler 2001), and 'governmental' (e.g., Raco 2003; Smith & Rochovská 2007) approaches. Perhaps most significantly, practice-oriented scholarship can be linked to 'relational' approaches in economic geography where empirical and theoretical emphasis is placed on understanding how the networks and social relations linking different economic actors drive economic globalization, influence regional development processes, and shape such phenomena as innovation, market integration, and workplace cultures (Dicken et al. 2001; Amin 2002; Sheppard 2002; Ettlinger 2003; Coe et al. 2004; Yeung 2005a; 2009; Bathelt 2006; Weller 2006).

These trends have provoked the tentative suggestion that there has been a more widely-defined conceptual, theoretical and empirical shift or 'turn' towards a concern with social relations and/or practices within the sub-discipline. However, the idea that economic geography should or has both undergone some kind of 'relational turn' - let along a practice-oriented one – has been strongly contested and criticised (e.g., Overman 2004; Sunley 2008). Foremost amongst the criticisms levelled is that relational approaches lack methodological rigor, explanatory power, sensitivity to structural factors, and policy relevance. Setting aside the arguments about whether the terminology of 'turns' is appropriate, there appears to be significant concern that economic geographical thinking anchored around ideas such as relationality or social practice is science built on 'fuzzy concepts, scanty evidence, and policy distance' (Markusen 1999). More specifically, critics see relational and practice-oriented approaches as unable to develop

90 useful generalized theoretical arguments about the nature of the space economy and as
91 restrictively focused on 'micro-scale' processes that do not provide insight into the
92 important (and macro-scale) factors and forces that shape wider economic life. The
93 dangers therefore of economic geography becoming increasingly focused on practice, at
94 the expense of 'big' structural factors (e.g., class relations, institutions, neoliberal
95 capitalism), are thus substantial if the sub-discipline is to remain relevant and of interest
96 to policy makers and other decision-makers.

97 Yet we would argue that beneath this apparent pragmatic debate about what
98 economic geography is for, and how best the sub-discipline should tackle key theoretical
99 questions, lie more fundamental tensions concerning the philosophical foundations of
100 economic-geographic thinking. The debate about the validity and utility or otherwise of
101 practice-oriented economic geography in fact is as much about different views within
102 economic geography of what concepts and theories are of use in understanding the
103 economy with, in particular, schools of thought grounded in structuralist social science
104 and quantitative/individualist (i.e., neo-classical utility maximization) methodologies
105 articulating scepticism at newer schools of thought informed by poststructuralist social
106 science and the aftermath of the cultural turn. Such a contention develops from two
107 particular propositions with respect to the role of practice as a concept within economic
108 geography.

109 First, we want to suggest that the notion of a 'practice turn' in economic
110 geography is unhelpful. On the one hand, the idea of a practice turn masks the fact that
111 economic geographers have been long interested in social practices as a constituent
112 element of economic activity. In that sense, whilst there may have been a recent revival

113 and development of this interest in practice, it is not particularly novel. Equally, on the
114 other hand, the notion of a recent 'turn' to practice implies greater coherence than exists
115 across the diverse range of theoretical frameworks and conceptual perspectives concerned
116 with practice and its influence on economic geographies. Thus we argue that the notion
117 of a practice turn should be replaced with a wider discussion about the diverse and varied
118 forms of practice-oriented economic geography.

119 Second, and in light of this, we suggest that the tension between practice-oriented
120 economic geography and those grounded in structuralist and individualist approaches are
121 neither as distinct nor as irreconcilable as some recent criticisms appear to imply. We
122 further suggest that some of the criticisms levelled at practice-oriented economic
123 geography are misplaced, grounded in problematic assumptions about the relative
124 strengths and weakness of different methodologies. We also argue that a number of other
125 criticisms that have been raised of practice-oriented work are based on misconceptions
126 about what a theoretical emphasis on practice aims to achieve. For us, practice is a
127 powerful, yet complementary concept in that it provides an analytical object that is
128 situated between structuralist (e.g., institutional) and individualist (e.g., utility
129 maximization) explanations for how economic and industrial change occur, one that
130 offers a means to better understand how context, structures, and individual agency or
131 action come together in the doing of economic and industrial activities. As such, practice
132 can inform both structural and individualist accounts of the world, strengthen our
133 empirical understandings of real-world economies, and improve the theoretical
134 frameworks economic geographers use to explain the causes, drivers, and/or obstacles to

135 larger-order economic outcomes (e.g., innovation, regional development, path
136 dependency, production networks).

137 The rest of this article elaborates these arguments in a series of steps. In the next
138 section, we examine the concept of practice itself, assessing how economic geographers'
139 understanding of practice has drawn on a variety of literatures from beyond the subject,
140 particularly sociology, the sociology of science and political theory. The third section
141 then examines the development and implementation of the concept of practice within
142 economic geography, arguing that there has not so much been a recent 'turn' towards the
143 concept as rather the development of a number of longstanding and interdisciplinary
144 threads of interest within the sub-discipline. It further suggests that practice-oriented
145 research does not represent a panacea for economic geography – an argument elaborated
146 further in the fourth section as it outlines the major criticisms levelled at practice-oriented
147 work. In light of these arguments, the final section ends by drawing together a number of
148 concluding propositions about how practice-oriented research – though not without
149 certain limitations - can form part of a complementary range of conceptual tools in future
150 economic geographical thinking.

151

152 2 THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF PRACTICE

153 Whilst the concept of (social) practice has a long history within social scientific thought
154 stretching back through the writings several major 20th century philosophers, sociologists,
155 anthropologists, and social psychologists, there are few contributions that try to develop
156 practice as basis for a generic social theory (Reckwitz, 2002). Nevertheless some form of
157 practice or practices conceived as social action rests at the heart of much social science is

seeking to theorise and understand. Indeed, one of the most influential twentieth century sociologists, Harold Garfinkel (1967), even went so far as to recommend that the discipline's subject matter should focus primarily on 'practical action' and its implications for social organization.

A broad definition of (social) practices as used by social scientists thus corresponds to 'the actions of individual or groups'. This conceptualization of action includes not just physical behaviour but mental activities such as theorizing or learning. Yet like many such generalized concepts, practice has a more specific and distinct meaning within a number of schools of social scientific thinking. Its implementation in contemporary human geography consequently reflects these rich and diverse foundations and we suggest that three different strands of thinking about practice have been particularly influential on human geographers who, since the cultural turn of the 1980s, have drawn on these different theoretical strands and applied them to a wide range of scholarly endeavours. A full review of these developments is beyond the scope of this paper, but it forms the context in which the concept of practice has come increasingly to the fore in economic geography. Figure 1 represents a diagrammatic attempt to illustrate these foundations and their points of overlap or intersection with respect to the concept's broad meaning and significance. Importantly, we do not assert that the role of social practices carries equal weight in these literatures, or indeed that the objective of each of these researchers is to theorize practice *per se*.

Figure 1: The social-scientific foundations of practice-oriented research

Practices	Authors	Concepts
Structuring, governing, and resisting practices	Bourdieu Giddens Foucault Certeau	**Habitus** **Structuration** **Governmentality** **Tactics**
Communicative and discursive practices	Habermas Bakhtin Schutz, Goffman Latour, Callon, Law	**Communicative rationality** **Dialogic practice** **Intersubjectivity** **Actor-networks**
Organizing, learning and networking practices	Latour, Callon, Law M. Polanyi Wenger Amin and Cohendet	**Actor-networks** **Tacit knowledge** **Communities of practice** **Relationality**

The first strand of literature is concerned with how practices help structure, organize, and govern cultures, societies, and nations. This issue has attracted the widest attention from sociologists, social historians and anthropologists. Central to such debates is the way in which individual or isolated practices interact with persistent social formations or structures. Within sociology, Giddens' (1979) structuration theory represents perhaps one of the key attempts to reconcile this relationship, viewing practices as everyday activities where agency and structure come together reflexively to create, reproduce, and/or restructure social systems in intended and unintended ways. In contrast, Bourdieu (1977) argues that cultural rituals and individual habits (his version of practice) reflect the dispositions or subconscious understandings the world (he terms this the *habitus*) that evolve historically and which position individuals within particular social classes or points in a culture's social structures. A further key contribution is that of Foucault (1991; 1997), whose concern with practice as a structuring tool emphasises the role of the state and its techniques of social control that he terms 'governmentality'. This concept aims to capture how even the mundane practices of government (e.g., town

201 planning, developing and maintaining statistical databases) are ideologically constructed
202 technologies that create "fields" for intervention and domination by the state apparatus.
203 In contrast to Foucault's rather grim interpretation of practice, de Certeau (1984) views
204 everyday practices in a more hopeful light, seeing them as tactical compromises between
205 an individual's need to conform to a dominant social order and her/his personal
206 expression of identity, meaning, and values.

207 A second conceptual strand emphasises the role and importance of
208 communicative and discursive practices – such as social performance, social
209 communication, and language – in shaping societies, economies, and cultures. Social
210 psychologists, symbolic interactionists, and ethnomethodologists (e.g., Goffman, 1959;
211 1974; Garfinkel, 1967) view communicative practices as ritualized or framed social
212 performances or techniques of inter-personal communication aimed at achieving
213 particular material or social outcomes. Communication is also a central theme for critical
214 theorists such as Habermas (1984) who focuses on the role that communicative practices
215 can play in helping individuals achieve a shared understanding or 'communicative
216 rationality' that, while not resolving differences in opinion or between social groups, can
217 create more plural and fair political systems. For Schutz (1967), successful
218 communication between individuals requires intersubjectivity – a situation where social
219 action becomes possible as individuals recognize and legitimate each others' verbal and
220 non-verbal utterances. Similarly, Bakhtin & Holquist (1981) view practices in terms of
221 dialogue and discourse, arguing that states and powerful social groups promote unitary
222 forms of what he terms 'dialogic practice' able to promote particular ideologies and
223 exclude marginal social groups by creating boundaries between appropriate and non-

224 appropriate forms of communication. Most recently, these ideas have been drawn on by
225 actor-network (ANT) theorists (e.g., Callon, 1986; Law, 1992; Latour 2005) who argue
226 that communication practices offer insights into the ways and means of *translation* – the
227 process through which actors exert power, mobilize material objects, and perform
228 socially in order to achieve particular objectives.

229 ANT's conception of practice has significant common ground with a third group
230 of practice-oriented researchers, those interested in how practices embody tacit forms of
231 knowledge and how they contribute to organizational cohesion and collective learning.
232 Tacit knowledge is that which is practiced by and embodied in individuals and their
233 conscious and subconscious feelings, identities, and circumstances (Polanyi 1967).
234 Because of its practical and cognitive characteristics, tacit knowledge cannot be easily
235 written down or communicated between individuals and is instead best transferred
236 through observation, imitation, and experiential learning (Gertler 2003). Interest in tacit
237 knowledge, and its role in organizational, industrial, and regional development, helped to
238 spawn the communities-of-practice (CoP) literature. CoP scholars have used the concept
239 of practice as an analytical tool to understand how organizations sustain coherence and
240 cohesion, foster collective learning, and transfer (or fail to transfer) knowledge internally
241 and externally (Brown and Duguid 2001; Wenger 1998; Amin & Roberts 2008). For
242 Wenger (1998: 5), practice is "a way of talking about the shared historical and social
243 resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action."
244 In other words, practices are the everyday activities embedded within organizational
245 communities that serve as repositories of the tacit knowledge needed for long-run
246 competitiveness. Furthermore, Amin and Cohendet (2004) contend that practices are

247 fundamentally social and spatial in that they are reproduced and changed through
248 negotiations between groups of individuals who interact within and between particular
249 locations and spaces. When one group of individuals recognize, legitimate, or validate
250 the practices of another they become more relationally proximate and this, in turn,
251 facilitates knowledge transfer and collective learning.

252 Few explicit theorizations or detailed examinations of the practice concept exist
253 although some in sociology have sought to place practice at the centre of more explicit
254 and generalized framework. Perhaps most significant is Reckwitz's (2002) assessment of
255 the prospects for practice to become a stand-alone social-scientific philosophy. For him,
256 practice may provide the scope to overcome some of the longstanding debates in
257 sociology about social structure versus individual agency, and it might enable theory to
258 move beyond the limitations of concepts like those of 'rational social or economic man'.
259 To do so, our understanding of practice needs to move beyond viewing it solely as
260 communicative, social, or material action, mental process, or discourse. Instead, practice
261 should be conceptualized in multi-dimensional terms and as a form of social order that
262 enables a "socially shared way of ascribing meaning to the world" (Reckwitz 2002: 246).
263 A more generalized conception of practice thus offers an alternative framework that
264 emphasizes the embeddedness of social meaning in the everyday world; meaning
265 manifest in the "time-space assemblages" of body-minds, things, knowledge, and
266 discourse, with both structures and agents serving as "carriers" of these assemblages
267 (Reckwitz 2002). Importantly, and despite his rhetorical support for practice as
268 philosophy, Reckwitz (2002: 259) recognizes that practice-oriented thinking remains less
269 a grand theoretical framework than a "loose network of praxeological thinking."

For our purposes, the implication of these foundations and developing arguments for economic geography is twofold. First, they demonstrate that practice-oriented social scientific theorizing and research is hardly new or novel and that any purported 'turn' toward practice is, in reality, part of a long-standing progression toward theories better suited to elucidate the contingencies, agencies, processes, and power relations that constitute the space economy. Second, that practice offers not so much a new theory but an alternative epistemological framework in which knowledge of the social world may be most effectively derived through a focus on the actions, processes, relationships, and contexts through which and where the ordinary, real, and everyday world is constituted. In the next section, we examine how recent understandings of practice within economic geography have become increasingly informed by this developing perspective.

3 PRACTICE IN ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

The idea that practice can serve as a central organising concept in economic geography is a very recent one, and thus is not explicitly prevalent in the literature (unlike references to cultural, institutional or relational 'turns'). Moreover, engagements with practice within economic geography are not clearly or explicitly delineated given that practice often serves as a background element or factor in studies of political economy, innovation, networks, industrial organization, and/or regional development. The task of this section is therefore to review a number of different strands of what can be termed 'practice-oriented' work in economic geography. We suggest that at least four interrelated but distinctive threads of practice-oriented scholarship are worth identifying in this respect: institutional approaches, political-economic approaches, diverse-economy approaches,

and relational or communitarian approaches. Beyond identifying these threads, the goal here is to demonstrate that there are two key commonalities linking these literatures. First, that these authors explicitly or implicitly view practice as a concept or idea that can help to carve out a middle ground of sorts between structural and individualistic accounts of social and economic action; one where a focus on the everyday or routinized activities of actors reveals significant insights into both the cognitive characteristics of agents, and larger-order structures such as institutions, political economies, networks, and/or cultures. Second, that these literatures use practice as a means to better understand socioeconomic processes and/or the power relations governing economies. As such, practice is thought to provide important insights into how and why economic phenomena (e.g., clusters, livelihoods, innovations, growth) evolve, stabilise, or destabilise within particular time-space contexts.

3.1 Institutions and practice

The first strand of practice-oriented work distinguishable within economic geography centres on attempts to engage with the role of institutions and their relationship to social practices that constitute economic activity. This concern with institutions within economic geography has drawn on work from evolutionary economics (e.g., Nelson and Winter 1982; Lawson 1997; Hodgson 1999; Castellaci 2006), organizational theory and management studies (e.g., Scott 1995; Braun 2005), and technology studies (e.g., Lall 1993; Kemp et al. 1998; Ruttan 2001). What characterizes institution-based engagements with practice has been in particular a concern with seeking to understand how practices reveal the rules, norms, and conventions that govern, coordinate, and direct industries,

316 socio-technical regimes, and regional economies. Practices are particularly significant for
317 institutional evolution given that 'routinized productive activities carried out by a
318 population of heterogeneous firms [that] may generate a relatively stable pattern of
319 economic activities and relationships over time' (Castellaci, 2006: 863). A substantial
320 recent economic geographical literature has thus developed regarding the significance of
321 how economic practices are manifest in "conventional-relational transactions" that create
322 "untraded interdependencies" between firms and regions (Storper, 1995; Storper &
323 Salais, 1997), how the everyday practices of economic actors help to create and
324 reproduce larger-order socioeconomic structures (Wood and Valler 2001), how
325 institutionalized practices influence urban or regional competitiveness (Amin 1999; Sokol
326 2007), and how institutions are (re)produced by social practices that have different
327 spatialities (Yeung 2001; Hess 2004). Most recently, an interest in the relationships
328 between practices and institutions can be linked to evolutionary theories in economic
329 geography (Boschma and Lambooy 1999; Boschma and Frenken 2006)
330

331 ***3.2 Political-economic approaches to practice***

332 Another strand to practice-oriented economic geography draws on political-economic
333 concepts of social practice and, in particular, the concept of 'governmentality.' In simple
334 terms, the notion of governmentality seeks to capture how organised and often mundane
335 practices (including mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) that are encouraged,
336 enforced, and directed by elites and states govern and control individual subjects
337 (Foucault 1991; Rose 1996). Broadly stated, economic geographers in this vein have
338 become concerned with practice as they seek to more explicitly engage with the power

339 relations that shape economic activity and outcomes.[1] In this perspective, power, viewed
340 in a Foucaultian sense as a series of strategies, techniques and practices“ (Allen, 1997:
341 63; 2003), can shed light on how states and multinational corporations strive to control
342 firms, workers, and consumers through development policies and management practices
343 that enable profit-taking and/or encourage particular kinds of (capitalist) behaviour
344 (MacKinnon 2000; Hughes 2001; Murdoch 2004; Wilson 2006; Langley 2006; Clarke et
345 al. 2007). These scholars have become particularly interested in the use by government
346 and other regulatory bodies of 'mundane practices and technologies of calculation,
347 notation, and language' which are central to the production of knowledge, fields of
348 intervention, and governable objects/subjects (e.g., consumers, workers, investors,
349 traders, development experts, urban futures) (Hughes 2001; Larner 2002; Murdoch 2004;
350 Bulkeley 2006; Rose-Redwood 2006; Langley 2006). Relatedly, others have sought to
351 understand how governmental practices maintain and create "hybrid, multi-focal
352 configurations" of neoliberal capitalism (Larner 2005) and how they create disciplinary
353 or prescribed spaces for capitalism's extension into the life world (Raco 2003; Hudson
354 2004). Such practices are important to understand since they play a key role in sustaining
355 structural inequalities based on race, class, and/or gender and in enabling corporations
356 and states to expand their reach and control over consumers, citizens, and workers (James
357 & Vira 2009).
358
359 ### *3.3 Diverse economies, livelihoods, and everyday practices*

[1] Some of the contributors to this literature would probably see their work as closer to political than economic geography, but it nevertheless forms one element of practice-oriented human geography concerned with the economic sphere.

360 The third strand to the economic geographical literature on practice is concerned with
361 alternative interpretations of capitalism and what have been termed ‘diverse economies or
362 livelihoods’. This work has examined “ordinary” or everyday economies, and the
363 “complex notions of relationality and power central to their practice” (Lee, 2002: 342).
364 For Lee, such economic geographies are “constituted geographically, socially and
365 politically – and hence practiced (Lee 2006: 421). In contrast to the rational economic
366 actors and consistent structural features (e.g. markets) of conventionally understood
367 capitalism, this diverse economies approach sees to conceptualise economic activities as
368 practices that produce ‘co-present and dynamic hybridizations of alternative,
369 complementary or competing social relations [and] which may vary over the shortest
370 stretches of time and space’ (Lee 2006: 421). This strand of economic geography has
371 thus become interested in the multiple rationalities and logics that frame economic action
372 (Ettlinger 2003), the hybrid interactions between ‘economic’ and ‘non-economic’ actions
373 (Smith & Stenning 2006; Pollard & Samers 2007), and the prospects for the emergence of
374 non-capitalist or alternative economic forms (Gibson-Graham 1996; 2008; Lee et al.
375 2008). Empirically, scholars in this area have largely focused on the livelihood practices
376 emerging in ‘post-socialist’ economies (e.g., Smith 2002; Smith & Stenning 2006; Smith
377 and Rochovská 2007) and alternative forms of exchange or currency systems (Pacione
378 1997; Gregson and Crewe 2003; North 2007). Through an emphasis on everyday lives
379 and alternative forms of economic organization, this literature has demonstrated how
380 capitalism is subject to diverse practices that create negotiated accommodations or
381 contingencies; contrary to monolithic interpretations of its constitution.
382

383 ***3.4 Relational approaches to practice***

384 A fourth strand to practice-oriented worked can be identified around a broad category of
385 'relational' and communitarian approaches to economic geographical thinking. Here
386 again economic geographers have looked to and drawn upon a range of works from
387 sociology (e.g., Emirbayer 1997; Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2002), science studies (Law
388 1994; Callon et al. 2002; Bruun and Langlais 2003; Darr and Talmud 2003), and
389 management and organizational theory (Wenger 1998; Adler and Kwon 2002; Borgatti
390 and Cross 2003). In taking social relations as its central concern, 'relational' economic
391 geography has a strong conceptual and methodological emphasis on social practice as it
392 seeks to identify, interpret and explain the dynamic nature of interpersonal relations that
393 shape economic outcomes. For relational economic geographers, practices serve: as "a
394 source of coherence in a community" (Wenger 1998: 72; Hall 2006; Amin & Roberts
395 2008); as repositories of tacit knowledge (esp. in "best" practices) (Gertler 2001; 2003;
396 Amin & Cohendet 2004; Amin & Roberts 2008; Faulconbridge 2006); as mechanisms
397 that legitimate, control, and coordinate activities in firms and networks (Dicken et al.
398 2001; Glückler 2005; Yeung 2005; Palmer & O'Kane 2007; Jones 2007; 2008); and,
399 lastly, as media that create relational proximity (and trust), thus enabling firms to act at a
400 distance (Amin, 2002; Bathelt & Glückler, 2003; Bathelt et al., 2004; Murphy 2006).

401 The primary scale of analysis for relational economic geography is that of the firm
402 (Dicken & Malmberg 2001; Yeung 2005b), and at least four objects of study can be
403 identified across the relational literature: the core socio-spatial behaviours of
404 businesspeople, firms, and industries (Jones 2003; Beaverstock 2004; Faulconbridge
405 2007); the relationships between these behaviours and outcomes such as exchange,

406 innovation, and profit making (Murphy 2002; 2003; Gertler 2004); the institutional and
407 regional contexts within which such behaviours are enabled or supported (Maskell and
408 Malmberg 1999; Amin and Graham 1997; Bathelt 2006; Murphy 2007); and the
409 implications of such behaviour for regional development processes and wider trends in
410 the global economy (Dicken et al. 2001; Coe et al. 2004). Beyond helping to describe the
411 implications of social behaviour for performance outcomes in firms, industries, value
412 chains, and economies, practice-oriented scholarship of the relational variety also
413 provides important insights into the dynamics of innovation and knowledge production
414 within particular industrial communities, knowledge that is often only realized in the
415 "doing" of business (Wenger 1998; Amin and Cohendet 2004; Jones 2003; Gertler 2003;
416 Yeung 2005a; Amin and Roberts 2008; Hall 2008).

417 Although these objects of study cover a diverse range, all share a conception of
418 practices as everyday relational processes that constitute economic action and hold
419 communities or firms together; processes that are embedded within geographic contexts,
420 networks, institutional structures, power hierarchies, and in relation to spatial scales
421 (Bathelt and Glückler 2003;Yeung 2005a). These processes are manifest as combinations
422 of agency and structure produced and reproduced in regular patterns but which remain
423 open to diverse, contingent, and unpredictable actions, expressions, and outcomes. At the
424 heart of relational approaches, therefore, context, social meaning, and identity are central
425 to interpretations of how practices shape competition, power struggles, learning, and
426 innovation.

427

428 ## 4 THE LIMITATIONS TO PRACTICE-ORIENTED ECONOMIC
429 GEOGRAPHY

430 It should be clear from preceding discussion that there are multiple strands of practice-
431 oriented work within contemporary economic geography that have roots in the so-called
432 cultural turn in human geography and numerous interdisciplinary cross-fertilisations (esp.
433 with sociology, management studies, and science studies) that have helped to shape
434 economic geography theories since the 1990s. Although this approach to the social-
435 scientific study of economic phenomena has promise, quite clearly there are theoretical
436 and methodological challenges. At least four significant strands of argument have in one
437 way or another been raised in the literature in this respect.

438 First, there is what might be termed a 'scale critique' which essentially argues that
439 a conceptual focus on practice is too idiosyncratic and places too much emphasis on the
440 micro-social at the expense of the macro-sociological/political. The consequence is that
441 in terms of theorizing practice–oriented economic geography does not lead to an
442 understanding of higher-level properties. Furthermore, this lack of capacity to understand
443 higher level properties means that relational or practice-oriented work is unable to
444 effectively theorise macro-scale structural forces and their historical role (Peck 2005)

445 Second is what we term the 'micro-to-macro validity' challenge which questions
446 the capacity of a focus on specific micro practices to effectively understand the
447 relationship between cause and effect (economic outcomes) (e.g., see Overman 2004).
448 Practice-oriented economic geography thus runs the risk of being purely descriptive and
449 'fuzzy' because it cannot demarcate the boundaries between practices or know which
450 practices, and at what scale, are more or less important. Such a critical engagement is

451 often based on the premise – from orthodox economics principally – that meaningful
452 statements about larger scale phenomena (e.g., regional or global economic trends) can
453 best be made through modelling exercises (e.g., econometrics) that maintain a strict and
454 linear relationship between individual behaviour and economic outcomes (c.f. Overman
455 2004).

456 Third, and related to the first two challenges, there are important concerns about
457 the policy and practical relevance of practice-oriented scholarship, particularly among
458 political-economic minded geographers. For some, practice-oriented work – especially
459 the work done by scholars of the relational variety – lacks the capacity to understand
460 structural power, inequality and uneven development. More specifically, critics assert
461 that relational approaches – particularly those that draw on network and actor-network
462 frameworks – underestimate or overlook the power relations and structural inequalities
463 influencing workers, firms, industries, and economies (Smith 2003). The consequence is
464 that a number of critics doubt the relevance of practice-oriented economic geography to
465 develop theories that have broad currency both more widely in the social sciences and
466 with policy-makers (Sunley 2008).

467 Fourth, practice-oriented economic geography also has important methodological
468 limitations. The key question is whether or not the methodological approaches used by
469 relational, cultural, or practice-oriented researchers – notably qualitative methodological
470 tools - can produce meaningful and generalizeable theories (Yeung 2003; James 2006;
471 Tickell et al. 2007). A counter-strand of the sub-discipline (and indeed within human
472 geography) thus questions the value, rigor and relevance of socio-cultural and relational
473 approaches to economic practices (Overman 2004; Sunley 2008). As Yeung (2003)

highlights, relational or practice-oriented research needs to meet the tri-partite litmus test of validity, reliability, and reflexivity if it is to successfully counter such criticisms.

While these critiques are significant, they are not insurmountable nor do they imply that practice cannot serve as a key concept for economic geography. What they do highlight is a constructive concern with how practice might be used to more rigorously explain why economic phenomena emerge, persist, or disappear within particular time-space contexts, what practice means for policy, justice, and/or welfare redistribution, and how researchers can actually "do" practice oriented research. For us, practices can only become viable as analytical objects if they can be coherently demarcated and isolated from other factors, if they can be shown to have a significant impact or influence on larger-order phenomena (e.g., regional development, global production networks), and if their study can contribute to or yield theoretical generalizations able to improve our explanations for economic-geographical phenomena. Although we cannot address how these requirements might be met here, we assert that the time is right for scholars interested in practice to focus their energies on developing general frameworks and methodologies able to do so.

5 CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF PRACTICE-ORIENTED ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

The overarching argument of this paper is that the terminology of a 'practice turn' in economic geography is both unnecessary and largely unhelpful. The reason is that - as the diverse literature we have discussed illustrates – there is a substantial body of important work within economic geography that can be justifiably described as practice-oriented,

497 but it does not represents a single school of coherent thought. Many of those cited in this
498 paper would not necessarily even identify their work as explicitly part of a practice-
499 oriented shift within the sub-discipline. Furthermore, an interest in practice is not an
500 especially recent or novel development as economic geographers are not alone in the
501 social sciences in valuing a practice-oriented epistemology. Similar strands of thinking
502 are also present in management studies, urban and regional planning and economic /
503 organizational sociology. As such, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest there has been a
504 deepening of interest in practice within economic geography over the last decade which
505 reflects the continued interdisciplinary perspective of the sub-discipline.

506 That said, the practice concept has a lot to offer in terms of the empirical and
507 theoretical questions it can be applied to. Empirically, the study of practice can provide
508 important insights into the social and spatial dynamics of economic transitions,
509 entrepreneurship, and industrial development. In transitional contexts (e.g., post-Socialist
510 Europe, rapidly globalizing economies), as aptly demonstrated in the diverse economies
511 literature, more "traditional" practices may be threatened or in flux as individuals,
512 households, firms, and industries are forced to contend with new, and often formidable,
513 challenges to their survival and success. How new practices evolve in such contexts, and
514 what they mean for livelihoods, development, and social well-being, is an important area
515 of research. So too is the study of the market internationalization and networking
516 practices used by entrepreneurs, particularly those businesspeople striving to
517 transnationalize their trade, production, and/or investment activities (e.g., see Yeung
518 2009). In this case, relationship development practices can yield important findings
519 about how inter-cultural divides are bridged through the creation of "hybrid" practices

520 that may reflect compromises between individuals and the contexts they come from.
521 Finally, a practice lens can also be applied to the study of new industries and industrial
522 communities where exchange, communication, and innovation practices are only just
523 beginning to emerge and where it is uncertain which forms are to become more widely
524 institutionalized. In this case, empirical studies can help us better understand the
525 trajectories of industrial development and the creation of path dependencies by showing
526 how and why one practice or set of practices "wins out" over the alternatives and what it
527 means for an industry and region.

528 Theoretically, a practice oriented economic geography has much to offer the four
529 strands of literature outlined above (i.e., the institutional, governmental, diverse
530 economies, and relational) as well as to other areas of the subdiscipline (e.g.,
531 environmental economic geography, global production networks, evolutionary theories).
532 For example, a refined practice concept can improve institutional theories through its
533 ability to show how routines (i.e., practices) emerge and become institutionalized such
534 that they shape the evolution of regional economies and industries. Relational theories
535 can also be enhanced, particularly through studies that analyze the regularized forms of
536 interaction that constitute industrial communities and production networks. A key
537 objective would be to improve conceptualizations of the power relations and socio-spatial
538 processes that enable or stifle such phenomena as learning, upgrading, and/or market
539 expansion. Lastly, among others, environmental and evolutionary economic geographers
540 can also benefit from a focus on practice – particularly those scholars interested in more
541 sustainable socio-technical regime transitions and the socio-spatial dynamics of urban
542 and regional development (e.g., Wiskerke 2003; Frenken and Boschma 2007; Truffer

2008; Rock et al. 2009). The everyday, geographically situated, practices of consumption, production, innovation, planning, policy making, and environmental management are critical to understand if industrial and sustainability transitions are to be understood and conceptualized.

In conclusion, it is important to reassess the question of why practice and why now? For us, much of the impetus for economic geographers to focus on practice has arisen from the substantial and enduring critiques of the limitations of quantitative social science and its incapacity to develop sufficiently sophisticated or detailed understanding of how economic outcomes emerge beneath the level of regional or national economies. To revisit this fundamental epistemological debate within human geography and the social sciences is far beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is sufficient to note that a significant body of work questions the capacity of modelling techniques or even institutional theories to effectively explain the complexity of contemporary economic processes and outcomes. A (reinvigorated) interest in practice is in part precisely a response to dissatisfaction with the both the scale of generalization and validity of causal explanations (c.f. Sunley 2008) that other strands of economic geography lay claims to. Whilst as Yeung (2003) acknowledges, there are significant methodological challenges that face economic geographers with respect to developing effective methodological frameworks that enable the development of theoretical generalizations and higher level concepts, we do not see this as an impossible task, and suggest that critiques of practice-oriented research - particularly those associated with its relational aspects - do not succeed in discrediting the value of a practice-oriented approach.

Consequently, given the complexity of the global economy, it seems likely that economic geographers will be increasingly interested in practice-oriented research as a means to develop more effective theories of economic action. In this respect, we think that practice-oriented research should be viewed as a significant field of economic geographic research that complements rather than competes with others. It is not a question of whether the sub-discipline ‘turns’ to be focused on one methodology, scale or dimensions of economic activity or another, but whether it has the capacity to develop better and more sophisticated theories. In that sense, recent practice-oriented economic geography has made, and will continue to make, significant contributions.

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